AMAZING GRIEF
AFRICAN AMERICAN MOURNING AND CONTEMPORARY BLACK ACTIVISM

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Abstract

From slave rebellions to the fight for civil rights to recent protests against police violence, how black communities in the United States have struggled to remember, honor, and avenge the dead has profoundly influenced black political life. *Amazing Grief: African American Mourning and Contemporary Black Activism* demonstrates the complex and contested ways acts of public grief have shaped, and been shaped by, black activism, with particular focus on Black Lives Matter (BLM). By examining eulogies, street memorials, the activism of bereaved mothers, and invocations of the dead within electoral politics, this project shows how BLM embodies a radical politics of grief that stands within a long tradition of African American mourning. The first chapter challenges the ideologies of Afropessimism and black liberalism, both of which articulate stories of loss that stifle the more transformative dimensions of black politics. The last three chapters examine the Charleston Massacre, Michael Brown’s street memorial, and the Mothers of the Movement during the 2016 presidential election. Taken together, the dissertation charts a geography of grief - from the church to the street to the ballot - that situates African American mourning within an expansive terrain of contemporary black freedom struggle.
To

Dad, my earth

Chad, my wind

Rev. Ron, my fire
# Table of Contents

Abstract.................................................................................................................. iii

Acknowledgements................................................................................................... vi

Introduction................................................................................................................. 1

Chapter 1: Phantom Pain........................................................................................... 24
Chapter 2: Amazing Grief........................................................................................... 101
Chapter 3: A Rose from Canfield.............................................................................. 145
Chapter 4: Mothers of the Movement...................................................................... 198

Conclusion: The Mourning After............................................................................ 271

Bibliography............................................................................................................. 274
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Introduction

National protests in response to the shooting deaths of Trayvon Martin by neighborhood watchman George Zimmerman and Michael Brown at the hands of white police officer Darren Wilson animated conversations about race and mourning in American politics. The killings were not anomalies. Weeks before Mike Brown was fatally shot in Ferguson, Missouri, Eric Garner was choked to death on a Staten Island street corner by NYPD officer Daniel Pantaleo for allegedly selling “loosies.” Garner spoke for many black Americans when he gasped, eleven times, “I can’t breathe.” In the following months, a social movement led primarily by black youth emerged on the national scene. Beyond campaigns to divest from police and transform the criminal justice system, Black Lives Matter (BLM) called for the nation to mourn the black lives lost at the hands of police, white vigilantes, and the slow violence of systemic racism.

BLM is a political formation that stands within a long tradition of African American mourning. From the abolition of slavery to the fight for civil rights to recent protests against police brutality, how black communities have struggled to

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1 This is a colloquial term for untaxed cigarettes.
2 I use the descriptor “Black Lives Matter” to describe the broader movement that emerged in the wake of the Ferguson Rebellion, not the global activist network founded by Patrisse Cullors, Alicia Garza, and Opal Tometi. Before the formal network was formed, BLM was the banner under which a range of protests, campaigns, advocacy efforts, and political formations were organized. Throughout the dissertation I am referring to the latter.
remember, honor, and avenge the dead has shaped the development of black political life. Black grief does not begin or end at the funeral procession. The dead live on in the music, stories, folklore, art, religious rituals, family traditions and, as I will demonstrate, the social movements of the African American sojourn. By examining eulogies, street memorials, the activism of bereaved mothers, and invocations of the dead within American electoral politics, this project examines the complex and contested ways black people in the United States have confronted legacies of racial violence and premature black death.

Key Terms

African American mourning refers to more than African Americans who mourn. The term describes a set of social, cultural, and political practices forged under conditions of racial terror and white supremacy that mark how black people have learned to bury our dead and live on in their wake. It invokes particular histories of slavery, lynching, Jim Crow, and

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3 I am borrowing from Eddie Glaude’s pragmatic conception of African American religion, which he describes as a set of religious practices forged within the encounter between faith and white supremacy. I understand African American mourning in a similar way. It is a term that describes the social, cultural, and political practices forged within the encounter between grief and racial domination. This is not to suggest that all expressions of African American mourning are mere responses to racial oppression. Rather, it is to say that if the term is descriptively useful, it is to bring into view a set of material conditions that shape how African Americans have learned to collectively grieve. For Glaude’s account of African American religion see African American Religion: A Very Short Introduction (New York: Oxford University, 2014).
police violence, as well as rich black experiences of storytelling, imagination, ritualization, and activism.

In my view, African American mourning is best understood as a tradition. My understanding of tradition follows Alasdair MacIntyre’s description of the term as “arguments extended in time.” To think of black mourning in this way involves tracing the continuities and discontinuities of grieving practices within African American life. Continuities include certain cultural practices: call and response, open casket, spirited eulogies, makeshift memorials, celebration, the adorned body.

But there are also political continuities constitutive of the tradition. Simon Stow makes this point in his book, American Mourning: Tragedy, Democracy, Resilience, where he situates Coretta Scott King’s funeral service within “an African American tradition of tragic and self-consciously political responses to loss, one that was central to the fight against slavery and post-Reconstruction violence, and to the struggle for civil rights.” This project extends Stow’s formulation to the Black Lives Matter movement by demonstrating how the funerals, memorials, and activism surrounding recent victims of police and

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vigilante violence were central to the fight against patterns of police brutality and institutionalized racism.

The discontinuities within black mourning practices are also important. What do we make of the fact that Black Lives Matter emerged during the tenure of America’s first black president? What does it mean to mourn the black dead in a world where black death has gone viral? How has the shifting meanings of feminism shaped the activism of bereaved black mothers? Tradition provides a lens to read these tensions and transformations within a long history of African American grief.

Mourning is messy. How an aggrieved people work through death and loss does not fit into neat political categories. But the fact that grief is complex does not mean it is illegible. Invocations of the dead pervade political discourse. Just ask a black elder to give one reason why young people should vote. Because “our ancestors died” so we could, they’ll tell you. Of course, previous generations sacrificed their lives for a range of things. Some black freedom fighters were killed resisting capitalism and imperialism. But I have never been urged to vote for the socialist, anti-war candidate. My point here is not historical accuracy but to show how, especially in African American communities, a central aspect of political life often hinges on how we make meaning of the sacrifices of the dead.
Amazing Grief speaks to this contest over the significance of public grief. To do so I sometimes use phrases such as liberal politics of grief and radical politics of grief. What I call a liberal politics of grief is a form of political engagement that, in the wake of racial violence, seeks to quell black rage; articulate a linear narrative of national progress; and promote procedural mechanisms as the legitimate route to justice, while delegitimizing political resistance that challenge the logic of law and order. As I will demonstrate, this mode of public mourning showed up in Obama’s eulogy of Rev. Pinckney and Hillary Clinton’s relationship to the Mothers of the Movement during the 2016 presidential election.

A radical politics of grief, on the other hand, is a form of political engagement that, in the wake of racial violence, expresses black rage; challenges narratives of national progress; and embraces forms of resistance that exceed the mechanisms of procedural justice. As I will demonstrate, this mode of public mourning emerged in Bree Newsome’s removal of the confederate flag and the construction of Mike Brown’s street memorial. Ultimately, a radical politics of grief seeks to expand the possibilities of black freedom struggle.

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7 Procedural justice refers to how the law is enforced. Logic of law and order, as I use it here, is the general idea that procedural justice is the ultimate arbiter of justice. For a summary of these ideas see pages 13-15 in Alex Vitale’s The End of Policing (Brooklyn: Verso, 2017).
Both forms of public grief are activist in style. By that I mean they both employ the language and symbolism of black freedom struggle; articulate historical wrongs that are ongoing and pervasive; and, most importantly, call mourners to act. But a liberal politics of grief narrates a story of African Americans overcoming racial injustice in order to constrain the more radical elements of black political life. Martyrs such as Dr. King and Rev. Pinckney are invoked as models of black political behavior while others, such as Bree Newsome and the Black Panthers, are casted into the shadows of the African American sojourn. A radical politics of grief employs similar language and symbolism of the mighty dead, but it tells a different story that challenges the nations’ founding myths and calls for a fundamental transformation of American society.

The terms are admittedly tidy. As I will elaborate in the first chapter, not everyone who practices a liberal politics of grief are necessarily liberals, or the same kind of liberal. Similarly, not all who practice a radical politics of grief identify as radicals. Dr. King does not easily fit into either category. It is also possible to practice features of each mode. My point is that the framework does not aim to represent the politics of African American mourning. It seeks to interpret it.
Mourning and Melancholia

Scholars use different terms to talk about how people respond to loss. In his 1917 essay, “Mourning and Melancholia,” Sigmund Freud compares these two modes of grief. He argued, in short, that mourning is a healthy response to loss where the mourner replaces or overcomes the loss object. Melancholia, on the other hand, internalizes loss, resulting in a “painful dejection, cessation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love, [and] inhibition of all activity.” Freud’s conceptions of mourning and melancholia are expansive. Both respond, not only to “the loss of a loved person” but also to “the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as fatherland, liberty, an ideal, and so on.” This is a critical Freudian formulation. Loss transcends individual concerns. How we mourn is a question of ethics and politics.

Freud’s dichotomy of mourning and melancholia informs contemporary scholarship on race, politics, and loss. While a wide range of literature has informed the development of this dissertation, two texts, both of which can be read as responses

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9 Ibid, 244.
10 Ibid, 243.
to Freud, have served as generative starting points in helping me develop my own thinking around African American mourning.¹¹

In *Hope Draped in Black: Race, Melancholy, and the Agony of Progress*, Joseph Winters rejects Freud’s pathologization of melancholia and offers a theory of a “melancholic kind of hope.”¹² The term describes a political optimism that is inseparable from sorrow and incompatible with progress. Progress, in Winter’s sense, refers to triumphant narratives that help to “reinforce, affirm, and justify the order of things (and conceal the nasty aspects of the existing state of affairs).”¹³ As I read Winters’ text, I thought of President Obama’s 2008 election night victory speech. “If there is anyone out there who still questions the power of our democracy, tonight is your answer,” he declared from Chicago’s Grant Park – just six miles from the nation’s largest jail where nearly 7,000

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¹³ Ibid., 15.
black inmates were questioning why their toilets were overflowing.\textsuperscript{14} A Department of Justice report that year documented a pattern of unconstitutional practices at the 96 acre Cook County Jail including beatings by corrections officers, rat infestation, poor quality food, overcrowding, and inadequate medical care.\textsuperscript{15}

Melancholic hope is Winters’ response to the persistence of black suffering alongside pronouncements of national progress, such as Obama’s speech. Instead of seeking to get over America’s ugly past, Winters calls readers to linger with the histories of racial loss and the reality of black death in the present. In this sense, my project builds on Winters’ insights, including his critique of post-racialism and stories of national progress.

But my conception of mourning differs from his in important ways. According to Winters, melancholic hope is a rich site of political possibility, but it is unclear - at least to me - what those politics entail. Throughout the text, Winters makes quite abstract arguments regarding the relationship between art and activism, And while he argues convincingly that

\textsuperscript{14} This is taken from a letter by Assistant Attorney General Grace Chung Becker of the DOJ’s Civil Rights Division to the Cook County Board President and Sheriff, written on July 11, 2008; Memo from the Justice Advisory Council of the County of Cook to the Cook County Board of Commissioners, Examination of Cook County Bond County, July 12, 2012, The New York Times, July 18, 2008.

the black arts provide a unique ground for hope in American politics because they help us imagine different political possibilities, I do not get a sense of how melancholic hope materializes in concrete examples of political struggle.

To be clear, Winters does recognize the need for organizing and protest. In his response to Adolph Reed’s claims about the evasion of politics within cultural studies, he suggests that we avoid two false oppositions. One option suggests that we should conflate politics and aesthetics or politics and the reading...of cultural productions. This position would permit subject matters like affect, remembrance, interpretation, and ‘vulnerability’ to the other’ to supersede the tedious work of organizing, grassroots politics, supporting progressive candidates, and changing laws. The other option assumes that the latter activities are what really matter politically, that these actions exhaust the political field.16

I agree with Winters’ critique of Reed. As I argue in chapter 3, politics are not reducible to formal protests or joining an activist organization. But while Reed’s notion of political struggle is too narrow, I worry that Winters’ is too abstract.

Melancholic hope does not speak to the essential work of collective resistance. Consider, for example, Winters’ reading of Du Bois’ lynching parable, ‘Of The Coming of John.’ The story follows two Johns: one black and one white. After both returned home from college, white John spotted Black John’s sister,

16 Winters, Hope Draped in Black, 82.
Jennie, outside of his home and he sexually assaulted her. Black John sees what White John does to his sister and he kills him.

Amid the trees dim morning twilight he watched their shadows dancing and heard their horses thundering toward him, until at last they came sweeping like a storm, and he saw in front that haggard white-haired man, whose eyes flashed red with fury. Oh, how he pitied him...and wondered if he had the coiling twisted rope. Then, as the storm burst round him, he rose slowly to his feet and turned his closed eyes toward the Sea.

And the world whistled in his ears.\textsuperscript{17}

It is easy to assume, as I initially did, that black John falls victim to the lynch mob. But, as Winters rightfully points out, he is not lynched in the text itself.

I suggest that the line ‘turned his closed eyes toward the Sea’ is ambiguous. It can refer to John’s surrendering to the tempestuous lynching crowd or to his preparing to plunge into the water below. Even if the latter possibility is not what Du Bois has in mind, the image of John’s standing between a lynch mob and a cliff that hangs over the sea conjures up the ‘flying home’ motif in African American literature and folk traditions.\textsuperscript{18}

I agree with Winters insistence on reading Du Bois’ lynching parable with this kind of ambivalence. Winters’ alternative interpretations - diving into the sea or flying home to Africa - are powerful leaps of imagination that can provide grounds for hope. But there are other possibilities rooted in concrete political struggle that he overlooks. Black John, for example, could have found markings of an escape route left behind by

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 255.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 73.
other black people who fled. He could have been armed and defended himself. His family could have arrived in time with weapons to protect him from the lynch mob. These imaginative possibilities of resistance are rooted in historical reality.

Du Bois’ fictional essay is best understood within this broader anti-lynching movement, which inspired him to write over a dozen lynching parables, and to build activist organizations to confront the racial terror. In 1905, two years after the publication of Souls, Du Bois and William Monroe Trotter organized The Niagara Movement, which served as the precursor to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), which grew out of the 1908 race riot in Springfield, Illinois, where a white lynch mob destroyed black homes and businesses and brutally murdered nine African Americans.\(^{19}\) Du Bois was one of the NAACP’s founding members. During the interwar years, the organization turned much of its attention to fighting lynching. Members worked on multiple fronts, from political education campaigns to anti-lynching legislation.

To be sure, resistance to lynching was a prominent mode of activism used in the courts, the press, and the streets. In his dissertation, *Resisting Lynching: Black Grassroots Responses to*

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Lynching in the Mississippi and Arkansas Deltas, 1882-1938, Karlos Hill argues that “Delta blacks routinely organized resistance to lynching through social networks and vigorously contested white rationales for mob violence.” Hill’s work outlines an important “grassroots tradition of black resistance to white lynch mob violence.” The Equal Justice Initiative (EJI), which established the “Lynching Museum” in Montgomery, Alabama in 2018, spoke to this tradition in their report, “Lynching in America: Confronting the Legacy of Racial Terror,” with fading voting power and few allies in either national political party, African Americans undertook their own efforts to combat...lynching through grassroots activism. Black people targeted members of the white lynch mobs for economic retaliation by boycotting their businesses, refusing to work for them, and setting fire to their property. To thwart lynching attempts, black people risked serious harm to hide fugitives, organized sentinels to guard prisoners...and engaged in armed self-defense. Hill’s dissertation and EJI’s report, taken together, demonstrate an important tradition of radical black resistance that is central to my conception of African American mourning.

In Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Tradition, Robin D.G. Kelley rejects the separation of art, politics, and theory. He argues that black artists transformed communism, surrealism, and radical feminism, producing visions for how to eradicate oppression and build a just world. Like Winters, Kelley argues

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that art and politics play vital roles in social transformation. But Kelley’s grounds for hope are not what Winters refers to as the “contemplation of suffering and loss,” but rather the capacity of social movements to transform society. I mention Kelley’s work because it evades the pitfalls of both Reed’s and Winters’ arguments. Freedom Dreams insists upon an expansive notion of politics that includes the vital role of the black arts, and it does so, in part, by offering close readings of artistic production that are rooted in collective resistance.

Similarly, Amazing Grief values the power of the black arts as critical resources within movements for social change, while also offering another way of thinking about political responses to premature black death that accents the concrete strivings of African Americans resisting racial domination.

Like Winters, Christina Sharpe theorizes at the intersection of race, loss, black suffering, and premature death. In her book, In the Wake: On Blackness and Being, Sharpe lays out her concept of “wake work.”21 It is a theoretical framework that, in essence, conceptualizes diasporic blackness in the modern world as an elaboration of the condition of chattel slavery.22 “Living in the wake means living the history and present of terror, from slavery to the present, as the

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22 Ibid., 5-22.
ground of our everyday Black existence,” Sharpe explains. While Winters seeks to redeem melancholia from Freud’s pathological interpretation, Sharpe distinguishes wake work from his dichotomy of mourning and melancholia altogether.

I want to distinguish what I am calling Black being in the wake and wake work from the work of melancholia and mourning. And though wake work is, at least in part, attentive to mourning and the mourning work that takes place on local and translocal and global levels, and even as we know that mourning an event might be interminable, how does one mourn the interminable event?

Sharpe’s question challenges Freud’s framework, which conceives of mourning as overcoming loss. Embedded in the question, at least in the way Sharpe formulates it, is a theory of blackness known as Afropessimism. While the term is not mentioned directly, its major themes and basic tenets undergird the text. As I will elaborate in the first chapter, Afropessimism argues that racism is permanent; black life after slavery is completely defined by racial oppression; black people are better understood as slaves than human subjects; and racism cannot be analogized to other forms of oppression. Wake Work is Sharpe’s response to this condition of total black subjugation.

In the Wake joins the work of those scholars who investigate the ongoing problem of Black exclusion from social, political, and cultural belonging; our abjection from the realm of the human. But the book departs from those scholars and those works that look for political, juridical, or even philosophical answers to this problem.

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23 Ibid., 44.
24 Ibid., 19-20.
My project looks instead to current quotidian disasters in order to ask, what, if anything, survives this insistent Black exclusion, this ontological negation, and how do literature, performance, and visual culture observe and mediate this un/survival. To do this work of staying in the wake...I look also to forms of Black expressive culture...that do not seek to explain or resolve the question of this exclusion in terms of assimilation, inclusion, or civil or human rights, but rather depict aesthetically the impossibility of such resolutions by representing the paradoxes of blackness within and after the legacies of slavery’s denial of Black humanity.\textsuperscript{25}

Sharpe, like Winters, turns to black artistic production as a resource to think through the genocidal features of black life. Her conception of blackness stems from close readings of poetry, film, novels, and art exhibits, including Toni Morrison’s \textit{Beloved}, Julie Dash’s \textit{Daughters of the Dust}, NourbeSe Philip’s \textit{Zong!}, and Kara Walker’s Brooklyn-based exhibition “The Marvelous Sugar Baby.” “I have turned to images, poetry, and literature that take up the wake as a way toward understanding how slavery’s continued unfolding is constitutive of the contemporary conditions of spatial, legal, psychic, and material dimensions of Black non/being as well as Black aesthetic and other modes of deformation and interruption.,” she explains.\textsuperscript{26}

Sharpe writes throughout the text that living “in the wake” is about simultaneously recognizing the impossibility of black life in civil society while refusing to accept the terms of an

\textsuperscript{25} Ibid., 14.
\textsuperscript{26} Ibid., 20.
anti-black world. “Just as the weather is always ripe for Black death,” she argues, “the singularity also produces Black resistances and refusals.”²⁷ Yet, despite scant pronouncements of “Black being that continually exceeds all of the violence directed at Black life,” one is hard pressed to find examples of black resistance and refusal in the text.²⁸ Interestingly, Black Lives Matter does not show up, other than a mention in the acknowledgements and a subtle critique of the national organization Black Youth Project 100 for its attempt to get Obama to recognize the plight of black Americans. It is an odd omission, in my view, especially considering the fact that the book was published three years after the emergence of a social movement formed in response to the numerous deaths of black people at the hands of police officers and racist vigilantes, a protest movement which poet Claudia Rankine described as “an attempt to keep mourning an open dynamic in our culture.”²⁹

I am not saying that Sharpe must have included BLM in order to justify her claims. I am saying that she missed an opportunity to apply her theory to the lived experiences of black people forging social, cultural, and political life under

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²⁷ Ibid., 124.
²⁸ Ibid., 134.
conditions of racial oppression. As I read questions like, “what does it mean to be a ‘former mother’ when one has never been able to lay claim to how mother means in the world?,” I thought of black mothers who recently lost their children to police violence, like Sybrina Fulton and Lezley McSpadden, both of whom take great pride and joy in mothering black children despite the precarity of black life. Or, when she describes Michael Brown as “Darren Wilson’s projection” and Canfield Drive (where Mike was shot and killed) as “filled with and by brutal imagination,” I thought of those local residents who, just hours after Brown’s tragic death, filled the street with flowers and lit the concrete with candles. We do not hear such voices or see these types of acts of communal care. We do get rich insights from academics and artists. But lost are the voices, experiences, and freedom dreams of black communities in whom wake work and Afropessimist thought takes as its subject of scholarly inquiry.

In the end, Sharpe’s wake work paints a severely limited portrait of black life. I worry that her broad-brushed claims about the totalizing nature of white supremacy overshadow the color, texture, and beauty of black culture, politics, and resistance. As I illustrate throughout this dissertation, black life is about much more than the worst things that have ever

30 Sharpe, In the Wake, 77.
31 Ibid., 83.
32 Ibid.
happened to black people. Not only have African Americans resisted racial oppression, but we have forged identities, built families, and established alternative institutions and traditions, including unique ways of mourning that have profoundly shaped black life and American politics.

*Amazing Grief* builds on the insights of Winters’ melancholic hope and Sharpe’s wake work. I especially appreciate Winters’ critique of American progress, Sharpe’s emphasis on the particularity of black suffering, and both of their calls to linger with death and loss. But my work differs from theirs in important ways. It moves from abstract theories of mourning to the lived experiences of protestors, activists, local residents, and bereaved activist-mothers who have resolved to not let their slain children die in vain. As such, the case studies I offer pose a serious challenge to Afropessimist thought and its notions about the impossibility of black life and liberation, as well as the ideology of black liberalism which, as I will show in chapter 1, articulates its own narrative of loss.

The dissertation features a range of voices that speak to the relationship between African American mourning and contemporary black activism. James Baldwin looms large. His later writings help elucidate the ascendance of Barack Obama and the emergence of Black Lives Matter. Baldwin is a kind of prophetic voice throughout the project that articulates the
human costs of systemic racism while highlighting the capacity of ordinary people to transform their social conditions and interior lives. His literary witness of the sacrifices of the mighty dead in the wake of the 1960s freedom movement alongside his deep suspicions regarding the promise of black political leadership can be read as precursors for things to come.

President Obama shows up in every chapter. As Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor explains, there is no way of understanding the politics of Black Lives Matter outside the context of his presidency. Yet, as I will demonstrate in chapter 1, Obama is also representative of a broader political ideology that shaped the development of contemporary black freedom struggle. Here, I turn to the work of Michael Dawson and Eddie Glaude in order to explicate the basic tenets of black liberalism, which will help set the stage for my criticisms of Obama and other black leaders such as Rev. Al Sharpton.

My explicit examination of Afropessimism is largely confined to the first chapter, but my engagement with scholars such as Christina Sharpe and Frank Wilderson implicitly runs throughout the dissertation. One way to think of the case studies that follow chapter 1 is as a dual critique of Afropessimism, at the level of form, and of black liberalism, at the level of content. That is, the very existence of these expressions of black mourning contradicts the basic argument of
Afropessimist thought, while their political content challenges the major claims and constitutive features of black liberalism.

Chapter Summaries

The first chapter, “Phantom Pain,” articulates the architecture of my argument. It contends that all is not lost in the wake of loss and that the best of what remains is not a narrow story of African American politics that begins with the tragedy of slavery and ends with the triumph of Barack Obama. As such, Amazing Grief rejects the ideologies of Afropessimism and black liberalism, both of which articulate stories of loss that stifle radical black politics. Here, I offer another way of thinking about patterns of premature black death that accents the radical dimensions of black struggle.

This chapter, “Amazing Grief,” contextualizes the Charleston Massacre within a broader history and politics of black burial traditions and black freedom struggle. Here, I stage a contest over the meaning of Roof’s attack by examining Barack Obama’s eulogy of Rev. Pinckney, James Baldwin’s 1985 essay The Evidence of Things Not Seen, and activist Bree Newsome’s removal of the Confederate flag. I argue that Obama’s eulogy embodied a liberal politics of grief that constrained the radical elements of African American politics by telling a liberal story of the slain pastor, the Black Church tradition, and the family members of the Charleston Nine.
The third chapter, “A Rose from Canfield,” interprets Mike Brown’s makeshift memorial as both a specific act of protest as well as a certain way of thinking about protest itself. My aim is to challenge the popular “protest to politics” teleology that so easily limits black resistance. In my view, the makeshift memorial was much more than a way of honoring Mike Brown’s life and death, although it was no less that. The shrine represented a democratic assertion of the value of black life in the face of a racist society managed by the nation’s first black president.

The fourth chapter, “Mothers of the Movement,” examines the politics of several mothers who lost their children to police and racial violence. Here, I narrate the personal stories and analyze the activist efforts of Sybrina Fulton, Lezley McSpadden, and Samaria Rice in order to think through broader questions of public grief, black motherhood, and electoral politics. I argue that defining the mothers solely through their common experiences of loss flattens significant political differences between them. Instead, I foreground the diversity, complexity, and agency of these mother-activists to demonstrate how their political work shaped, and was shaped by, Black Lives Matter, Hillary Clinton’s presidential campaign, and the long tradition of African American mourning.

In the end, Amazing Grief is a story about the formation and development of Black Lives Matter that unearths the
political life of African American rituals of death. Each chapter stages a contest over the substance of black politics in the shadow of racial violence: Michael Brown’s street memorial, Rev. Pinckney’s funeral, and the Mothers of the Movement during the 2016 presidential election. Taken together, the dissertation charts a geography of grief - from the church to the street to the ballot - that situates African American mourning within an expansive terrain of contemporary black freedom struggle.
Phantom Pain

I came to theory because I was hurting - the pain within me was so intense that I could not go on living. I came to theory desperate, wanting to comprehend - to grasp what was happening around and within me. Most importantly, I wanted to make the hurt go away. I saw in theory then a location for healing.  

Of all the maladies that attack the human organism, trauma may ultimately be one that is recognized as beneficial. I say this because in the healing of trauma, a transformation takes place - one that can improve the quality of life.

I was born with a sixth finger. I was too young to remember the amputation, but every once in a while, someone shakes my hand a little too tight and I feel a sharp, throbbing pain in my finger that is no longer there. Sometimes it aches for a few minutes. Sometimes for days. Medical experts call it phantom pain. Many amputees experience cramping, stinging, itching, pressure, burning, and cold spells in the part of the limb that was cut off. Any sensation the limb could have experienced prior to amputation may be experienced after. It is a peculiar pain that marks the presence of loss. My late brother, Chad, whose right leg was severed after a train accident, experienced acute phantom pain up until his untimely death. Some days he could feel his toes no longer there, tingling as if they never left.

This chapter offers an interpretation of the African American mourning tradition as a politically charged expression of phantom pain. How the human body responds to amputation illuminates the dynamic ways black communities respond to generational trauma, racial violence, and premature black death. In both contexts, the presence of loss — sensations in severed limbs, memories of the victims of racialized violence — is a generative force that can transform how traumatized people think, live, and act in the world. In this sense, I use phantom pain as an analogy and an analytic to engage the basic tenets of Afropessimism and black liberalism, both of which articulate stories of loss that involve varying conceptions of and responses to what I will refer to as the “racial wound.”

By that I mean something like what poet adrienne marie brown describes in “what is unveiled? the founding wound.”

some of us are black
still nauseous from the boat’s hold
still catching our breath from snapped ropes
still oiling our calloused field hands
and still wounded...

what rots at the core is known, documented
it is tangible, moral, American, spiritual
it is the founding wound...

36 To avoid annoying repetition, I will also use the terms the “founding wound,” the “wound of white supremacy,” and simply “the wound.”
the founder’s wound is the myth of supremacy...38

brown’s description of the nation’s “founding wound” as “tangible” is a helpful way of thinking about phantom pain. Here, white supremacy is not simply the belief that white people are better than others. It is a concrete system of oppression that has and continues to materially harm black communities. And yet, it is also a “moral” infection that “rots at the core” of American democracy. In this sense, white supremacy, in one way or another, wounds all of us within its grip, including those who materially benefit from its exploitative practices but morally suffer from the insidious ways the wound mars the soul. brown’s poem is also useful because it moves beyond descriptions of racial violence and articulates ways to heal.

things are not getting worse
they are getting uncovered
we must hold each other tight
and continue to pull back the veil...

remove the shrapnel, clean the wound
relinquish inflammation, let the chaos calm
the body knows how to scab like lava stone
eventually leaving the smooth marring scars of lessons learned...

denial will not disappear a wound...

the healing path is humility, laughter, truth, awareness and choice...

we are our only relevant hope
we are our only possible medicine...39

38 Ibid.
39 Ibid.
Like brown’s poem, my conception of phantom pain is a tool of critique that also takes on the imaginative challenge of living in the wake of racial violence and premature black death. Her claim that “denial will not disappear a wound” alongside her insistence to not believe “the wound is who we are” informs my readings of Afropessimism and black liberalism, respectively.\footnote{Ibid.} Phantom pain, as I conceive it, articulates the more dynamic and potentially transformative elements of black politics that emerge in the wake of premature death. Here I am thinking of black rebellions, militant direct actions, politicized street memorials, radical protest movements, and anti-establishment activist-mothers, to name a few.\footnote{Each of the following chapters examines different aspects of these examples. I conclude chapter 2 by examining Bree Newsome’s removal of the confederate flag the day after Reverend Pinckney’s funeral. In chapter 2, I look at the construction of Michael Brown’s street memorial in the context of the Ferguson Rebellion; and in chapter 3 I highlight the anti-establishment activism of Samaria Rice in the wake of her son’s police killing.} To be clear, however, the case studies I present throughout the dissertation are neither exhaustive nor are they inherently emancipatory. Activism is messy. Rage without love can devolve into resentment. Black rebellions disconnected from social movements may make the news but not necessarily make a change. Resistance to police violence that fails to take seriously other forms of injustice can reinscribe systems of oppression. Phantom pain is a way of
foregrounding the possibility of radical transformation amid the precarity of racial domination. It is a way of thinking through racialized trauma and premature black death that can aid in the creation of a “healing path.” It is not the path itself.

I focus on Afropessimism and black liberalism for a few reasons. Afropessimism because it began to grow from an obscure subfield of black studies into a relatively significant political discourse. As I will show in my reading of Frank Wilderson’s work, since the emergence of Black Lives Matter, the concept has captured the attention of academics, activists, writers, and those generally interested in questions of black suffering, racial violence, and the persistence of premature black death. As such, I examine the ideas and interventions of Afropessimist thought in order to better understand its implications on black politics and contemporary activism.

Black liberalism because there is simply no way to understand the emergence of Black Lives Matter under the tenure of President Obama without some sense of the political ideology that undergirds the rise of the black political leadership class. As I will demonstrate through my engagement with the work of Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, Michael C. Dawson, and Eddie Glaude, the failures of Obama’s presidency alongside notions of racial colorblindness and national progress set the stage for the explosion in Ferguson and the movement born in its wake. I
examine black liberalism, in particular, in order to better grasp the impact and implications of black political leaders’ role in managing and, in certain ways, exacerbating the racial wound while preaching a message of healing and hope.

To be clear, Afropessimism and black liberalism are not the only theories relevant to an assessment of contemporary black activism. Nor are they necessarily the most important. Elements of black nationalism, queer feminism, trans politics, and international solidarity (to name a few) also played important roles in the emergence and development of Black Lives Matter. I focus on Afropessimism and black liberalism here not only because they help contextualize BLM protests but because, in similar and distinct ways, they illuminate the complex and contested ways loss, grief, racial trauma, and premature black death animate and constrain African American politics. In this chapter, I consider how both formations often stand in the way of a more transformative style of political engagement that was central to the development of Black Lives Matter.

At the heart of phantom pain is the fact that something remains in the wake of racial violence and the wound of white supremacy. The term remains is traditionally used to describe a corpse, but here it marks the social, cultural and, most prominently, political remnants that exceed what Afropessimist scholars call “social death,” a concept taken from sociologist
Orlando Patterson which describes a total and perpetual state of alienation and enslavement.\textsuperscript{42} Phantom pain rejects this conceptualization of the black experience. As I demonstrate throughout the dissertation, black life is not reducible to racial domination and premature death, as seen (perhaps ironically) in the expansive ways we grieve our dead. The long tradition of African American mourning - open casket funerals, makeshift memorials, protests in the wake of racial violence, bereaved family members commemorating the slain through activist efforts - challenges the basic argument of Afropessimism, demonstrating how loss lingers and how the dead live on. It is precisely what we make of our losses and how we work through the reality of our dead that animates the life of black politics.

This chapter will unfold in three parts. First, I will use Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor’s account of Black Lives Matter to frame the movement’s emergence and political development. Second, I will explicate and critique the basic tenets of black liberalism and Afropessimism by examining the remarks of Barack Obama, and the recent work of Frank Wilderson. Third, I will juxtapose the two ideological frameworks. To do so, I turn to Sheldon Wolin’s

\textsuperscript{42} Orlando Patterson defines social death as a persistent assault on five basic human needs, including: the need to belong, to understand one’s environment; to have some control over life outcomes; to feel capable of being loved; and the ability to trust others. See page ix in the Preface to Social Death: A Comparative Study. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982).
notion of blocked grief and Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing’s ideas on narratives of progress in order to demonstrate the ways stories of triumph and tragedy cohere as much as they contradict each other. Lastly, I put these theoretical insights on death and loss in conversation with recent discoveries in the physiology of trauma in order to illuminate my concept of phantom pain. By exposing the limitations and contradictions of Afropessimism and black liberalism, my aim is to create space to consider the more transformative possibilities of contemporary black politics.

'This Ain’t Yo Grandparent’s Civil Rights Movement’

In From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation Keaanga-Yamahtta Taylor captured the conundrum of post-civil-rights African American politics by asking:

How do we explain the rise of a Black president, along with the exponential growth of the Black political class and the emergence of a small but significant Black economic elite, at the same time as the emergence of a social movement whose most well-known slogan is both a reminder and an exhortation that 'Black Lives Matter'?\textsuperscript{43}

The obvious answer is that racism did not end when Obama became president. But I believe something more specific was at stake. The endless loop of black death online and in the streets agitated the same young people who were told to have hope because Obama’s election meant that the racial wound would mend.

\textsuperscript{43} Keaanga-Yamahtta Taylor, From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation (Chicago: Haymarket, 2016), 33.
It was not only the number of deaths but the manner of the killings that sparked the “fire this time.”\textsuperscript{44} Trayvon Martin shot and killed on his way home to watch the NBA all-star game. Michael Brown’s body sprawled on the street for hours. Eric Garner choked to death on a Staten Island street corner as he yelled “I can’t breathe!” Nine black parishioners slaughtered during bible study as they closed their eyes to pray.

In one sense, it should come as no surprise that the killings of black people at the hands of law enforcement sparked the latest iteration of the black freedom struggle. Incidents of police and racial violence have sparked black rebellions throughout U.S. history. In the week after Dr. King’s assassination, alone, 125 uprisings broke out in nearly every major city.\textsuperscript{45} But to call Michael Brown our Emmett Till is misleading. This was new terrain. BLM protests were erupting under and against black political leadership.

Taylor’s account of BLM is crucial for understanding this complex moment in contemporary black political life. Three features are especially important. The first is the significance of the black political leadership class. “The most significant

transformation in all of Black life over the last fifty years,” Taylor argues, “has been the emergence of a Black elite, bolstered by the Black political class, that has been responsible for administering cuts and managing meager budgets on the backs of Black constituents.”

It is a kind of dramatic irony: black political leaders were handed the keys to some of America’s largest cities; yet the masses of black people have remained caged in cycles of poverty, unemployment, decrepit housing, and a racialized criminal justice system. Between the signing of the Voting Rights Act in 1965 and the release of Grandmaster Flash’s debut album, “Freedom,” in 1980, the number of African American politicians grew from 1,400 to nearly 5,000.

It is a complicated story that involved - among other things - the passage of civil rights legislation, shifting demographics within the Democratic Party, and a pragmatic approach to black liberation on behalf of civil rights leaders such as Bayard Rustin and Dr. King, as well as Black Power advocates such as Amiri Baraka and the Black Panthers.

What is important, for my purposes at least, is that the dramatic increase of black elected officials alongside the rise of the black middle class set the stage for the emergence of Barack Obama and Black Lives Matter. As Taylor explains,

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46 Taylor, #BlackLivesMatter, 53.
47 Ibid., 223-4.
after forty years of this electoral strategy, Black elected officials’ inability to alter the poverty, unemployment, and housing and food insecurity their Black constituents face casts significant doubt on the existing electoral system as a viable vehicle for Black liberation.\textsuperscript{48}

A black president presiding over deepening class inequality, rising political austerity, and rampant patterns of police violence had shifted the terrain of political struggle. Racial representation wouldn’t cut it. From 2008 to 2011, African Americans lost fifty percent of their wealth.\textsuperscript{49} Over one in every three black children were growing up in poverty.\textsuperscript{50} By 2010, national black unemployment reached 16 percent.\textsuperscript{51} The median net wealth of African American households fell from $16,600 in 2010 to $11,000 in 2013.\textsuperscript{52} A school-to-prison pipeline continued to railroad black students into shadows of confinement.\textsuperscript{53} And during Obama’s presidency, police killed more than a thousand black people; young black men were killed at a rate five times higher

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\textsuperscript{48} Ibid., 239.
\textsuperscript{52} Rakesh Kochhar and Richard Fry, “Wealth inequality has widened along racial, ethnic lines since end of Great Recession,” Pew Research, December 12, 2014, \url{https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/12/12/racial-wealth-gaps-great-recession/#:~:text=Meanwhile%2C%20the%20median%20wealth%20of,2010%20to%20%2411%20000%20in%202013}.
than young white men. Obama’s election did not mitigate black unemployment, a racialized housing crisis, police killings, or mass incarceration. As Naomi Murawaka writes: “One black man in the White House did not erase the million more in the Big House.” In many ways, it concealed it.

Part of the significance of Black Lives Matter is that, to use Brown’s language, it “pull[ed] back the veil” not only of systemic racism but of the myth of racial colorblindness. There is perhaps no better example of this than the Baltimore Uprising. On April 12, 2015, less than a year after Darren Wilson shot and killed Michael Brown in Ferguson and 15 days after white police officer Michael Slager shot and killed Walter Scott in North Charleston, Baltimore police pursued 25-year-old Freddie Gray without cause and threw him in the back of a police van where eighty percent of his spine was severed. Gray died a week later after suffering cardiopulmonary arrest.

City residents immediately flooded the streets in protest. But it was not until a few hours after Gray’s funeral service,

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when police attacked a large group of black teenagers and they responded by hurling rocks and bricks at cop cars and riot shields, that tensions reached the boiling point.\textsuperscript{57} It was yet another example of black grief sparking social protest. The day Gray’s body was put to rest was the night Baltimore exploded.

But the Baltimore Rebellion was not a mere extension of the eruption in Ferguson. “What distinguishes Baltimore from Ferguson,” Taylor explains, “is that the Black political establishment runs the city: African Americans control virtually the entire political apparatus.”\textsuperscript{58} Ferguson was, in part, a tale of a predominately black city controlled by a majority white power structure. In Baltimore, however, the mayor, police commissioner, superintendent, the entire city housing commission, eight of the fifteen city council members (including the president), three of the six officers involved in Gray’s death, and even the judge who presided over the trial, which was eventually dismissed, were all black.\textsuperscript{59} “If the murder of Mike Brown and the rebellion in Ferguson were reminiscent of the old Jim Crow, then the murder of Freddie Gray and the Baltimore uprising symbolize the new Black political elite.”\textsuperscript{60}

\textsuperscript{57} Taylor, \#BlackLivesMatter, 197-8.
\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., 173-4.
\textsuperscript{59} Ibid., 173-6.
\textsuperscript{60} Ibid., 173-4.
Despite the naked brutality of Gray’s tragic death, black politicians quickly blamed angry black youth for the uprising. Mayor Rawlings-Blake described the protestors as “thugs” and “criminals.” President Obama echoed her statement a few days later, referring to the kids from Baltimore’s blighted inner city as “criminals and thugs who tore up the place.”

As I will demonstrate throughout the dissertation, such narratives of cultural pathology, alongside fictitious notions of post-racialism and national progress, dovetail into a profound political mythology that protects the interests of black political leaders and black elites at the expense of the black poor and working classes. By shifting blame from law enforcement and elected officials to African American culture, black political leaders absolve themselves of their responsibility to address the root causes of social inequality. As Taylor argues, “this framework of Black inferiority politically narrates the necessity of austere budgets while sustaining...the premise of the ‘American Dream.’”

To be sure, the black political leadership class not only can obscure the reality of systemic racism, but it can also cover up the fact of deepening class inequality within black communities. This is the second important feature of Taylor’s

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61 Ibid., 175-6.
62 Ibid.
63 Ibid., 67-8.
treatment of the movement. Class matters. While the mainstream media narrowly portrayed BLM protests as impulsive reactions to sporadic incidents of police brutality and racial animus, the movement was also about economic exploitation.

The context of the police killings suggest as much. Consider, once again, the Baltimore Uprising. Freddie Gray was from Sandtown-Winchester, the poorest neighborhood in Baltimore where the population is 97% black. At the time of his killing, over a third of households in that area lived in poverty; more than half made less than $25,000; and in 2012 the unemployment rate was 24.2%, nearly double that of the city. Compare these statistics to South Baltimore where, in 2010, 97.3% of the population was white; over a half of residents made above $75,000 a year; and the median income per household was $85,173 – nearly four times higher than those in Sandtown.

Baltimore is a proverbial tale of two cities. Between 1950 and 1990 – the year Gray was born – the city lost tens of thousands of manufacturing jobs. Furthermore, as white flight took off and deindustrialization gained wind, Baltimore saw a dramatic increase in home vacancies. Between 1970 and 1998, the

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65 Ibid.
66 Ibid.
67 Ibid.
number of abandoned houses mushroomed from 7,000 to 40,000.\textsuperscript{68} In 1993, there were 600 in Gray’s neighborhood alone, an area consisting of only 72 square blocks.\textsuperscript{69} Despite the plethora of empty homes, nearly 30,000 people experience housing insecurity every year.\textsuperscript{70} African American youth suffer particularly harsh conditions in “Charm City.” In 2013, the first year of Obama’s second term, 37% of black 20 to 24-year-olds were unemployed.\textsuperscript{71} The overwhelming majority of black students attend underfunded, decaying public school buildings and qualify for free and reduced lunch.\textsuperscript{72} And, in the 2006-2007 academic year, about half of black men dropped out or were expelled from high school.\textsuperscript{73} The severity of racial and economic inequality throughout Baltimore can perhaps be summarized in a single statistic: there is a 20-year difference in life expectancy between the residents of Roland Park, a white affluent neighborhood, and the black people who live six miles away in Hollins Market.\textsuperscript{74} Bizarre data like this gives concrete meaning to Ruthie Wilson Gilmore’s

\textsuperscript{69} Kasperkevic, “In Freddie Gray’s neighborhood, more than a third of households are in poverty.” \\
\textsuperscript{70} Alana Semuels, “Could Baltimore’s 16,000 Vacant Houses Shelter the City’s Homeless?” The Atlantic online, October 20, 2014, \url{https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2014/10/can-homeless-people-move-into-baltimores-abandoned-houses/381647/}. \\
\textsuperscript{71} Keller et al. “Baltimore: The divided city where Freddie Gray lived and died.” \\
\textsuperscript{72} Ibid. \\
\textsuperscript{73} Ibid. \\
\textsuperscript{74} Ibid.
definition of racism as “the state-sanctioned and/or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death.” As I will show in chapter 3 regarding Michael Brown’s case, Gray’s death is best understood as a spectacular expression of the slow day-to-day violence of racial capitalism. “This is bigger than Freddie Gray,” Will Kearney, a 28-year-old black Baltimore resident, said after Gray’s death. “What you’re seeing now is the bubbling up of frustration. This is just the bubble being burst.”

The explosions in cities like Baltimore and St. Louis ruptured the myth of post-racialism, challenged the legitimacy of black political leadership, and displayed the fortitude of black protest in the face of racial and economic oppression. Black youth and burgeoning activists refused to give police or politicians the last word. Local and national protests effectively kept the wound of state-sanctioned violence open for the world to see and for the nation to confront. These heady days of black insurgency inform the third important feature of Taylor’s assessment of BLM: grassroots protest movements are the

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77 Ibid.
primary vehicles of social transformation. As she wrote, “Black people’s progress has always been propelled by the strength of the movements of the mass of ordinary Black people.”

Taylor’s work is especially valuable for my conception of phantom pain and assessment of black politics because, in addition to explicating the crises facing African Americans, she also elaborates various ways to confront and eradicate them. While her book does not focus on the politics of black grief, Taylor’s emphasis on the capacity of social movements to spur social change demonstrates how black people have and continue to channel a shared sense of sorrow into collective resistance, as seen in the local and national responses to the killings of Trayvon Martin, Mike Brown, Freddie Gray, and countless others.

Furthermore, Taylor’s stress on the fissures within black activism, and the discontinuities between BLM and the 1960s freedom movement is also important. While I primarily focus on the contest between the political establishment and black millennial activists, it is critical to note that activism is not monolithic. As we will see in the following chapters, there were deep divides within Black Lives Matter, including competing political analyses, theories of change, and visions of justice and freedom. As Taylor explains,

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78 Taylor, #BlackLivesMatter, 253-4.
the sharp contrast between the intersectional, grassroots organizing of the ‘new guard’ and the top-down control of the civil rights establishment had helped to obscure important differences that existed among the new organizers. For example, some embraced building organizations like Black Youth Project 100 (BYP 100), #BLM, Dream Defenders, Million Hoodies, and Hands Up United, while others saw little need for that, instead embracing social media as the best way to organize the movement.\textsuperscript{79}

The mainstream story of a generational divide within contemporary black politics does not account for pivotal differences between activists such as DeRay McKesson, who promoted a “leaderless” movement primarily based online and regularly collaborated with President Obama, and formations such as the Dream Defenders and BYP 100, which saw value in organizational structure and were primarily antagonistic to establishment politicians. It also does not address the differentiation within organizations themselves, including questions about international solidarity, black queer leadership, and the efficacy of electoral politics.

In a similar way, Black Lives Matter is not necessarily the offspring of the civil rights movement. There are significant discontinuities between the two formations, much of which involves the first point I highlighted from Taylor’s text: the ascendance of black political leadership. What happens when a significant aim of a previous movement becomes a stumbling block

\textsuperscript{79} Ibid., 401-2.
for the next? How does the rise of the black middle class and a small but highly visible number of black elites impact racial solidarity? What happens when African American leaders become the managers of racial inequality? Resisting Bull Connor’s police dogs and billy clubs in “Bombingham,” Alabama is one thing. Declaring Black Lives Matter amidst tanks and teargas during the tenure of America’s first black president is another. Rapper and activist Tef Poe spoke to this when he interrupted a large forum organized by veteran civil rights leaders in Ferguson a few months after Brown’s killing: “This ain’t your grandparents’ civil rights movement!” he yelled to the crowd.\textsuperscript{80}

Tef’s provocative statement, in my view, should not be read as a complete rejection of the legacy of the 1960s freedom movement, but rather as an announcement of a remarkably new era of black political struggle, and a challenge to the old guard that sought to narrow and control its more radical visions and tactics.

To be clear, my aim here is not to point fingers at black politicians. Black elected officials are not the root causes of police violence or systemic racism, and there are real economic pressures and practical constraints within electoral politics.

Rather, as I will elaborate in chapter 3, my point is to expose the failures, limitations, and contradictions of a certain political strategy - electoral black power or “protest to politics” - that began in the 1970s, accelerated throughout the past several decades, and culminated with Obama’s election.

The development of black politics is not accidental or inevitable. Nor is it reducible to a certain political strategy or theory of change: the idea that we all share the same end but disagree on the means to get there. The rise of black leadership and the ascendance of Barack Obama are the outgrowths of a complex struggle between various actors, formations, and worldviews. As we will see, there are competing ideologies that shape black politics and American democracy. To better understand and navigate this tricky political terrain, we must get a hold on what ideas, visions, and political commitments gave voice to the declaration that black lives matter.

Moving Beyond the Racial Wound

In many of the activist spaces I occupy, liberal is shorthand for not radical and radical is shorthand for anything politically left of liberal. This is a bit crude. In reality, most of the organizers and intellectuals I study and struggle with have at least a broad sense of what they mean by these terms. Liberal often connotes an allegiance to the nation-state; a commitment to capitalism; a firm belief in law and order; and
a staunch rejection of militant violence. Radical normally means to grasp at the ideological and political roots of unjust systems and to seek to improve the lot of the oppressed.

But political ideologies are complex. Liberalism, for example, is polysemous. Its meanings shift over space and time, and its significance varies under different historical, social, and political conditions. At the same time, there are common threads that weave these tropes into something we might call a worldview. This complexity requires us to clarify the concept in order to engage its theoretical content and social implications. Otherwise, buzzwords within mainstream political discourse can come to mean so much that they end up meaning so little.

Michael C. Dawson’s Black Visions: The Roots of Contemporary African-American Political Ideologies is a helpful starting point.\(^8\) Dawson defines an ideology as “a world view readily found in the population, including sets of ideas and values that cohere, that are used publicly to justify political stances, and that shape and are shaped by society.”\(^9\) A political ideology, more specifically, helps distinguish friends from enemies, identify potential allies, cultivate certain civic behaviors, and craft a coherent narrative of society. Think of it as a kind of compass that guides us through complex political

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\(^9\) Ibid., 4.
questions, including the role of the state, the legitimacy of law and order, the moral dimensions of violence, and conceptions of the common good. Historian Barbara Fields puts it this way: "ideology is best understood as the descriptive vocabulary of day-to-day existence, through which people make rough sense of the social reality that they live and create from day to day."  

*Black Visions* is an examination of the nexus between American liberalism and four political ideologies prevalent in contemporary African American politics: black nationalism, black feminism, black marxism, and black liberalism. Dawson’s aim is to explicate how these worldviews relate to the American Creed. That is, broadly construed, the idea that the United States is a democratic society based on the principles of liberty, justice, individual rights, and equal protection before the law.  

According to Dawson’s typology, black nationalism views liberalism as inherently racist and oppressive. Black nationalists from Martin Delany to Malcolm X have argued that liberalism is not only an ineffective solution to racial injustice; it is a constitutive feature of it. Black marxism and black feminism, on the other hand, regard liberalism as racist.

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84 Dawson, “Introduction,” *Black Visions*.
85 Ibid., 58-61.
in practice but not necessarily in theory.\textsuperscript{86} Adherents of both ideologies have acknowledged the history and reality of racial inequality in the United States and remain suspicious of the viability of American liberalism to achieve black freedom; but neither reject traditional liberal principles altogether. Black liberalism, however, claims that the “only option for advancing American democracy and black social justice is to finally redeem the promise of America.”\textsuperscript{87} As such, in Dawson’s view, black liberals see racism as a force that is contradictory to and independent of liberal democracy and the system of capitalism.

In addition to examining the variety of black political ideologies, Dawson also typologizes the different “shades” of black liberalism itself. For Dawson, black liberal ideology consists of a wide range of political orientations including radical egalitarianism, disillusioned liberalism, and black conservatism. Radical egalitarians promote procedural justice, mitigated capitalism, economic equality, moral (over violent) struggle, and the U.S. government’s responsibility to redress racial inequality.\textsuperscript{88} Disillusioned liberals are former believers in the promises of American democracy that come to doubt the efficacy of liberalism to achieve racial justice.\textsuperscript{89} Black

\textsuperscript{86} Ibid., 14.
\textsuperscript{87} Ibid., 252.
\textsuperscript{88} Ibid., 259.
\textsuperscript{89} Ibid., 101-2.
conservatives advocate small government, personal responsibility, and the logic of free markets.\textsuperscript{90} Despite their differences, what binds all three is that each strand begins and ends with an argument about the American Creed. Here, mainstream liberalism sets the terms of black freedom struggle, reducing African American politics to a debate around whether the United States has lived up to its stated ideals or not.

Yet, in Dawson’s framework, not all black liberals are the same, nor are all those who endorse its tenets squarely black liberals. Clarence Thomas, the black conservative Supreme Court Justice, and Reverend William Barber, the architect of the new Poor People's Campaign, both believe in the legitimacy of the Constitution and both root their starkly different political arguments in an idea of the American dream. Booker T. Washington, an opponent of black protest, and Malcolm X, a proponent of black militancy, each championed self-determination and communal uplift in decidedly racial terms. Post-1930 Du Bois became disillusioned with the American Creed. So did Dr. King. Both evolved from what Dawson calls radical egalitarians to disillusioned liberals. A few weeks before his assassination, King told his friend and fellow civil rights activist Harry Belafonte that he had “come to believe we’re integrating into a

\textsuperscript{90} Ibid., 154-5.
Black liberalism, in this sense, is best understood as an ideology that animates, shapes, and develops complex political identities and orientations.

In Democracy in Black: How Race Still Enslaves the American Soul, Eddie Glaude applies Dawson’s formulations to the Obama era. He typologizes black liberalism somewhat differently but Dawson’s emphasis on the diversity and similarity within black liberal ideology obtains. According to Glaude, there are at least three kinds of black liberals: traditional, conservative, and post-black. Traditional black liberals view racism as a consequence of the contradiction between the nation’s stated ideals and actual practices. Their response to racial inequality tends to be significant government intervention. Conservative black liberals emphasize free markets and downplay the legacy of white supremacy. Their response to the ongoing impacts of racism is often a narrative of individual uplift and black cultural pathology. “Between the traditional and conservative black liberal,” Glaude explains, “stands the post-black liberal.”

These are people who believe in the American Idea and acknowledge the history of racism but deemphasize its current relevance, and appeal to ideas of efficient government in partnership with the private sector. Post-

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93 Ibid., 303-4.
94 Ibid., 305-6.
95 Ibid.
black liberals recognize the legacy of racial
discrimination but also insist on personal responsibility
and accountability. They have a faith in markets, as
conservative liberals do, and they don’t believe government
has all the answers to the problems of black communities.
They split the difference between traditional and
conservative black liberals, as they appeal not to a
totally color-blind America, but to an America in which
race doesn’t matter as much. In this sense, post-black
liberals are “race transcenders” – they acknowledge race
only to point to the need to get beyond race.\textsuperscript{96}

Obama is a quintessential post-black liberal. His political
vision, policy stances and, as I will emphasize throughout the
dissertation, remarks on the racialized killings of black people
speak to this kind of political ideology that dovetails a belief
in free-markets, post-racial rhetoric, private-public
governance, personal responsibility, and black cultural
pathology, all tightly wrapped in a narrative of national
progress. At the heart of Obama’s presidency was the idea that,
in order to make real the promises of American democracy, the
nation must first move beyond its tragic racial past.

On March 18, 2008, the then Illinois senator delivered his
‘A More Perfect Union’ address at the National Constitution
Center in Philadelphia. The moment was shrouded in patriotic
symbolism. Over 200 years prior, George Washington and 37 white
settler colonialists signed the U.S. Constitution across the
street in the Pennsylvania State House. Obama’s “race speech,”

\textsuperscript{96} Ibid.
as many commentators dubbed it, was, in large part, a response to a video of his former pastor, Reverend Jeremiah Wright, declaring repeatedly from the pulpit of Trinity United Church of Christ: “God Damn America!” The sermon, which went viral, caused a political firestorm. Conservatives and liberals alike immediately denounced Rev. Wright’s remarks as inflammatory and a mischaracterization of U.S. history and contemporary racial politics. As the presidential election gained steam, Obama’s association with the Chicago pastor became a site of controversy. But his speech was more than a chance to address Rev. Wright’s remarks. It was an opportunity to tell a bigger story about the past, present, and future of race in America.

Obama opened the address by acknowledging the impact of racial oppression in the formation of the United States. “The document they produced was eventually signed but ultimately unfinished,” he told the packed crowd, referring to the U.S. Constitution. Yet, the presidential hopeful quickly moved on, assuring the American people that, despite the country’s fraught history, change was possible and that grounds for political hope could be found squarely in the content of the American Creed.

98 Ibid.
“The answer to the slavery question was already embedded within our Constitution [which] had at its very core the ideal of equal citizenship under the law; a Constitution that promised its people liberty and justice and a union that could be and should be perfected over time.”

In Obama’s view, the goal is “to narrow that gap between the promise of our ideals and the reality of [our] time.”

His campaign was framed as a chance to mitigate, if not resolve, this founding contradiction. “This was one of the tasks we set forth at the beginning of this presidential campaign,” Obama explained, “to continue the long march of those who came before us, a march for a more just, more equal, more free, more caring and more prosperous America.”

Obama’s remarks about Rev. Wright’s sermon should be read in light of his conception of America as an exceptional democratic experiment forever in the process of perfecting itself. “We've heard my former pastor...use incendiary language to express views that have the potential not only to widen the racial divide, but views that denigrate both the greatness and the goodness of our nation.”

To be clear, Obama did not dismiss the need to address issues of race altogether. In fact, he stated that “race is an issue that I believe this nation

99 Ibid.
100 Ibid.
101 Ibid.
102 Ibid.
cannot afford to ignore right now.”

The problem was not that Rev. Wright critiqued contemporary patterns of racial injustice but that his emphasis on the ongoing impacts of the founding wound challenged the notion of national progress and exceptionalism.

The profound mistake of Reverend Wright's sermons is not that he spoke about racism in our society. It's that he spoke as if our society was static; as if no progress had been made; as if this country—a country that has made it possible for one of his own members to run for the highest office in the land...is still irrevocably bound to a tragic past. But what we know—what we have seen—is that America can change. That is the true genius of this nation. What we have already achieved gives us hope—the audacity to hope—for what we can and must achieve tomorrow.

For Obama, the viability of his presidential campaign proved his former pastor wrong. Clearly, America could transcend its tragic past. How else could a black man possibly become president of a nation built on chattel slavery? So the story went. But Obama took it a step further. “I have asserted a firm conviction—a conviction rooted in my faith in God and my faith in the American people—that, working together, we can move beyond some of our old racial wounds, and that in fact we have no choice if we are to continue on the path of a more perfect union.” This statement captures the essence of Obama’s address and, in my view, his entire presidency. The claim is not only

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103 Ibid.
104 Ibid.
105 Ibid.
that the nation can transcend “our old racial wounds” but that it must “if we are to continue on the path of a more perfect union.” This is the formulation that, for Dawson, binds the various shades of black liberalism. Here, as he explained, the “only option for advancing American democracy and black social justice is to finally redeem the promise of America.”

In my view, this is what made Rev. Wright’s sermon so threatening to Obama’s campaign and broader political vision. Beyond its provocative language of “God Damn America!” the message peeled back the myths of American exceptionalism and progress that cover the severity of the racial wound. The sermon told a different story of the nation’s past and how it haunts the political present. “This Government lied about their belief that all men were created equal,” Rev. Wright preached. ¹⁰⁶ “The truth was they believe all White men were created equal.” ¹⁰⁷ Here, the Constitution and its promises of liberty, equality, and equal protection before the law are not grounds for political hope, as Obama asserts, but national illusions that obscure the ongoing reality of racial and social injustice.

The government put them in slave quarters, put them on auction blocks, put them in cotton fields, put them in inferior schools, put them in substandard housing, put them in scientific experiments, put them in the lowest paying jobs, put them outside the equal protection of the law,

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.
kept them out of their racist bastions of higher education and locked them into position of hopelessness and helplessness. The government gives them the drugs, builds bigger prisons, passes a three-strike law, and then wants us to sing “God Bless America.” No, no, no. Not “God Bless America”; God Damn America! That’s in the Bible, for killing innocent people. God Damn America for treating her citizens as less than human. God Damn America as long as she keeps trying to act like she is God and she is supreme!108

Rage spewed from Rev. Wright’s lips as he critiqued what Dr. King called in 1967 the “triple evils” of racism, militarism, and capitalism. His sermon challenged stories of progress by situating the nation’s tragic past alongside its traumatic present. To be clear, Rev. Wright did not claim that “slave quarters” and “cotton fields” are the same as “substandard housing” and the “lowest paying jobs.” Rather, similar to adrienne marie brown’s poem, his sermon laid bare how the “myth of supremacy” is the ideological backbone of the founding wound. That is, regardless of its various expressions and iterations, the through line of American politics is what bell hooks calls a system of “white supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchy” which puts into practice the belief that human value is based on one’s racial identity, economic standing, gender performance, and sexual orientation.109

108 Ibid.
109 hooks uses the term “white supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchy” to describe what she conceives of as the interlocking systems of white supremacy, capitalism, patriarchy, and queer-antagonism that, taken together, constitute the political foundations of the United States. She has also used
In this sense, for Rev. Wright, white supremacy is not reducible to white racists or even white people. It is a system of oppression which, over the last several decades, has incorporated a significant number of people of color, including black elites and African American political leaders. Similar to Keaanga-Yamahtta Taylor’s critique of the black political leadership class, Rev. Wright’s sermon debunked the politics of racial representation that often conceal the reality of class inequality and more systemic forms of racial oppression. “For every 1 Oprah, a billionaire, you got five million Blacks who are out of work,” he explained to the congregation. 110 “For every 1 Colin Powell, a millionaire, you got ten million Blacks who cannot read. For every 1 ‘Condeskeeza’ Rice, you got one million in prison.” 111 According to Rev. Wright, “oppressors come in all colors.” 112 In many ways, this kind of analysis around the inclusion of people of color into the operations of systemic racism foreshadowed the emergence of Black Lives Matter.

While Obama did not disown his former pastor, he dismissed his fervent critique as “unproductive,” claiming that it “distracts attention from solving real problems” and “keeps us from squarely facing our own complicity within the African-

“imperialist” as an additional qualifier. For more see https://imaginenoborders.org/pdf/zines/UnderstandingPatriarchy.pdf.

110 Rev. Wright, “Confusing God and Government.”

111 Ibid.

112 Ibid.
American community in our condition.”\textsuperscript{113} Here, expressions of black rage and radical critiques of U.S. politics not only deny the greatness of America, but they disregard the “real” issues that impact “every American,” as well as the ways black communities contribute to our own oppression.\textsuperscript{114} For Obama, progress requires African Americans to bind “our particular grievances — for better health care and better schools and better jobs — to the larger aspirations of all Americans” and to take “full responsibility for our own lives by demanding more from our fathers, and spending more time with our children.”\textsuperscript{115}

These ideas of national unity and cultural pathology alongside condemnations of black rage and radical protest showed up, perhaps most clearly and consistently, in Obama’s public responses to the racialized killings of black Americans. Take, for example, his comments on the shooting death of Trayvon Martin and the subsequent trial of George Zimmerman. On July 19, 2013, five days after a jury decided not to convict Zimmerman, Obama addressed the nation from the Oval Office. He began with the language of a poised lawyer appealing to procedural justice. “The juries were properly instructed that in a case such as this reasonable doubt was relevant, and they rendered a verdict. And

\textsuperscript{114} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{115} Ibid.
once the jury has spoken, that's how our system works.”  
But, after doubling down on the court decision and what he considered the legitimacy of procedural justice, Obama took on a much more personal tone. “You know, when Trayvon Martin was first shot I said that this could have been my son. Another way of saying that is Trayvon Martin could have been me 35 years ago.”

Similar to his ‘A More Perfect Union’ speech, President Obama did not deny the significance of race in Trayvon’s case. He acknowledged that “in the African American community at least, there’s a lot of pain around what happened here” which is rooted in “a history of racial disparities in the application of our criminal laws.” But Obama quickly moved on and spent the rest of the speech focusing on what he saw as problems within Black America. “I think the African American community is also not naïve in understanding that, statistically, somebody like Trayvon Martin was statistically more likely to be shot by a peer than he was by somebody else,” he continued. “So folks understand the challenges that exist for African American boys.”

Obama’s statement is a statistical fact rooted in a cultural lie. Black people kill other black people at about the

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116 Ibid.
117 Ibid.
118 Ibid.
119 Ibid.
120 Ibid.
same rate that white people kill other white people. But Obama was not making a point about intra-racial violence. He was peddling a trope of black-on-black crime. Remember, as Dawson elucidates, political discourse is not social data in narrative form. The power of ideology lies not in its accuracy, but in its ability to craft a coherent and compelling vision of society. This helps explain how Obama could receive a round of applause during his Morehouse College commencement speech as he called on the young black men to “break that cycle where a father is not at home,” despite the fact that, according to a 2013 Center for Disease Control report, black fathers are more present in their children’s lives than fathers of other races. This kind of discourse of black-on-black crime in the wake of Trayvon’s tragic death and Zimmerman’s acquittal operated within a broader political ideology of post-black liberalism wherein black culture is as much to blame as structural racism.

Halfway through the speech, Obama turned to the question of how to move forward. He began by addressing the protests that were bubbling up across the country, which he called

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“understandable.” But he also made it clear that rioting and looting were unacceptable and that such acts would “dishonor what happened to Trayvon Martin and his family.” As I will elaborate in the following chapters, these kinds of appeals to the legacy of the premature dead and the grief of bereaved family members are often used by establishment politicians and even some veteran activists to police black political behavior and set the terms of acceptable forms of activism. “Beyond protests or vigils, the question is, are there some concrete things that we might be able to do,” the president continued.

Obama made a few suggestions, including trying to restore trust between law enforcement and communities of color; examining laws that may justify racial violence such as the Stand Your Ground in Florida; and, finally, providing mentorship for black youth. “We need to spend some time in thinking about how do we bolster and reinforce our African American boys,” he said. “There are a lot of kids out there who need help who are getting a lot of negative reinforcement.” Characteristic of post-black liberalism, Obama shied away from suggesting policies that would address the root causes of a racialized criminal justice system. Instead, he presented the idea of a national mentoring program that would largely address what he saw as moral crises within African American communities, including missing fathers, black criminality, and a growing disenchantedment
among black youth in the legitimacy of the American dream. “I'm not naïve about the prospects of some grand, new federal program,” he said. “But I do recognize that as President, I've got some convening power...for us to be able to gather together business leaders and local elected officials and clergy and celebrities and athletes, and figure out how are we doing a better job helping young African American men feel that they're a full part of this society.” For Obama, a public-private partnership that supported criminalized black boys would be more effective than a federal policy that addressed the criminalization of black youth. “I think that would be a pretty good outcome from what was obviously a tragic situation,” he stated before calling on Americans to “do some soul searching” and to not “lose sight that things are getting better.”

The following year the Obama administration launched My Brother's Keeper (MBK). The program’s title, taken from the biblical story of Cain who brutally murdered his brother Abel, suggests the political vision of the project. While the initiative provides educational resources and employment opportunities for young men of color, it largely focuses on supposedly ameliorating African American culture by providing

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positive male role models and cultivating a desire in the young men to take full personal responsibility for their own lives. As Obama said during his Morehouse commencement speech, “we’ve got no time for excuses. Nobody cares how tough your upbringing was. Nobody cares if you suffered some discrimination.”\textsuperscript{124} To be sure, many people within the black community already embrace ideas of individual uplift. As Dawson and Glaude show, calls for African Americans to assume responsibility in determining our own fate is characteristic of various expressions of black political life. Even Rev. Wright called on his congregation to stop “looking to the government” to ensure racial justice.\textsuperscript{125}

But Obama’s attempt to make black youth “feel that they’re a full part of this society and that they've got pathways and avenues to succeed” by building their trust in law enforcement and hope in the promises of the American Creed was met, over and over again, with spectacular instances of police brutality. Six months after the launch of MBK, another national incident of racial violence rocked the nation. On August 9, 2014, white police officer Darren Wilson shot and killed 18-year-old unarmed black teenager Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, sparking outrage and, eventually, the emergence of the largest black movement since the 1960s. The racial wound Obama sought to cover

\textsuperscript{124} Obama, “Morehouse College Commencement.”
\textsuperscript{125} Rev. Wright, “Confusing God and Government.”
with a mentorship program and the myth of American progress busted wide open as Ferguson residents stormed the streets and articulated their pain and rage in the form of a rebellion.

Obama’s response to the police killing of Mike Brown and the non-indictment of Darren Wilson was almost identical in content to his remarks on Trayvon’s case. First, he appealed to procedural justice by asserting that “we are a nation built on the rule of law.” Then he made several things clear: “there’s never an excuse for violence”; protestors should “channel their concerns constructively”; that peaceful protests and reflection are what it means to honor Mike Brown’s legacy and the grief of his family; and that Americans must remember that, despite the tragedy, we have “made enormous progress in race relations.”

As I explained in the introduction, Obama’s remarks represent a liberal politics of grief which, in the wake of racial violence, asserts the logic of law and order, seeks to quell expressions of black rage and forms of militant protest by defining the legacy of the dead and the grief of bereaved family members, all while reiterating the need for national unity and telling a story of American progress. “I know the events of the past few days have prompted strong passions,” Obama said, “but as details

127 Ibid.
unfold, I urge everyone in Ferguson, Missouri, and across the country, to remember this young man through reflection and understanding. We should comfort each other and talk with one another in a way that heals, not in a way that wounds.”  

Here, Obama seems to suggest that any emphasis on black suffering exacerbates the “old racial wound” as much as the ongoing conditions of white supremacy that cause the pain.

As we will see, this particular brand of black liberalism, with its condemnation of black anger, dismissal of radical critique, policing of black political behavior, story of national progress amid the persistence of racial inequality, and faith in the capacity of American democracy to mend the founding wound, in certain ways, stands in stark contrast to the ideology of Afropessimism, which tells its own story of death and loss.

Let the Sore Fester

Frank Wilderson’s latest book, simply titled Afropessimism, was published a month between the high-profile police killings of Breonna Taylor in Louisville, Kentucky and George Floyd in Minneapolis, Minnesota.  

As the pandemic wreaked havoc across the country and globe, people of all races and ages took to the streets, breaking social distancing orders, to protest the

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latest round of black lives turned viral hashtags. It was an unprecedented moment soaked in unfathomable grief. Perhaps the largest protests in American history were erupting under the deadliest pandemic in over a century.\textsuperscript{130}

Wilderson’s \textit{Afropessimism} quickly entered into the mainstream conversation around the value of black lives and the persistence of systemic racism. In addition to its influence within academic circles, the book – and Wilderson’s broader body of work – has been discussed and debated in several popular media outlets, social movement forums, and high school debate teams.\textsuperscript{131} Even conservative \textit{New York Times} columnist David Brooks


encouraged people to read *Afropessimism*, reiterating one of Wilderson’s major claims: “the spectacle of Black death is essential to the mental health of the world.”

To be sure, Afropessimist scholarship is relatively wide, and while Wilderson’s text does not claim to be a definitive account of Afropessimist thought, it does articulate its basic arguments and tenets. The UC Irvine professor is also widely recognized as a founder of the field and, as such, an authoritative voice on the theory’s insights and interventions within black studies and public political discourse. For these reasons, and for the sake of precision, I will turn to Wilderson’s *Afropessimism* in order to think through the broader claims of Afropessimist thought and their implications on black politics and contemporary activism, in particular.

*Afropessimism* reads like a work of autotheory, a form of creative writing that blends philosophy and autobiography.

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Wilderson describes it as a “hybrid seed” that “weaves the abstract thinking of critical theory with the blood-and-guts stories of life as it’s lived.” In this framework, in order to grasp the author’s arguments, the reader must appreciate the personal experiences that gave them voice.

Frank Wilderson III was born in 1956 into an upper middle class black family. The Wildersons were a part of that wave of upwardly mobile African Americans Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor describes as central to post-civil-rights American politics. Frank’s dad was a university professor and his mom was a school administrator who later earned her doctorate in educational psychology. After short stays in several college towns, the family settled into the white affluent Kenwood neighborhood of Western Minneapolis “where parents were executives, bankers, architects, attorneys, doctors, and statesmen like Senator, soon-to-be Vice President Walter Mondale, and Mark Dayton, a politician whose family owned Target and B. Dalton Bookseller.” The Wildersons were the first family of color in town and Frank was one of two black kids in his grammar school.

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137 Zug, “The Italicized Life of Frank Wilderson ’78.”
138 Wilderson, Afropessimism, 22.
139 Zug, “The Italicized Life of Frank Wilderson ’78.”
Like many black children reared in white spaces, Frank experienced the daily stings of American racism. In the book, he recalls classmates pressing his face in the snow, calling him monkey when he climbed rope in gym class, and one white girl who “wouldn’t hold my hand for fear that my soot would stain her.”

During a playdate, Frank was asked by his friend’s mother how it felt to be a Negro. When he responded that “it was nice,” she looked offended and blew a cloud of cigarette smoke toward his face. As I read the memoir, I could sense the racial wound seeping through the boyish innocence of the young Frank, who loved to play sports and regularly wet the bed. “As a boy I seldom lived in the present,” he writes. “It hurt too much to be present. When I occurred to myself I was in the future. The present was the penance, what I had to pay for my soot.”

These formative experiences left Frank wounded, and they became the window through which he began to make sense of the forces that stood between the white world and the Wildersons.

I was no Afropessimist at the age of eleven and my knowledge of what gave me so much anxiety was bereft of a critical vocabulary. But I knew I was Black; not because of smells of filé powder and smoked sausage thickening in a gumbo roux wafted from my house and no other in the neighborhood, but because we were the only ones they called Negroes.

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140 Wilderson, Afropessimism, 20.
141 Ibid., 27.
142 Ibid., 21.
143 Ibid., 19.
The day Frank turned twelve, Congress passed the 1968 Civil Rights Act which, among other things, made housing discrimination and inciting riots illegal. The bill was signed into law as cities exploded across the country in response to the assassination of Dr. King, whose head was blown off seven days earlier as he stood on a hotel balcony in Memphis. Frank watched the riots every night with his grandmother, who had come up from New Orleans to Minneapolis to visit the family.

One night her feet shot up from the easy chair and damn near knocked her beer and pigs’ feet off the TV dinner tray. As I steadied the table, she laughed like I’d never seen her laugh before. ‘Go head, son!’ she cried. Grandmother Jules rooted for the rioters like a football fan whose team finally made it to the Superbowl. Her gaiety at the sight of America’s underdogs setting buildings aflame and hauling shopping carts full of clothes and television sets soothed Frank’s insides and made his pain legible.

I caught her joy and laughed out loud, too. A knot loosened in my chest, a phantom tumor that had been there since first grade. We were watching the riots, and my grandmother laughed my pain away...And I felt loved.145

By the time Frank enrolled at Dartmouth College in 1974, he had fully embraced black militancy. He did not “grow up to be a looter and make [his] grandma proud,” as he initially wished. Instead, he grew into a student activist, serving as president

144 Ibid., 38.
145 Ibid.
of the Black Student Union as he played outside linebacker on the football team. During his sophomore year, he was suspended for organizing a rally against the inhumane work conditions of immigrant laborers on campus. By the time he returned to school, the F.B.I. began to surveil his whereabouts. Oddly enough, after graduating, Wilderson spent “eight ethically bankrupt years” as the first black stockbroker at Merrill Lynch in Minneapolis. A period he scantily mentions in the memoir, other than a vivid description of the ulcer he developed in his stomach from being overworked. At 33, Wilderson quit his job and enrolled at Columbia University to study creative writing. After completing his M.F.A., he moved to Johannesburg to join his then wife, Khanya, who he had met there two years prior while doing research for a novel he was writing.

South Africa was on the verge of revolution, and Wilderson thrusted himself into the center of the anti-apartheid struggle. In addition to waiting tables and teaching cultural studies, the Ivy League trained writer became an elected official in the African National Congress (ANC) and moonlighted as a spy in the Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK), the party's armed paramilitary unit. The apartheid regime was beginning to crumble under the weight

146 Ibid., 6.
147 Zug, “The Italicized Life of Frank Wilderson ,’78.”
148 Ibid.
of black resistance. The question was what the new South Africa would look like, and what would be the means to achieving it.

For Wilderson and his comrades, there were two viable options: a liberal capitalist state led by Nelson Mandela or a radical socialist regime spearheaded by ANC leader Chris Hani. Ultimately, as Chinese communist leader Mao Tse-Tung once contended: “political power [grew] out of the barrel of a gun.”\(^\text{149}\) Hani was assassinated and Mandela was elected president in 1994. This was a critical turning point in Wilderson’s political and intellectual development. The writer and militant activist felt that Mandela betrayed the revolutionary struggle. “Mandela’s promises flickered and choked like the last gasps of lampposts,” he laments. “All the bloodshed for a flag-and-anthem nation, the mist of mythology, and tough love from his cronies who rebuked the so-called ultra-left wit, ‘Now, comrades, you must understand that you cannot eat your principles.’”\(^\text{150}\)

In many ways, Hani’s murder and Mandela’s betrayal struck the death knell in Wilderson’s hope in social transformation. *Afropessimism* can be read as a painful and deeply personal response to the trauma he incurred from the persistence of white supremacy in the United States and the failures of black leadership in South Africa. As Wilderson said in an interview:


“Rather than try to fix what could not be reconciled, I allowed that sore to fester on the page – as beautifully as I could.”151

After demobilizing in 1996, Wilderson returned to the U.S. and enrolled in a doctoral program at UC Berkeley, where he developed his autobiography into an academic theory now known as Afropessimism. He opens the memoir describing a psychotic episode he experienced while in graduate school. “I was moaning. Sobbing,” he recalls. “Cluster bombs spiked in my heart. I clutched my chest and cried out.”152 The doctor at the student center, who I assume was white, asked him to describe the pain.

I told them it was the stress of graduate school. The best way to deal with an interrogation is to weave a bit of truth into your lie. I couldn't tell them I had suddenly realized what it meant to be an Afropessimist; that my breakdown was brought on by a breakthrough, one in which I finally understood why I was too black for care.153

This is where things get tricky. Because Wilderson narrates his personal life as a series of political lessons, it is unclear, at least to me, which parts of the text are meant to be read as theoretical claims or purely vignettes of a black man aggrieved by an anti-black world. Perhaps this is the method to Wilderson’s madness. He thrusts his reader onto his “high-wire act between rage and paranoia” with little space to discern what is happening beneath the lyrical performance.154

151 Williams, “A Black Intellectual Mixes Memoir and Theory.”
152 Wilderson, Afropessimism, 3.
153 Ibid., 17.
154 Williams, “A Black Intellectual Mixes Memoir and Theory.”
But despite the text’s nebulosity, Wilderson makes several claims that are not hard to decipher, even if they are to digest. “Blacks are not Human subjects, but are instead structurally inert props, implemented for the execution of White and non-Black fantasies and sadomasochistic pleasures.”

This jarring thesis stands at the heart of Wilderson’s memoir. For clarity, it is perhaps better to lay out the basic tenets that form this particular worldview. In Afropessimist thought, blackness and slaveness are synonymous; black suffering is incomparable to other forms of oppression; black liberation is unattainable in civil society; and racism is immutable.

“There is no solution to black suffering,” Wilderson said in an interview. “The problem today is the same as it was in 1865 even though the technologies have changed.” He went on to suggest that black people “live in a state of total subsummation by violence and hate,” that “all we have is psychic terror and suffering,” and that the “black experience is “complete captivity from birth to death.” In the background of Afropessimism is a critique of what Wilderson sees as the

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155 Wilderson, Afropessimism, 15.
156 Black Ink, “We’re Trying to Destroy the World: An Interview with Frank B. Wilderson III, conducted by The Killer Bs (Jared Ball, Todd Steven Burroughs, and Hate),” Black Ink online, February 10, 2018, https://black-ink.info/2018/02/10/were-trying-to-destroy-the-world/.
157 Ibid.
158 Ibid.
159 Ibid.
160 Ibid.
inherent racism within theories of liberation. “Afropessimism, then, is less of a theory and more of a metatheory,” Wilderson argues, “a critical project that, by deploying Blackness as a lens of interpretation, interrogates the unspoken, assumptive logic of Marxism, postcolonialism, psychoanalysis, and feminism.” The underlying assumption, according to Afropessimist thought, is that black people are, indeed, people - in any meaningful sense of the term. That is, political subjects recognizable within the terms of civil society. Because “Blacks” are not subjects but slaves - necessary for, yet barred from, the category of humanity - efforts to redress or redeem black suffering are dead upon arrival. And, as such, the plight, struggle, and fate of “Blacks” are incomparable to other oppressed groups (immigrants, non-black women, indigenous people, white workers, and so on). Taken together, these tenets form the philosophical lifeblood that pumps meaning into the stories Wilderson’s shares throughout his memoir.

Take, for example, his quarrel with a Palestinian coworker. After “licking [his] wounds” from his time at Merrill Lynch, Wilderson took on a job as a security guard at an art museum in the twin cities. One day Sameer, who also worked at the museum, told Frank that his cousin, who was an insurgent living
in Ramallah, had been “blown up while making a bomb.”

Initially, Wilderson expressed empathy. “There I sat, yearning, in solidarity with my Palestinian friend’s yearning, for the full restoration of Palestinian sovereignty; mourning, in solidarity, with my friend’s mourning, over the loss of his insurgent cousin.” But, after Sameer explained to Frank how he feels extra humiliated at checkpoints when the Israeli soldier is an Ethiopian Jew, “the earth gave way. The thought that my place in the unconscious of Palestinians fighting for their freedom was the same dishonorable place I occupied in the minds of Whites in America and Israel chilled me,” he writes.

For Wilderson, Sameer’s heightened sense of humiliation when he is harassed by Ethiopian soldiers was a universal lesson in political solidarity and racial psychology. “I was faced with the realization that in the collective unconscious, Palestinian insurgents have more in common with the Israeli state and civil society than they do with Black people,” he writes. “What they share is a largely unconscious consensus that Blackness is a locus of abjection to be instrumentalized on a whim.”

Such claims based on personal anecdotes, an idea of racial essentialism, and abstract notions of an anti-black unconscious...
that menaces the hearts and minds of all non-black people permeate the text and broader Afropessimist theory. In Wilderson’s view, African Americans, Ethiopian Jews, and all black people—no matter their standing in the social and economic order—share the same plight and fate; the political economy is better understood as a “libidinal economy” that employs black pain in the pursuit of white and non-black pleasures and politics; and Sameer’s story, which is every Palestinian’s story, even if they do not know it, proves that anti-black racism is incomparable to other forms of oppression.

Aside from his time in South Africa, Wilderson’s geography of grief is largely confined to unpleasant experiences in academia, awkward encounters with people of color, racial slurs from white peers, and a few outlandish moments that read more like a Hollywood thriller than a justification for academic theory. The white mother asking him as a child how it feels to be black; Native Americans calling his father a “nigger man” during a meeting over land rights; his Palestinian co-worker revealing that he feels especially aggrieved when an Ethiopian Jew harasses him at Israeli checkpoints; white colleagues at an academic conference in Berlin failing to take his scholarship

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168 Ibid., 13.
seriously; and white neighbors that Wilderson believed was trying to poison him and his partner, Stella.\textsuperscript{169}

“Yet the sense one individual Black writer makes of his or her life, from the perch of our wounds, our aspirations, our bourgeois frames of reference, are often read as saying much more than they actually can about the broader experiences and thoughts of Black people,” Imani Perry writes in her review of several recently published black memoirs, including Ta-Nehisi Coates \textit{Between the World and Me}.\textsuperscript{170} “That is dangerous,” she adds. While \textit{Afropessimism} is a fusion of memoir and theory, Perry’s insight elucidates the risk of reading Wilderson’s personal experiences for more than what they are: his personal experiences as a black man living in a racist world.

The problem is not Wilderson’s story. It is the move to neatly map it onto the vast geography of grief that shapes the black diaspora. When we accept his narrative as normative, we are left with a microscopic view that enlarges his wounds at the expense of the “blood-and-guts stories of life as it’s lived” in prison cells and on street corners, waiting in unemployment lines and learning in crumbling schools, traveling on refugee boats and public transportation, and the many sites of injustice that pervade black poor and working-class communities. Yes,

\textsuperscript{169} Wilderson, \textit{Incognegro}, 27; Wilderson, \textit{Afropessimism}, 12; 45; 171-6; 115.
\textsuperscript{170} Imani Perry, “The Year of Black Memoir,” \textit{Public Books} online, February 1, 2016, \url{https://www.publicbooks.org/the-year-of-black-memoir/}.
Wilderson went to Johannesburg and fought for the revolution. But he also entered with an American passport, two Ivy league degrees, and eight years of Merrill Lynch on his resume.

To be clear, my aim is not to devalue Wilderson’s personal grief, nor is it to debunk all of Afropessimist theory. My aim, rather, is to demystify the idea that his experiences can prove, as opposed to texture, his arguments. In this sense, Wilderson’s description of the book as a “hybrid seed” is spot on. Not because it weaves philosophy and autobiography, but because, as we know in gardening, hybrid seeds cannot be used for reproduction. That is the beauty and difficulty of the memoir as a genre, especially those that blend the personal and the political. “If indeed Black memoir, and Black literature, are to be methods for us to understand race in America today in all of its messiness,” Perry argues, “then each should be understood as one cry in the ring, a small piece of a mosaic, vast and ever changing. They should be set amidst other forms of knowledge, and considered carefully rather than treated with simplistic adulation. And at best we hope they open a road.”

The project of Afropessimism, however, seems to be a dead end. If we take Wilderson’s claims seriously and follow them to their logical conclusion, we must ask: from where does a black

\[171\] Ibid.
person derive the agency to argue, in effect, that black people do not have agency? If "all we have is psychic terror and suffering," then how do we make sense of Grandmother Jules' laughter and the savor of "smoked sausage thickening in gumbo roux?" Not to mention the ability to become the chair of African American studies at a major university and to present scholarship at conferences across the world. One wonders what to make of Nelson Mandela and Barack Obama. How might "Slaves" become presidents of two of the most powerful nations on earth?

Jeffrey Stout calls this the "paradox of point of view."

If a narrative includes a rendering of the author's own situation, the point of view from which the story invokes must be plausibly accessible to a historical agent thus situated. (The narrative cannot take omniscience as its point of view). As an author, one can neither describe nor judge one's own situation from a distance without establishing a position at the margins of, but still belonging to, that situation. There is no rising above the situation in its entirety. Any total condemnation of one's own age necessarily issues incoherence.172

Stout is critiquing philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre. He argues that MacIntyre's criticisms of modern moral discourse fail to account for the sources enabling his critique in the first place. I see a similar issue with Wilderson's work. "Inert props" cannot write books, make love, form language, dance, weep, flee the Master's House, head militaries, experience pain,

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benefit from exploitative political economies, forge social movements, or mourn the dead. They cannot “cry to sleep with Sarah Vaughan’s music” as Wilderson did in the wake of Hani’s assassination. And here is the jig beneath Afropessimist jargon. The theoretical center cannot hold under the weight of its own performative contradiction. Things fall apart.

So, what makes Afropessimism so alluring? Why has it captured the imaginations of a perhaps small but significant slice of academia and activism today? I am not sure if there is a way to answer that question definitively without some sort of research study. But context might help. In a 2018 forum, Professor Jasmine K. Syedullah summarized the political climate in which the theory of Afropessimism gained wind.

It is a mode of conversation about race and racism that cohered against a backdrop of the election of the first black American president and in opposition to those who anticipated, far too soon, that with black representation at the highest level of national governance we must have finally arrived at the end of the era of antiblack racism.

Dr. Syedullah’s conception of Afropessimism as a response to the notion of racial colorblindness aligns with Keeanga Yamahatta Taylor’s examination of Black Lives Matter. Taken together, their assessments highlight the common ground from which both

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173 Williams, “A Black Intellectual Mixes Memoir and Theory.”
formations rose into the mainstream. If we consider the endless eulogizing of black people killed at the hands of police alongside deepening class inequality, gigantic student debt, perpetual war, mass incarceration, and social media where people can document all their grievances, then what you have in Afropessimist thought is an enticing way to explain the failures of black leadership and contradictions of the American Creed.

To this score, Jesse McCarthy is on to something when he asks, “to what extent will Afropessimism ultimately be comprehended as something of a historical ‘mood,’ related in ways to the underlying dynamics of our historical epoch that we are still unable to fully elucidate?” He goes on to compare Wilderson’s theory to Weltschmerz (“worldpain”), a version of European pessimism that became popular among German elites in the second half of the 19th Century. “The psychological woundedness implied in the compound ‘worldpain’ reflects the intensity of the role that injury plays in these theories,” he writes. “It helps us to understand why Wilderson narrates his journey into the bondage of his pessimistic worldview by using an approach that strongly resembles talk therapy.” McCarthy’s insight illuminates the tendency within Afropessimist thought to psychologize race, to move it from the realm of power and

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177 Ibid.
domination to emotional distress. The primary goal, here, is to help victims of racial trauma identify what is causing their suffering and, at best, provide ways to cope. The underlying political conditions animating the pain, however, remain intact.

Blocked Grief

As I have shown, Afropessimism and black liberalism each articulate stories of loss that involve varying conceptions of and responses to the founding racial wound. In Afropessimist thought, the persistence of white supremacy proves that racism is permanent and therefore black liberation is impossible. The work of Frank Wilderson and, to some degree, Christina Sharpe suffers from a totalizing narrative of historical continuity. The idea here is not necessarily that the past and present are identical (although that is sometimes the argument), but that the differences do not make much of a difference. The prison replaced the plantation, to give an example, which proves that the condition of black life will always be defined by social death. The appropriate response to white supremacy, in this framework, is some form of black consciousness, an acute internal awareness of the particularity of black suffering. Perhaps Afropessimism can be thought of as a Freudian politics of melancholia where death and loss are internalized: precluding the possibility of and, in some cases, desire for healing.
Black liberalism largely describes the racial wound as the vestige of an old America that stands in the way of progress. It does not deny the existence of racial inequality, but it downplays its severity and continued relevance. Post-black liberals such as Obama tell a particular story of historical discontinuity. The idea here is not that the past and the present are totally different, but that the shadow of the nation’s dark past only confirms the light of its bright future. In this framework, the path to healing is personal responsibility, improving black culture, binding black grief to the struggles of all Americans, and an unwavering faith in the promises of the American Creed. Black liberalism might be thought of as a kind of Freudian politics of mourning that seeks to replace any significant focus on the persistence of white supremacy with an emphasis on the promise of American progress.

Yet, despite their differences, Afropessimism and black liberalism politically cohere as much as they rhetorically contrast each other. Both ideologies entail quests for closure. By that I mean something like what John Dewey called “quests for certainty,” which describes attempts on behalf of people to secure themselves against the contingency and precarity of human experience. Yet, despite their differences, Afropessimism and black liberalism politically cohere as much as they rhetorically contrast each other. Both ideologies entail quests for closure. For Dewey, these quests are dangerous, in part,  

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because they often cause people to relinquish their responsibility to act creatively and courageously in the face of danger. I add a gloss to this concept by using the term closure as a way to accent political responses to death, loss, and suffering that seek to seal the racial wound in a singular, eternal meaning. Closure, as I use it here, is a specific kind of quest for certainty sought in the wake of death, especially those characterized by tragedy. Think of how a funeral often provides closure for bereaved loved ones or how the concept of heavenly salvation offers relief in the wake of death. But, in the world of politics, such quests have a profound impact on how communities and nations mourn and work through the reality of the dead. This is why, as I argue in the next chapter, Obama’s eulogy of Rev. Pinkney is so significant. Because, in many ways, it was an attempt to close the founding racial wound in a narrative of grace, forgiveness, and empty reconciliation.

This is how I understand Afropessimism and black liberalism. Afropessimism seeks to seal the past and future into a tragic narrative by fetishizing the founding wound and largely ignoring the phantom pains that exceed its violence. Scholars such as Frank Wilderson employ a microscopic focus on black suffering at the expense of traditions of black resistance. Black liberalism seeks to seal the past and future into a triumphant narrative by downplaying the significance of the
founding wound and its ongoing impacts on African American life. As we will see throughout the following chapters, black liberals do not deny the presence and value of certain phantom pains. Funerals, bereaved family members, and national protests in the wake of racialized killings all play a vital role in legitimizing and sustaining the political power and agendas of the black political leadership class. The irony is that black liberals such as Obama and Rev. Al Sharpton depend on their capacity to tame, control, and graft the more transformative elements of collective expressions of African American mourning. By pronouncing, once and for all, what black suffering and the premature dead mean, neither Afropessimism nor black liberalism leaves room for the possibility of radical transformation.

The late political theorist Sheldon Wolin writes insightfully on the relationship between the politics of optimism and pessimism. In his 1998 essay, “From Vocation to Invocation,” Wolin reflects on the future of political theory. He begins by invoking his past.179 “My formative experiences are: a child during the Great Depression, a flier in World War II, a Jew during the era of the Holocaust, and an activist during the sixties.”180 For Wolin, his lived experiences - “all dominated by

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180 Ibid., 33.
loss,” including the “loss of liberal innocence” – led him to the question of “how to memorialize loss theoretically?”\textsuperscript{181}

The essay was presented at an academic conference, but the query was not simply an exercise in academic curiosity. “What is at stake,” Wolin clarifies, “is not mere recognition of loss but how one works through it.”\textsuperscript{182} Loss, in this sense, is a question of theory and action. How we think about loss shapes our responses to its presence in our personal lives and in the life of politics. Yet, Wolin does not provide so much of an answer as he does a way of thinking critically about the question.

His notion of blocked grief is a useful framework to think about the politics of Afropessimism and black liberalism.

When the casualties involved have figured importantly not only in personal but in the fabric of common concerns and, at the same time, the rate at which casualties are produced radically exceeds the limits of ordinary expectancy, with the result that there is not enough time to mourn, to absorb the loss and make sense of it, then there is the political equivalent of blocked grief.\textsuperscript{183}

Here, mourning is understood in personal and political terms. Like Freud, Wolin suggests that loss “is related to power and powerlessness.”\textsuperscript{184} He is primarily thinking about casualties of war. “For example, the loss may be acted out by erecting a memorial – the Confederate dead, to the Holocaust, to those who

\textsuperscript{181} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{182} Ibid, 36.
\textsuperscript{183} Ibid, 36-37.
\textsuperscript{184} Ibid, 33.
died in the Vietnam War - yet the resentments remain and the questions are unresolved.”

Blocked grief, in this sense, births forms of politics defined by the losses it has failed to process and the resentments that remain in the wake. Wolin mentions religious and patriotic fundamentalism as two examples.

But what about when the casualties occur on the battlefields of contemporary black life? The question not only invokes incarcerated loved ones, victims of police brutality, high infant mortality rates, and skewed life chances. It asks, more specifically, what happens when, due to the persistence of white supremacy, those left in the wake cannot afford to work through the mental and emotional costs of the racial wound? The times when, as my mom often says, “it’s just too much.” How do we soak up the losses without drowning in our own sorrow?

Eddie Glaude takes up this question in his book *In a Shade of Blue: Pragmatism and the Politics of Black America.* Here, he applies and elaborates Wolin’s formulation in the context of black politics, and its core categories of history, identity, and agency. “I want to suggest that blocked grief has resulted, among African Americans, in the persistence of black quests for certainty - forms of racial politics that secure us from

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185 Ibid., 37.
American hypocrisies.” Glaude is concerned about formations of black nationalism that, in their quests for a priori knowledge and solutions discoverable in history, block pathways to more imaginative thinking and creative action in the face of the contemporary crises facing black Americans.

I have a similar concern in light of the promise of Obama’s election and the perils of his presidency. What happens when a certain form of blocked grief, a politically powerful one, begets another form completely defined by its resentment toward its original source? That is, in our case, when the failure of liberal optimism to work through the realities of premature black death breeds a fatalistic pessimism that forfeits any effort to change things. Put differently, what happens when contemporary black politics is reduced to a debate about the successes and failures of liberalism and American democracy as they currently stand? Not much. Black liberals such as Obama claim victory in pursuit of maintaining the status quo. Afropessimists such as Frank Wilderson describe the carnage and declare defeat. By seeking to close the meaning of the founding wound in narratives of triumph and tragedy, both ideologies block creative pathways toward healing and transformation.

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187 Ibid., 16.
188 This is not Wolin’s exact formulation. Black liberalism, at least as I use it here, is not rooted in a politics of resentment. I still frame it as a form of blocked grief because the ideology hinges, in many ways, on a failure to work through the deaths and losses within African American life.
While the pronouncements of Afropessimism may sound radically different from black liberalism, the ideologies cohere in a profound way. By reducing politics to the failures of liberal democracy, Afropessimist thought concedes to the terms of liberal discourse, even in its critiques against the hypocrisies of liberalism. Here, nothing escapes the teleology of progress. It is as if all there is to be known and said about black people is how the world has failed black people.

Anthropologist Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing makes this point in *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*.189 Between 2004 and 2011, Tsing conducted research on the life of matsutake mushrooms in regions devastated by global capitalism. In documenting how this fungi grows from a deeply wounded earth - beneath litter, in desecrated forests, among industrial wastelands - Tsing makes broader claims about the “cracks of the global political economy” that gesture toward the “so-much-more out there” and, ultimately, the “the question of what’s left.”190 “What emerges in damaged landscapes, beyond the call of industrial promise and ruin?” she asks.191 Implied in the question is a recognition of the limits of totalizing stories of defeat. For Tsing, “neither

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190 Ibid., viii; 4.
191 Ibid., 18.
tales of progress nor ruin tell us how to think about (collaborative) world-making."¹⁹² Both share “the assumption that the trope of progress is sufficient to know the world, both in success and failure,” she explains. “The story of decline offers no leftovers, no excess, nothing that escapes progress. Progress still controls us even in tales of ruination.¹⁹³

Tsing’s argument makes me think of Michael Dawson’s typology. Remember, for him, what binds the various shades of black liberalism is that each takes the American Creed as its ultimate object of political orientation. Disillusioned liberalism stands out because, of the three types Dawson delineates, it is defined by a profound disenchantment with the American project. Following Wolin’s concept of blocked grief as a form of political resentment and Tsing’s notion of how pessimism is captured by progress, perhaps there is a way to think of the politics of Afropessimism along these terms.

Of course, there are stark differences in how Dawson describes disillusioned liberalism and the way I understand Afropessimism. Disillusioned liberals such as Dr. King and Du Bois came to believe, among other things: that the U.S. is a fundamentally racist country, but they did not give up on the importance of democratic values; that the majority of white

¹⁹² Ibid., 19.
¹⁹³ Ibid., 21.
people are committed to the idea of white supremacy, but not all of them; and that liberal integrationism is not a viable strategy to achieve black liberation, but multi-racial solidarity was still incredibly important. Dr. King believed black Americans were “integrating into a burning house,” but he died fighting to build a global beloved community. Du Bois ultimately fled the United States, but he embraced communism and elements of Pan-Africanism to resist capitalism and American empire. According to Dawson, “those who become disillusioned, particularly if they remain committed to activism, move on to other ideological positions such as nationalism, Marxism, feminism, and occasionally conservatism.”

What makes Afropessimism resonate with disillusioned liberalism is not how it has tended to work historically, but rather its stifling orientation toward liberal democracy. That is, how the concept’s arguments and tenets essentially revolve around liberalism, in its various shades. Unlike figures such as King and Du Bois, disillusionment within Afropessimist thought is not a starting point to another set of politics. It is the beginning and the end. Perhaps Afropessimism can perhaps be thought of as a kind of disillusioned liberalism with nowhere to go. A political ‘mood,’ as Jesse McCarthy suggested, trapped in

194 Dawson, Black Visions, 279.
its own disenchantment. This would help explain the absence of political struggle in Afropessimist thought. If “the trope of progress is sufficient to know the world, both in success and failure,” then whatever exceeds the optimist-pessimist framework is illegible.\textsuperscript{195} Black Lives Matter and the long tradition of black freedom struggle does not matter here because, in its rejection of liberal optimism and commitment to political struggle, it outwits the epistemology of progress. The question is, how do we work through loss when the meaning of the dead is apparently already defined for us?

A Location for Healing

The term “phantom pain” was coined in 1871 by American neurologist Silas Weir Mitchell.\textsuperscript{196} The Civil War had claimed the lives of well over 600,000 soldiers, and medical experts such as Mitchell were left to tend to injured veterans, including those whose limbs were gouged on the battlefield.\textsuperscript{197} Initially, it was unclear what caused the pain in the amputated body parts. But, in the 1990s, researchers made a groundbreaking discovery: nerve endings at the site of amputation continue to shoot pain signals to the brain which, in turn, fires those signals toward the wound, causing it to throb, ache, sting, cramp and, at times,

\textsuperscript{195} Tsing, \textit{Mushroom}, 21.
\textsuperscript{197} Ibid.
tingle. This process is a part of a phenomena known as neuroplasticity, which describes the capacity of neurons to change their connections and transform human behavior. Bessel Van der Kolk’s The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma, and Peter A. Levine’s Waking the Tiger: Healing Trauma, each explains how trauma impacts the human body, mind, and spirit. While most of their research focuses on survivors of war, rape, and child molestation, “the information is pertinent on both personal and societal levels,” Levine writes. “The magnitude of the trauma generated by the events that are affecting our world exact a toll on families, communities, and entire populations.” Van der Kolk makes a similar point, explaining that traumatic experiences “leave traces...on a large-scale.” In this sense, the physiology of trauma has significant implications on the way we work through the founding wound incurred from the ongoing legacies of racial trauma. Van Der Kolk and Levine demonstrate how generational trauma impacts collective memory, notions of agency and identity, cultural narratives, and imagination.

198 “Phantom Pain,” Mayo Clinic.
200 Ibid.; Levine, Waking the Tiger.
201 Levine, Waking the Tiger, 9.
202 Ibid.
203 Van der Kolk, The Body Keeps the Score, 1.
A few points are worth noting. First, based on their research, denial and obsession are harmful responses to trauma that exacerbate suffering and block the path to healing.\textsuperscript{204} Denial causes more harm because it precludes the vital work of engaging the wounds incurred from traumatic experiences. To be sure, confronting harm — be it physical, psychological or, in our case, political — can be excruciating, especially when the traumatic experiences are ongoing. But denying the painful reality of the wound does not make the pain go away. It only, in the words of Frank Wilderson, allows the sore to fester. This basic insight demonstrates, once again, how Afropessimism and black liberalism cohere in profound ways. By downplaying the severity of the racial wound, black liberals such as Obama do the very work Afropessimist thought seeks to do, even as it protests the harms caused by black political leadership.

Obsession exacerbates trauma because it precludes the ability to see anything beyond the harm. Van der Kolk writes extensively about how trauma impairs imagination. In one study, he gave twenty-one veterans the Rorschach test: an experiment where patients are shown a card marked with a blot of ink and asked what they see.\textsuperscript{205} Because the human brain is naturally a meaning-making organism, study participants tend to concoct an

\textsuperscript{204} Ibid., 46; 239; Levine, \textit{Waking the Tiger}, 44; 48; 141; 166-167; 165.
\textsuperscript{205} Van der Kolk, \textit{The Body Keeps the Score}, 16.
image or story based on the inkblots. The patient’s answer, then, provides insight to how their mind works.\textsuperscript{206} In his study, Van der Kolk found that sixteen of the twenty-one veterans reacted as if they were reliving a traumatic wartime experience. The others made nothing of the image. “The five men who saw nothing in the blots had lost the capacity to let their minds play,” Van der Kolk explained.\textsuperscript{207} “But so, too, had the other sixteen men, for in viewing scenes from the past in those blots they were not displaying the mental flexibility that is the hallmark of imagination. They simply kept replaying an old reel.”\textsuperscript{208} This inability to imagine otherwise is one of the most devastating consequences of ongoing trauma, both in our personal lives and our broader political arrangements. “Imagination gives us the opportunity to envision new possibilities – it is an essential launchpad for making our hopes come true,” Van der Kolk contends.\textsuperscript{209} “Without imagination there is no hope, no chance to envision a better future, no place to go, no goal to reach.”\textsuperscript{210}

Van der Kolk’s study elucidates the limitations of Afropessimist thought. By fetishizing the racial wound, this ideological orientation blocks the capacity to imagine

\textsuperscript{206} Ibid., 15-16.
\textsuperscript{207} Ibid., 17.
\textsuperscript{208} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{209} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{210} Ibid.
otherwise. Within the Afropessimist framework, the complexity, diversity, and beauty of black life is overlooked, and our experiences are seen as mere iterations of the traumatic conditions of slavery and its afterlives.

Levine makes it clear that “trauma is a fact of life” but “it does not have to be a life sentence.” As he explains, traumatic symptoms are not caused by the ‘triggering’ event itself. They stem from the frozen residue of energy that has not been resolved and discharged; this residue remains trapped in the nervous system where it can wreak havoc on our bodies and spirits...Fortunately, the same immense energies that create the symptoms of trauma, when properly engaged and mobilized, can transform the trauma and propel us into new heights of healing, mastery, and even wisdom.

If a wild animal survives being attacked, it will shake off the hormones it used to fight or escape. This keeps the traumatic experience from devolving into trauma. “When it is out of danger, the animal will literally shake off the residual effects of the immobility response and gain full control of its body,” Levine explains. Human beings become traumatized when we fail to “thaw” the hormones that secreted during the traumatic event. Over time, what was once beneficial for evading death becomes detrimental for experiencing life. It’s a gift and a curse: the same adrenaline that can keep you alive can also kill you.

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211 Levine, Waking the Tiger, 2.
212 Ibid., 19.
213 Ibid., 20.
Obviously white supremacy isn’t that simple. Not only because, as human beings, we have a profound capacity to remember, including some of the worst things that happen to us. But because racial violence and premature black death are not a series of “traumatic events,” as they are sometimes conceived. Chattel slavery, lynching, and Jim Crow are not harmful things that happened in the past that we, as a nation, should be careful not to deny or fetishize. These are ongoing legacies that constitute the larger beast of white supremacy, which relentlessly preys upon black people and the most vulnerable. The likes of Frank Wilderson and Christina Sharpe are right to point this out. My quarrel with Afropessimist thought is not so much its description of white supremacy. It is the argument of its invincibility and the lack of recognition of the struggles against it, even as those struggles made the pronouncement, and the academic positions from which it is made, possible.

Now What?

Once we relinquish the quest for closure, after we step outside of the teleology of progress and its failures, when we refuse the identity of eternal victimhood or a story of easy victory, what remains? Phantom pain is my way of engaging that question without answering it once and for all. The term addresses the imaginative challenge of living in a dynamic world of precarity and possibility, of racial trauma and radical
transformation, where the souls of black folk constantly encounter the shadow of death. Phantom pain is not a systematic theory that attempts to resolve all the questions, tensions, and contradictions that accompany the messy politics of race, trauma, and death. Nor is it a speculative project that shies away from the important work of articulating some theory of change and strategies to help achieve a more just world. Think of it, rather, as a call to confront the nation’s founding wound, in all its funk and daily stings, in search of those transformative moments and movements—however fragile and fugitive—itching and burning for another world.

To do so, we will have to tell bigger and better stories about black life that hold at arm's length totalizing narratives of victory and defeat. And, painful as it may be, we must keep the founding wound open. There is no guarantee that any of this will work. I do not believe the arc of the moral universe inherently bends towards justice, nor do I believe it’s totally in the hands of the political establishment. Between the two lies the open-ended questions of imagination, courage, luck, and will. This is the point of departure for my conception of phantom pain, and what distinguishes it most from Afropessimism and black liberalism. As Lewis Gordon explains:

An ironic dimension of pessimism is that it is the other side of optimism...Both are connected to nihilism, which is, as Nietzsche (1968) showed, a decline of values during
periods of social decay. It emerges when people no longer want to be responsible for their actions. Optimists expect intervention from beyond. Pessimists declare relief is not forthcoming. Neither takes responsibility for what is valued...Facing the future, the question isn’t what will be or how do we know what will be but instead the realization that whatever is done will be that on which the future will depend. Rejecting optimism and pessimism, there is a supervening alternative: political commitment.  

A political commitment to love, study, and struggle, in my view and experience, can be a powerful path to healing.

Like bell hooks, I came to theory hurting. The sorrow of losing my pastor, father, and brother in nearly the same year cut deep. I was wounded and wanted to heal, or at least find a place to begin. So, I started to do research on the impacts of trauma on the mind, body, and spirit in order to work through what felt like all-consuming pain. As I studied, I experienced an onset of phantom pain in the part of my right hand where my finger was amputated as a child. Initially, I tried to ignore it. I greeted friends and strangers with an elbow dap to avoid the sting that would turn into days of throbbing. The pain only grew worse. It wasn’t until I truly engaged my stub that it became clear to me: losing my finger felt something like losing my loved ones. Grieving, for me, had almost exclusively been about what I had lost. But the philosophy of phantom pain helped

\[214 \text{ Gordon et al., "Afro Pessimism," 108.}\]
reveal what remained in the wake. And that a transformation can take place if I had the courage to engage the wound.
Amazing Grief

We’ve made a legend out of a massacre.⁸¹⁵

On June 17th, 2015, twelve members of “Mother” Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina welcomed a white 21-year-old with a sandy blonde mushroom haircut into their weekly bible study. As the group closed their eyes for prayer, Dylann Roof, an avowed white supremacist, opened fire. Cynthia Marie Graham Hurd, Susie Jackson, Ethel Lee Lance, Depayne Middleton-Doctor, Tywanza Sanders, Daniel L. Simmons, Sharonda Coleman-Singleton, Myra Thompson, and Pastor and State Senator Clementa Pinckney were slain. Felicia Sanders saved herself and her granddaughter by smearing their bodies in her son’s blood and playing dead.⁸¹⁶ In the midst of the bloody rampage Sanders’ son, Tywanza, questioned the gunman’s motives. “Ya’ll raping all our white women and taking over the nation,”⁸¹⁷ Roof retorted before shooting Tywanza to death and absconding the sanctuary.

A week after the massacre President Barack Obama eulogized Reverend Pinckney to a crowd of nearly six thousand mourners.⁸¹⁸

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⁸¹⁷ Ibid.
The funeral, which aired nationally, demonstrated a uniquely African American way of mourning: open casket, call and response, sorrow songs, jubilee. Mourners sang and wept as the chords of a Hammond B3 organ rang throughout the sanctuary. Clergy cloaked in purple vestments sat between a robed gospel choir and a weary congregation dressed in their Sunday best. The pageantry of Pinckney’s “celebration of life” stood in stark contrast to the tragic circumstances of his death.

The particularity of black burial traditions emerges from the sufferings and strivings of African Americans under conditions of racial terror and domination. Emmett Till’s funeral is perhaps the most familiar example. The 14-year-old Chicago native was visiting family in the Mississippi Delta when two white men lynched him for allegedly whistling at a white woman.219 His mutilated body was found three days later in the Tallahatchie River. Till’s mother, Mamie Till, decided to have an open casket funeral “so the world could see what they have done to my baby.”220 Simeon Wright, Till’s cousin, recently recalled the importance of that decision. “When they saw what

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happened this motivated a lot of people that were standing what we call ‘on the fence,’ against racism. It encouraged them to get in the fight and do something about it.”

Wright spoke to what many others have suggested: the sight of Till’s bloated face and mangled body “was the spark that lit the civil rights fire, bringing the tragic black funeral tradition to bear on yet another iteration of America's racial conflicts.”

The services of Till and Pinckney are part of a long tradition of African American mourning that dates back to the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries. In the summer of 1800, Gabriel Prosser invited black men to an organizing meeting for his planned insurrection at the end of an enslaved child’s funeral before the attack was to occur. After Nat Turner’s rebellion the Commonwealth of Virginia passed legislation prohibiting black preaching at unsupervised slave funerals. As Simon Stow explains in his insightful essay, “Agonistic Homegoing: Frederick Douglass, Joseph Lowery, and the Democratic Value of

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African American Public Mourning," how the enslaved formally mourned their dead shaped their fight for freedom.

By necessity, and often by homeland tradition, slave funerals often took place at night, frequently unnerving slave owners. Georgia plantation resident Francis Kemble recounts how the 'first high wailing notes of a spiritual' emanating from a slave funeral 'sent a chill through my nerves.' Consequently, they were subject to heavy restriction. In New York alone, nighttime slave funerals were prohibited by laws passed in 1722, 1731, 1748, and 1763, and those that were permitted were tightly regulated: limited to 12 mourners and deprived of all ceremonial trappings. Funerals offered slaves an opportunity to experience themselves as a people in a ritualized setting...As such, the delicate economy of slave funeral restrictions, permissions, and transgressions politicized black burials even before the founding of the nation.225

Clearly, slave funerals involved more than burying the dead. They were spaces where black people forged social life in the face of social death. According to Suzanne E. Smith, “the slave funeral served as the foundation of several key elements of African American life, including the early origins of an independent black church, [and] the organization of mutual aid and burial societies.”226 Black burial rituals, from chattel slavery to the civil rights movement to recent protests against police brutality, have animated black quests for freedom and

justice, evidencing a tradition of African American mourning that exceeds the violence of the nation’s founding wound.

This chapter contextualizes the Charleston Massacre within a history and politics of black burial traditions and black freedom struggle. Here, I stage a contest over the meaning of the massacre by examining Barack Obama’s eulogy of Rev. Pinckney, James Baldwin’s 1985 essay *The Evidence of Things Not Seen*, and activist Bree Newsome’s removal of the Confederate flag. I argue that Obama’s eulogy embodied a liberal politics of grief that constrained the radical elements of African American politics. The eulogy was not only a chance to memorialize Rev. Pinckney. It was an opportunity for Obama to shape political behavior by telling a liberal story of the slain pastor, the Black Church, and the families of the Charleston Nine.

Baldwin and Newsome offer a different story of black grief and African American politics. Penned in the wake of the 1960s freedom movement, Baldwin’s *Evidence*, in many ways, presaged the persistence of white supremacy amidst the promise of black political leadership. His account of the Atlanta Child Murders in the early 1980s elucidates the limitations of Obama’s eulogy and the significance of Black Lives Matter. Newsome’s removal of the Confederate flag the day after Pinckney’s funeral embodied a more radical politics of grief. She employed the prophetic tradition of the Black Church and black activism and transcended
formal challenges of political engagement. Taken together, Baldwin’s writing and Newsome’s activism demonstrate the transformative dimensions of black political struggle.

Charleston Massacre

Emanuel AME church was founded in 1816 in Charleston, South Carolina. After a dispute over a black burial ground and segregated seating at the Bethel Methodist church, Reverend Morris Brown and 4,000 African American members left in protest. A year later Brown founded Mother Emanuel. Established in the “capital of the slave trade” - forty percent of enslaved Africans entered the Americas through Charleston’s harbor - the church soon became a national symbol of antiracist struggle.

In fact, one of the church’s founders, Denmark Vesey, was executed for plotting the largest slave rebellion in U.S. history.

Born into slavery in 1757, Vesey was eventually brought from St. Thomas to Charleston where he won a lottery that enabled him to purchase his freedom. But like many other

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229 David Robertson, “The Shock of Execution: Denmark Vesey as a National Figure” in Denmark Vesey: The Buried Story of America’s Largest Slave Rebellion and the Man Who Led It (New York: Vintage, 2000), Kindle.
freemen, he was unable to buy his wife and children out of slavery. The absurdity of America’s “peculiar institution” haunted Vesey for the rest of his life.\textsuperscript{230} In 1821, nearly two centuries before the Charleston Massacre, Vesey planned to kill the city’s slaveholders, burn its buildings, and escape to Haiti by boat. He enlisted the help of over 9,000 enslaved blacks and even reached out to Haiti’s leaders for military assistance.\textsuperscript{231}

A lay preacher fluent in French and Spanish, Vesey used the biblical story of \textit{Exodus} to inspire fellow slaves to rise up and throw off the chains of slavery.\textsuperscript{232} According to Eddie Glaude, \textit{Exodus} was the principal lens through which African Americans imagined freedom from slavery. In \textit{Exodus!: Religion, Race, and Nation in early 19th Century Black America}, Glaude explains how “most efforts toward liberation in African American history have been articulated as reenactments of Israel’s exodus from Egypt.”\textsuperscript{233} Mother Emanuel exemplified \textit{Exodus politics}.\textsuperscript{234} The church was the key institution where the enslaved resisted human bondage. According to David Robertson, Vesey’s planned revolt “could not have progressed as far as [it] did without the

\textsuperscript{231} Kate Chow, “Denmark Vesey And The History Of Charleston’s 'Mother Emanuel' Church,” \textit{NPR}, June 18, 2015, 2:11 p.m. EST, \url{https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2015/06/18/415465656/denmark-vesey-and-the-history-of-charleston-s-mother-emanuel-church}.
\textsuperscript{232} “Denmark Vesey,” PBS, accessed April 1, 2021, \url{https://www.pbs.org/thisfarbyfaith/people/denmark_vesey.html}.
\textsuperscript{234} Ibid., 105-159.
organization and membership of the African Methodist Episcopal Church.”

Despite the enormous energy behind the plot, plans ended abruptly. On July 2, 1822, Vesey was hanged alongside five co-conspirators after a fellow slave revealed the details of the plan to city officials. But executing Vesey and his followers did not soothe white fear of black rebellion. A few days later, a mob of angry whites destroyed Mother Emanuel due to its complicity in the planned revolt and abolition movement.

Roof’s attack on Mother Emanuel sits in a long history of violence against black churches. The massacre hearkens back to the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing in Birmingham, Alabama, where the Ku Klux Klan killed four black girls preparing for Sunday service. Dr. King called the bombing “one of the most vicious and tragic crimes ever perpetrated against humanity.” Such attacks were common throughout the civil rights movement. In fact, a few years before the 1963 bombing, segregationists angry at the success of the Montgomery bus boycott bombed Dr.

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235 Robertson, “Introduction: The Reality of Denmark Vesey” in Denmark Vesey.
236 “Denmark Vesey,” PBS.
237 Ibid.
King’s home. Luckily, King was away speaking at a mass meeting.240

Reverend President

Obama began his eulogy of Rev. Pinckney invoking this bloody racial history. “There’s no better example of this tradition than Mother Emanuel. A church built by blacks seeking liberty, burned to the ground because its founder sought to end slavery, only to rise up again, a Phoenix from these ashes,” he preached as mourners rose to their feet.241 The eulogy was a prime example of civic funeral discourse. Traditionally, funeral orations are rituals meant to provide comfort for the bereaved, cohesion to a wounded community, and direction on how to move forward in the wake of death and loss. In the Black Church tradition that I grew up in, the preacher would offer condolences to the family, say good words about the deceased, tell a story about heavenly salvation, and call on people in the congregation to give their life to Christ.

But what happens when a death impacts the entire nation? When the memorial service captures the attention of the larger body politic due to the political significance of the deceased and/or the death itself? In this context – after the death of a

241 Ibid.
politician, martyr, veteran activist, victim of state violence, to name a few — traditional features from funeral discourse remain, however the stakes are certainly raised. Here, the words about the dead are addressed, not only to the bereaved family and loved ones, but to the broader political community.

David W. McIvor addresses these questions in *Mourning in America: Race and the Politics of Loss*. “Through eulogies or commemorative events, public officials and other prominent voices shape the discourse surrounding social trauma,” he explains. “Such rituals offer a collective means of mourning by incorporating traumatic events into narratives of civic life.”

For McIvor, civic funeral discourse comforts an aggrieved and wounded community, and attempts to “set the terms of political membership” by painting a picture of the ideal citizen. Following the work of Nicole Loraux, who discusses the significance of eulogies in the formation of civic identity in Athenian society, McIvor writes that “the real subject matter” of funeral orations “is often less the particular bodies of the dead than the polis itself.”

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243 Ibid.
To be clear, this political conception of funeral discourse does not hinge on individual intent. As Simon Stow argues, “it is a tradition that relies less on claims about private motivations and/or mental states writ large than it does on the observable action of public political actors.” In this framework, the aim is not to figure out what was going on in the head and heart of the eulogist, but to flesh out the ideological content and political implications of the eulogy itself.

Obama’s eulogy of Rev. Pinckney is best understood in this way. Like his remarks in the aftermath of Trayvon Martin’s, Michael Brown’s, and Freddie Gray’s brutal killings, his funeral oration was more than a chance to console a bereaved community. It was an opportunity to shape political behavior by seeking to define the meaning of Pinckney’s tragic death and the Charleston Massacre more broadly. In many ways, it was yet another attempt to set the terms of black political behavior, and to seal the nation’s founding wound in a story of national progress.

I see this happening in a few ways. First, Obama presented Pinckney, Mother Emanuel congregants, and family members of the victims as exemplars of African American political behavior. After offering condolences to the slain pastor’s wife, Jennifer, and two daughters, Eliana and Malana, the former president

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245 Simon Stow, American Mourning, 4.
opened the eulogy describing Pinckney’s hope in a better America. “We are here today to remember a man of God who lived by faith. A man who believed in things not seen. A man who believed there were better days ahead, off in the distance,” Obama said in a somber tone. The language of “better days” set the stage for the entire eulogy. As I discussed in the previous chapter, Obama’s post-black liberal politics hinges on a teleology of progress that views the nation’s unjust past as a kind of stumbling block toward a more perfect future.

To be sure, Obama did not completely shy away from the racially charged nature of the massacre. He was clear that [Roof] surely sensed the meaning of his violent act. It was an act that drew on a long history of bombs and arson and shots fired at churches, not random, but as a means of control, a way to terrorize and oppress. An act that he imagined would incite fear and recrimination, violence and suspicion. An act that he presumed would deepen divisions that trace back to our nation’s original sin.

Obama understood that Roof’s attack on Mother Emanuel sits in a long history of violence against black churches. The massacre hearkens back to the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing in

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247 Ibid.

Birmingham, Alabama, where the Ku Klux Klan killed four black girls preparing for Sunday service.

Obviously, Obama could not afford to be race-neutral. Yet, aside from gesturing at the nation’s violent past, he did not linger with the particularity of black suffering in the present. Instead, he sought to graft the tragedy into a narrative of national unity and racial reconciliation:

Oh, but God works in mysterious ways...He didn’t know he was being used by God. Blinded by hatred, the alleged killer could not see the grace surrounding Reverend Pinckney and that Bible study group - the light of love that shone as they opened the church doors and invited a stranger to join in their prayer circle. The alleged killer could have never anticipated the way the families of the fallen would respond when they saw him in court - in the midst of unspeakable grief, with words of forgiveness.249

In perhaps the most cringe-worthy passage of the eulogy, Obama framed the massacre as a part of God’s divine will. In his view, Roof’s attack was an opportunity for Americans to “see where we’ve been blind” and “to find our best selves.” For Obama, the bible study group’s act of hospitality and the family members’ public expressions of forgiveness embodied the political virtues that constitute an American ideal citizen.

According to Obama, Rev. Pinckney, in particular, embodied these Christian virtues in his personal and political life. His description of the slain pastor and state senator is telling.

249 Obama, “Remarks by the President in Eulogy.”
Reverend Pinckney embodied a politics that was neither mean, nor small. He conducted himself quietly, and kindly, and diligently. He encouraged progress not by pushing his ideas alone, but by seeking out your ideas, partnering with you to make things happen. He was full of empathy and fellow feeling, able to walk in somebody else’s shoes and see through their eyes. No wonder one of his senate colleagues remembered Senator Pinckney as ‘the most gentle of the 46 of us - the best of the 46 of us.’...What an example he set. What a model for his faith.\textsuperscript{250}

Obama’s emphasis on Rev. Pinckney’s quietness, empathy, and commitment to a certain conception of progress should be understood as broader commentary on race and American politics. He delivered the eulogy at the height of uprisings during Black Lives Matter. Dylann Roof’s attack followed a wave of protests following police and vigilante killings of black people. Two months before the massacre, North Charleston police officer Michael Slager shot and killed Walter Scott less than twelve miles from Mother Emanuel; and a few weeks after the attack, white police officer Ray Tensing shot and killed Sam DuBose after pulling him over for a missing license plate. Cities were exploding with rebellions as protestors made noise in the streets. Obama eulogized Rev. Pinckney in the heat of national protests and the shadow of cold blood.

This context matters because, as McIvor argues, civic funeral discourse is best understood not only as praise for the deceased, but a way to set the terms of political engagement for

\textsuperscript{250} Obama, “Remarks by the President in Eulogy.”
the living. Here, “quiet” and “empathy,” which may describe an individual’s character, operate as critiques of expressions of collective black rage and radical resistance to black suffering. Obama seems to suggest that if Rev. Pinckney, who transcended partisan politics in low-country, Republican-dominated South Carolina, still had faith in American democracy, then black youth protesting in the streets should have more patience with the process of building a more perfect union.

Similarly, Obama’s framing of Pinckney as a “model for his faith” should be understood in political terms, especially considering the significance of the Black Church and Mother Emanuel, in particular, to the history of black struggle.

Over the course of centuries, black churches served as “hush harbors” where slaves could worship in safety; praise houses where their free descendants could gather and shout hallelujah - (applause) - rest stops for the weary along the Underground Railroad; bunkers for the foot soldiers of the Civil Rights Movement. They have been, and continue to be, community centers where we organize for jobs and justice; places of scholarship and network; places where children are loved and fed and kept out of harm’s way, and told that they are beautiful and smart - (applause) - and taught that they matter. That’s what happens in church.²⁵¹

Of course, black churches have played key roles in the African American sojourn. But by confining the history of the Black Church to a linear narrative of slavery to civil rights, I worry that Obama’s story limits the dynamism and diversity of black

²⁵¹ Ibid.
churches. His eulogy omits the more conservative and radical dimensions of black Christianity, and ultimately black politics.

In *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change*, Aldon Morris argues that while “the Black Church functioned as the institutional center of the modern civil rights movement,” many black churches were quite conservative.\(^{252}\) “It was a religion of containment” that often “soothed the pains of economic, political, and social exploitation,” but did not actively resist racial oppression.\(^{253}\) Eddie Glaude makes this point in the context of contemporary African American churches. In his controversial op ed, “The Black Church Is Dead,” he writes about the dangers of presuming an emancipatory politics within black church spaces.\(^{254}\) For Glaude, “the routinization of black prophetic witness” poses several problems. First, it seeks to validate the authority of the Black Church in an increasingly secularized social landscape by telling a narrow story of the past where “memory becomes its currency.” Second, an allegiance to that fabricated history blocks the ability to reimagine - rather than simply revere - the meaning of the Black Church in light of present conditions. And third, this presumption of a politics of liberation enables


\(^{253}\) Ibid., 97.

empty performances of prophetic witness that do not mirror the actual ministries of most black churches.

This third point, in particular, helps explain how black clergy and political leaders can quote King without any commitment to his dream of eradicating racism, militarism, and capitalism. As Obama told the congregation during his eulogy, “when there was a righteous movement to dismantle Jim Crow, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. preached from [this] pulpit, and marches began from its steps.” In reality, by the time King came to Charleston to address a crowd of nearly 3,000 people, the U.S. government had identified him as the “most dangerous man in America.” It was July 30, 1967 and the U.S. political climate was as sweltering as the southern heat. Two weeks earlier, Newark and Detroit had exploded in rebellion. Back in April, King stood behind the pulpit of the historic Riverside Church and critiqued the Vietnam War. And eight months after his visit to Charleston, he was gunned down in Memphis as he prepared to launch the Poor People's Campaign. The Black Church’s most famous preacher died unpopular, even among many black ministers and political leaders, for his radical stances and commitment to confronting the root causes of racial injustice.

255 Obama, “Remarks by the President in Eulogy.”
Obama’s celebration of the Black Church and its historic role in the Underground Railroad and civil rights movement elides this complicated history and the more radical dimensions of the African American sojourn. His invocation of the black prophetic tradition served, not as a challenge to the ongoing reality of white supremacy, but as a way to graft the legacy of black freedom struggle into the story of American progress. For Obama, Mother Emanuel embodies this tradition. “A sacred place, this church. Not just for blacks, not just for Christians, but for every American who cares about the steady expansion of human rights and human dignity in this country,” he preached.

Yet Obama omits a fundamental detail about the history of Mother Emanuel. Why did they burn down the church? In a 2013 speech, Pinckney addressed a group of doctoral students touring South Carolina to learn about civil rights. He opened in prayer. “God, we welcome and invite you into this place. We thank you for the spirit that dwells here...the spirit of Denmark Vesey.”257 Throughout his talk, Rev. Pinckney emphasized the important of radical resistance to racial domination. “Sometimes you gotta make noise...sometimes you may have to die like Denmark Vesey...sometimes you have to march, struggle, and be

257 For the full speech see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XP35_JVnP6g.
unpopular.”

Pinckney not only named Vesey, but he charged the audience to carry on his spirit in the fight for liberation.

Obama, by contrast, failed to mention who the church founder is and how he sought to abolish slavery. By celebrating Mother Emanuel’s role in abolition but omitting its involvement in Vesey’s insurrection, Obama sought to authenticate his relationship to the black freedom struggle while undermining the radical politics of that same tradition. He does not deny legacies of racial injustice. He grafts them within a narrative of national progress. From this view, the arson of Mother Emanuel - like Dylann Roof’s attack - merely marks a low point in the history of a country ever perfecting itself.

The history of Vesey’s insurrection is an important aspect of black freedom struggle. It disrupts Obama’s black liberal framework that touts nonviolence as the only acceptable form of black resistance to white supremacy. Armed self-defense is an important aspect of the black freedom movement. On the Underground Railroad that Obama mentions in the eulogy, Harriet Tubman carried a pistol. The Deacons for Defense protected activists in the South with arms. Civil rights leader Robert Williams, who served as president of the Monroe, North Carolina

258 Ibid.
NAACP chapter, organized a rifle club to defend black people from the KKK.261 Even Fannie Lou Hamer, a leader of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, practiced individual armed resistance. As she admitted: "I keep a shotgun in every corner of my bedroom, and the first cracker even look like he wants to throw some dynamite on my porch won’t write his mama again."262

Concealing this history not only delegitimizes traditions of black self-defense; it downplays the relationship between nonviolence and more militant forms of resistance. As Akinyele Umoja argues in We Will Shoot Back: Armed Resistance in the Mississippi Freedom Movement, “without armed resistance...the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) activists would not have been able to organize in Mississippi.”263 Armed resistance, in part, enabled the nonviolent movement in the South.

For the purposes of this chapter, I am not interested in the moral question of violence as a legitimate form of political resistance. I am more concerned with how narratives of

nonviolence limit black political imagination. Vesey’s planned insurrection was about much more than bloodshed. Reducing the rebellion to simple questions of violence overlooks, for example, the internationalism that informed his strategy and vision. The Haitian Revolution, which sent shock waves throughout the slaveholding Americas, was central to his plans. Vesey looked to the black Republic as a model of self-determination.\textsuperscript{264} Twenty years after the island became the first independent black nation in the modern world, Vesey reached out to Haitian leaders for military assistance. He even read newspaper articles relating to the revolt in order to encourage fellow conspirators.\textsuperscript{265} Stories of black freedom struggle that omit more militant forms of black resistance that involve violence such as slave insurrections can easily conceal other important dimensions of black freedom struggle.

Despite Obama’s rhetoric of activism, the actual politics of the eulogy do not, in any meaningful way, pose a challenge to the legacy of white supremacy. Post-black liberalism was still the political playbook. Like his remarks in the wake of Trayvon’s and Mike Brown’s deaths, Obama suggested Americans respond to Roof’s heinous attack by practicing empathy and doing some soul-searching. “That’s what I’ve felt this week,” he

\textsuperscript{264} Robertson, Denmark Vesey, 14.
\textsuperscript{265} Ibid., Introduction.
preached, “an open heart. That, more than any particular policy or analysis, is what’s called upon right now.”

As I explained in the previous chapter, Obama’s refusal to address racial injustice by passing public policy reflects a broader post-black liberal ideology. In fact, while he called Roof’s attack an act of racial terror, he largely framed the massacre as an issue of national gun violence. Here, Obama sought to graft the particularity of black suffering into a larger crisis that impacts all Americans.

When eight of our brothers and sisters are cut down in a church basement, 12 in a movie theater, 26 in an elementary school. But I hope we also see the 30 precious lives cut short by gun violence in this country every single day; the countless more whose lives are forever changed -- the survivors crippled, the children traumatized and fearful every day as they walk to school, the husband who will never feel his wife’s warm touch, the entire communities whose grief overflows every time they have to watch what happened to them happen to some other place.

While the Charleston Massacre is technically a mass shooting, comparing it to Sandy Hook and the movie theater in Colorado obscures the role of white supremacy in Roof’s attack. Of course, the latter two mass shootings involved white gunmen and almost exclusively white victims. But the problem here is not only that the comparison is a misleading political analysis. It

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266 Obama, “Remarks by the President in Eulogy.”
267 Ibid.
also secures the myths of post-racialism and national progress by downplaying Roof’s explicit commitment to white supremacy.

In the end, Obama’s most concrete suggestion to address the nation’s racial wound in the wake of the Charleston Massacre was a largely symbolic gesture: to remove the Confederate flag that flew over the South Carolina State House.

For too long, we were blind to the pain that the Confederate flag stirred in too many of our citizens. It’s true, a flag did not cause these murders. But as people from all walks of life, Republicans and Democrats...black and white, that flag was a reminder of systemic oppression and racial subjugation...Removing the flag from this state’s capitol would not be an act of political correctness; it would not be an insult to the valor of Confederate soldiers. It would simply be an acknowledgment that the cause for which they fought - the cause of slavery - was wrong...It would be one step in an honest accounting of America’s history; a modest but meaningful balm for so many unhealed wounds. It would be an expression of the amazing changes that have transformed this state and this country for the better, because of the work of...people of all races striving to form a more perfect union.268

Obama acknowledged that removing the Confederate flag will not transform American racial relations overnight. “To settle for symbolic gestures without following up with the hard work of more lasting change - that’s how we lose our way again,” he told the congregation. Instead, he framed the act of removing the flag as a “balm” that can soothe the nation’s founding wound and reflect the progress made since the days of slavery. “By taking down that flag,” he preached, “we express God’s grace.”

268 Ibid.
Many celebrated Obama’s remarks. His message of the power of grace in the wake of racial violence dominated mainstream media. A New York Times article called the eulogy “remarkable because [it] drew on all of Mr. Obama’s gifts of language and empathy.” 269 Missing from these stories, however, is the simple fact that nothing that the former president actually said in the eulogy - or championed throughout his presidency - addressed the need for concrete policy changes that could remedy the daily violence of systemic racism and begin to heal the founding wound that continued to fester under black political leadership.

The Evidence of Things Not Seen

President Obama mounted the same pulpit to eulogize Rev. Pinckney that Dr. King spoke from in 1962 to urge African Americans to register to vote. It was a spectacle shrouded in irony. The nation’s first black president, who many saw as the fulfillment of King’s dream, came to Charleston on the heels of a string police killings of African Americans to console a grieving black congregation two weeks after a white supremacist slaughtered nine of their church members. The moment symbolized what Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor describes as a kind of paradox of the post-civil rights era: the dream of a colorblind society contradicted the recurring nightmare of racial oppression.

269 Kakutani, “Obama’s Eulogy, Which Found Its Place in History.”
James Baldwin, in many ways, foresaw the transformations in racial representation amidst the persistence of white supremacy. Over forty years before Obama’s historic election Baldwin stood between two eras in black politics. The 1960s freedom movement had fallen victim to governmental repression, state-sanctioned violence, and hazardous internal fissures at the same time that black political power was coming to life. “This book has been much delayed by trials, assassinations, funerals, and despair,” he wrote in his 1972 essay, No Name in the Street. “An old world is dying and a new one, kicking in the belly of its mother, time, announces that it is ready to be born.”

Published nine years after his classic essay, The Fire Next Time, some critics claim that No Name represents a decline in Baldwin’s writing. The former white liberal darling succumbed to an all-consuming rage as his elegant aestheticism gave way to Black Power propaganda. So the story goes. But Eddie Glaude has a different take. “What is ironic about the criticism of Baldwin during this period is the refusal to take seriously what the dead might mean for him and for America.”

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No Name insists on an unflinching encounter with the racial wound and the wreckage it wrought in the life of Black America. The essay recounts the heroic struggles of Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, and Medgar Evers. At the level of content, No Name addresses the implications of the 1968 Omnibus Crime Bill. The act allocated federal funds toward “the prevention, detection, and control of riots and other violent civil disorders, including the acquisition of riot control equipment.”

Black rebellions were erupting in nearly every major city across the country. But despite the adverse economic impact of the uprisings, Baldwin rejected President Lyndon Johnson’s bill. He believed it would do more to criminalize expressions of black rage than it would improve life in African American cities.

At the level of form, memory fragments. “Much, much, much has been blotted out, coming back only in bewildering and untrustworthy flashes,” Baldwin wrote. Death began to take a toll on him. Throughout the essay, he struggles to remember what remains in the wake of tragic death and inexorable loss. “After I had left Atlanta, [my mind] began to move backward in time, to places, people, and events that I had forgotten,” he

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274 Baldwin, No Name, 6.
recounted.275 “Sorrow drove it there, I think, sorrow and a certain kind of bewilderment, triggered, perhaps, by something which happened to me in connection with Martin’s funeral.”276

By the early 1980s, when Baldwin returned to Atlanta, that old world he described in No Name had died a hard death. Medgar, Malcolm, and Martin were buried six feet under. Chicago state police had murdered 21-year-old Black Panther Party deputy chairman, Fred Hampton, while he slept in his bed. 17-year-old Bobby Hutton had already been gunned down by Oakland police. The FBI’s Counterintelligence Program was largely successful in imprisoning, exiling, and demonizing communists, black nationalists, radical feminists, anti-imperialists, and anyone who challenged the legitimacy of the American government. The promise of the 1960s black freedom movement was met, with full force, with the militarization of police, the frenetic rise of the prison system, and an overall crackdown on radical politics.

Meanwhile, a new America was emerging. The ascendance of African American political leaders alongside the rise of the black middle class was changing the terrain of racial politics. Yet, the white world lingered, even as the new baby bore the complexion of America’s darker citizens. Atlanta embodied this contradiction, and Baldwin bore witness to the bloodshed.

275 Ibid., 13.
276 Ibid., 14.
Between 1979 and 1981, 28 people were murdered in Atlanta, Georgia. Most of the victims were poor black boys. As the death toll surged, a wave of panic and paranoia took hold of the city. Many contributed the murders to the local police or Ku Klux Klan. The idea that Wayne Williams, a 23-year-old black man and freelance photographer, kidnapped and killed nearly two dozen African American children shocked residents. But his conviction also provided a semblance of peace and social order in the wake of what became known as the Atlanta Child Murders.\footnote{Wayne Williams was eventually convicted of killing two adults, but none of the children. 22 of the cases of the children were closed although they were unsolved. See Audra D. S. Burch’s “Who Killed Atlanta’s Children?” in The New York Times online for newly discovered details, \url{https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/30/us/atlanta-child-murders.html}.}

Baldwin initially went to Atlanta to write an essay for the New Yorker that would reflect his thoughts on the legacy of the civil rights movement in a post-civil rights era. He never finished the piece. But he later agreed to write an investigative report on the Atlanta murders for Playboy. Published in 1985, The Evidence of Things Not Seen did not receive the raving reviews Baldwin enjoyed after the publications of Notes of a Native Son in 1955 and The Fire Next Time in 1963. “There is far too much sermonizing here on the overall state of race relations in America and not enough digging into specific facts of the Atlanta murders,” John
Fleming wrote in the *New York Times*. Fleming’s review represented a broader narrative of decline that defined criticisms of Baldwin’s writings after the assassination of Dr. King. Similar to *No Name*, for many critics, *Evidence* illustrated Baldwin’s embrace of Black Power propaganda over and against more nuanced artistic assessments of American race relations.

Yet, what Fleming and others find lacking in the *Playboy* piece, I see as its strength. Baldwin was not after what happened in Atlanta but why it happened. He sought to tell a bigger story about America in the wake of the bloody 1960s. As Derrick Bell and Janet Dewart Bell wrote in the Preface to the 1995 edition of the book: Baldwin “eschews a search for clues and, instead, undertakes an exploration for truths.”

By the time he arrived in Atlanta, the city had been dubbed the “Black Mecca.” Beginning in the 1950s, and accelerated throughout the 1960s, capital development penetrated the downtown area. Hotels, shopping malls, and several convention

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halls were constructed. The city subsidized one of the nation’s largest airports, as well as an extensive highway system that decimated historic black neighborhoods, making way for white flight and more commercial property. Furthermore, after the passage of 1960s civil rights bills, legal segregation ended, and the black middle class emerged. By 1970, Atlanta was predominately black; and by 1974 voters elected Maynard Jackson, the city’s first African American mayor. Between Jackson’s election and the child murders, black civic leaders took over the local administration, from the school board to the police department to the judge that presided over Williams’ case.282

For many, the change of guard in the burgeoning metropolis evidenced the success of the civil rights movement. Atlanta seemingly embodied American progress and the possibility of black uplift. But, for Baldwin, such narratives of national progress concealed the grisly evidence of class exploitation. Evidence placed the ugliness buried beneath Atlanta’s economic success front and center. The essay argued, in essence, that the murders were less random than they were representative of the deathly conditions that routinely menaced Atlanta’s black poor and working classes. Perhaps the most tragic aspect of the story

for Baldwin is that the black administration seemed to care more about their image of prosperity than the reality of the carnage.

Atlanta’s black administration initially described the children how Obama described the black youth in Baltimore who threw rocks back at cops: “street kids” from “broken homes.”\footnote{Ibid., 129.} By placing the blame at the feet of the urban black poor, such narratives, Baldwin believed, secured the innocence of white suburbanites as well as the safety of the black middle class. It was a political blame game. White Georgians, like most white Americans, saw black leadership, including Mayor Jackson and Public Safety Commissioner Lee Brown, as the culpable party. Black leaders saw the black poor as the problem.

Baldwin saw things differently. For him, the white power structure was the ultimate criminal in the case, and black leaders were complicit in its crimes against the city’s most vulnerable. Evidence inverted the dominant narrative of the meaning of the civil rights movement. Here, racial integration was not a success story, but a disaster that eroded the social fabric of Black America and camouflaged the political stronghold of white political and economic elites. “The optimistic ferocity of this cosmetic job is the principle, if not the only reason
for the presence...of the Black Mayor,” Baldwin wrote. “It is a concession masking the face of power, which remains White.”

While many saw Atlanta as the fulfillment of Dr. King’s dream, Baldwin viewed the city as a betrayal of the minister’s efforts to end poverty and racism. This is why King’s monument in Atlanta, in Baldwin’s view, was “as absolutely irrelevant as the Lincoln Memorial.” For him, empty celebrations and prophetic gestures were “one of the ways the Western world has learned to outwit history...to make a life and death irrelevant.”

Ultimately, the power of Baldwin’s pen is precisely what the literary establishment criticized. He knew that the guilt or innocence of the accused was beside the point. Regardless of the particulars, the truth remained the same. Atlanta was a city “ruled by whites and dominated by blacks.” And America, despite all of its talk of progress, was a White nation committed to white supremacy, even under African American leadership. By situating the child murders in the broader context of post-civil-rights America, Baldwin captured the danger of racial colorblindness alongside narratives of national progress that would come to a head decades later at Mother Emanuel church.

286 Baldwin, *Evidence*, 84.
In certain ways, the Charleston Massacre and the Atlanta Child Murders could not be more different. Roof is an overt white supremacist whose attack is notorious for the brutal clarity of his intent and guilt. Williams is an African American man with no explicit political views whose case is still shrouded in mystery. The Atlanta murders took place in a black city under President Raegan, who built his career on rolling back the gains of the civil rights movement. The Charleston Massacre occurred in the former heart of the Confederacy during the tenure of America’s first black president.

But what connects the two is how each demonstrated the persistence of racial domination amidst the transformations in racial representation. Baldwin’s Evidence, in many ways, presaged the paradox of Obama’s presidency by illuminating the failures of black leadership and the contradictions of black liberalism which, taken together, has profoundly shaped the development of African American politics and contemporary black activism. As Joseph Vogel wrote in the Boston Review, “arguably no single work by Baldwin is as connected to the issues animating Black Lives Matter as his final nonfiction book.”

Obviously, not because of the race of the killer in Atlanta. But because of the broader racial context in which the string of

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murders took place. The Charleston Massacre, in a sense, is the evidence of things that many Americans preferred not to see during the child murders in Atlanta: racial representation has not only been proven ineffective, but it often obscures the deathly conditions buried beneath stories of America’s greatness. While black leaders such as Obama have sought to soothe the racial wound - with eulogies, mentorship, graduation speeches, and largely symbolic gestures - the deeper infection of white supremacy continued to fester under his leadership.

*Say Her Name*

A few days after the massacre, Obama and four staffers were flying over California discussing how his administration should respond. They talked about the pervasiveness of gun violence: twenty-three mass shootings occurred during the first five years of his presidency. But when Obama heard about the families’ expressions of forgiveness, he changed the focus. “Hold off on the statistics. That’s what I want to put the spotlight on.”

Throughout the eulogy, Obama framed forgiveness as a glimmer of light in the shadow of death. “The alleged killer could have never anticipated the way the families of the fallen would respond when they saw him in court - in the midst of unspeakable grief, with words of forgiveness,” he preached. The

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288 Obama, “Remarks by the President in Eulogy.”
former president was referring to the bond hearing, which occurred two days after the attack, where one family after another expressed forgiveness for Roof’s heinous act.\textsuperscript{289}

On the two-year anniversary of the massacre, Obama’s speechwriter, Cody Keenan, who helped draft the eulogy, took to twitter to reflect on the historic moment. Keenan called the period between Roof’s attack and Pinckney’s funeral “the 10 most hopeful days I ever saw in politics.”\textsuperscript{290} It was surely a thunderous time in America: the Supreme Court upheld the Affordable Care Act and Marriage Equality within two days. Obama wrote the first half of the eulogy the night between the decisions. On his way to Charleston Obama added the lyrics to “Amazing Grace.” The song would capture the essence of his eulogy. He lifted his voice as the crowd rose to its feet.

That reservoir of goodness. If we can find that grace, anything is possible. If we can tap that grace, everything can change. Amazing grace. Amazing grace. (Begins to sing) - Amazing grace - (applause) - how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me; I once was lost, but now I’m found; was blind but now I see.\textsuperscript{291}

Despite Obama’s narrative of forgiveness, several family members did not comport with his vision of an ideal citizen. Two years later at Roof’s bond hearing, some described the gunman as

\textsuperscript{289} Hawes, “God Forgives You, and I Forgive You,” in \textit{Grace Will Lead Us Home}.  
\textsuperscript{290} Cody Keenan (@codykeenan), “Our President is having a cynical morning. So here’s a story of the 10 most hopeful days I ever saw in politics, capped off 2 yrs ago today,” Twitter, June 26, 2017, \url{https://twitter.com/codykeenan/status/879342098633437184?lang=en}.  
\textsuperscript{291} Obama, “Remarks by the President in Eulogy.”
a “coward,” “monster,” and “the devil.” Marsha Spencer, a member of Mother Emanuel, asked Roof “what are you? What kind of subhuman miscreant could commit such evil?” Felicia Sanders’ husband, Tyrone, said he wishes “they could enact a law in which they cut off a limb every time you appeal.”

Yet Obama helped create and circulate a predominant political discourse on forgiveness in the mainstream media in the aftermath of the massacre. At a press conference, South Carolina Governor Nimrata “Nikki” Haley told reporters that the families’ “expression of faith and forgiveness took our breath away.” Jennifer Berry Hawes’ *Grace Will Lead Us Home: The Charleston Church Massacre and the Hard, Inspiring Journey to Forgiveness*, echoes this sentiment. A NY Times review of the book detailed, “a monstrous act of terrorism became a transfixing narrative of grace and forgiveness.”

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295 Hawes, *Grace Will Lead Us Home*.
Hawes claims that *Grace Will Lead Us Home* provides a “comprehensive picture” of the Charleston Massacre. The book is indeed rich in detail. It mentions Denmark Vesey’s role in the history of Mother Emanuel; Walter Scott and the Black Lives Matter protests in Ferguson and Baltimore; and the fact that the family members of the victims “weren’t the homogeneous group of forgiving people the world wanted them to be.”

Hawes’ story, however, omits the most notable act of black resistance in the aftermath of the massacre: activist Bree Newsome’s illegal removal of the Confederate flag at the South Carolina State Capitol. Newsome removed the flag the day after Pinckney’s funeral, catapulting her into the mainstream at the height of Black Lives Matter. As Obama fails to mention Vesey in his eulogy of Rev. Pinckney, Hawes fails to include Bree Newsome in her account of the Charleston Massacre. This is yet another example of the narrowing of black politics and the erasure of black resistance. Hawes’ omission implies that Newsome’s act is not an important aspect of the story of Charleston, and as such, not a legitimate step towards progress and healing.

Instead, Hawes chose to focus on Governor Haley instead. When the South Carolina legislature voted to remove the flag, Hawes retells the governor’s remarks at a press conference:

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298 Ibid., 283.
She described Emmanuel’s re-opening...and the grieving families’ words to Dylann Roof. 'Their expression of faith and forgiveness took our breath away.' She praised the people of South Carolina for their calm after Walter Scott’s shooting death. People didn’t riot or harm each other. Instead, lawmakers, black and white, passed the country’s first body camera bill for police officers. The state had changed considerably in recent years.299

But “the key to a tale is to be found in who tells it,” Baldwin wrote in No Name.300 Although South Carolina had indeed changed in recent years, it was what remained that was the key to the story. This is the lesson Baldwin offers in Evidence, that white supremacy persists even when people of color are in charge. But bigotry was not all that remained. Resistance did, too.

If we foreground Bree Newsome in the story of the Charleston Massacre, a different set of possibilities arise. Hers was a more radical politics of grief, an amazing one, that pervaded Black Lives Matter. Here, black agency transcended the courts and a commitment to the American Creed; stories of progress were met with unadulterated expressions of black rage; and the logic of law and order was challenged head on.

Bree Newsome was born in Charlotte, North Carolina and raised in Columbia, Maryland before studying film at New York University’s Tisch School of the Arts. Her father, Dr. Clarence Newsome, is a renowned scholar of religion who served as the

299 Ibid., 101.
300 Baldwin, Collected Essays, 380.
President of Shaw University, Dean of Howard University, and Director of the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center. Her mother is a former educator who spent her career fighting racial disparities in schooling. Her parents' commitment to social justice alongside the impact slavery had on her family informed her decision to remove the flag:

Several of my African ancestors entered this continent through the slave market in Charleston. Their unpaid toil brought wealth to America via Carolina plantations. I am descended from those who survived racial oppression as they built this nation: My 4th great grandfather, who stood on an auction block in South Carolina refusing to be sold without his wife and newborn baby; that newborn baby, my 3rd great grandmother, enslaved for 27 years on a plantation in Rembert, SC where she prayed daily for her children to see freedom; her husband, my 3rd great grandfather, an enslaved plowboy on the same plantation who founded a church on the eve of the Civil War that stands to this day; their son, my great-great grandfather, the one they called 'Free Baby' because he was their first child born free, all in South Carolina.

In a sense, Newsome stands between the old and new guards of the black freedom struggle. She is a millennial activist-poet that quotes rap lyrics and Old Testament prophets. She was a member of the NAACP and is the co-founder of The Tribe, a collective of activists and artists formed in the aftermath of


the Ferguson Uprising. And, while she does not reject the legacy of the civil rights movement and formal politics altogether, her thoughts and actions suggest that marching and legislation should not be our primary sites of political struggle, or at least when it continues to delay justice and freedom.

The inaction before Pinckney’s funeral had impacted Newsome. “I was hoping that somehow they would have the dignity to take the flag down before his casket passed by,” she said in a Democracy Now! interview after her arrest.303 “But that day...confirmed for me that we had to do this.”304 James Tyson, a white activist who helped Newsome scale the pole, echoed her sentiment. “They wouldn’t even take it down for the funeral. They wouldn’t even lower it to half-mast, you know?”305

As Newsome scaled the flagpole at the state capitol, she conjured the prophetic tradition of the Black Church that Obama elided in his eulogy. “You come against me with hatred and oppression and violence, I come against you in the name of God. This flag comes down today!”306 On her way down, with state police stationed around the perimeter, Newsome recited Psalm 27

304 Ibid.
305 Ibid.
306 Ibid.
and the Lord’s Prayer.\textsuperscript{307} She was arrested and taken to jail.

When later asked how she would respond to people saying that she should have waited for further public debate, Newsome answered:

\begin{quote}
...why is the debate required? The debate is required because of a law that was put in place by a racist, all-white Legislature in the '60s. And so, that's why I felt like it was a powerful statement to have the people go and take it down, because it’s—you know, we’re drawing that attention not just to the Confederate flag, not just to that symbol, but to the brokenness of the system itself.\textsuperscript{308}
\end{quote}

Newsome emerged in the wake of the Charleston Massacre as a different kind of ideal citizen who practiced a radical politics of grief. Her actions and words told a different story about America, the black church, and the diversity of tactics in response to racial oppression. She exposed and challenged the politics of universalism that animated Obama's eulogy and presidency. “I’ve already spent more time in jail for unhooking a Confederate flag from its post than the cop who assaulted a [black] girl in McKinney,” she tweeted after her arrest.\textsuperscript{309} In her interview, Newsome elaborated further: “Why is that? I think that speaks to the larger issue of systemic racism.”\textsuperscript{310} She additionally linked the killing of Trayvon Martin and Mike

\textsuperscript{307} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{308} “Bree Newsome: As SC Lawmakers Debate Removing Confederate Flag, Meet the Activist Who Took It Down,” Interview with Amy Goodman, Democracy Now! https://www.democracynow.org/2015/7/6/Newsome_newsome_as_sc_lawmakers_debate.
\textsuperscript{310} Bree Newsome, interviewed by Amy Goodman, Democracy Now!
Brown, names Obama did not mention in his funeral oration, to the Charleston Nine and Black Lives Matter.

Furthermore, Newsome rejected the commemorative mode of African American politics. That is, a celebration of the legacy of the black freedom movement divorced from a serious commitment to its aims, especially its more transformative ones. “For the most part, especially things around like civil rights, a lot of things have felt commemorative.” She elaborated by saying:

You know, like, yes, we’re still—we’re still fighting over things with voting rights, we’re still—but for the most part it felt like things like, you know, 16th Street Baptist Church, the assassination of our leaders. Those things felt like things in the past. But Wednesday night, it became very real. You know, that was a moment where I really had to think I could die, I could die for doing this work, and am I prepared to do that? And, you know, I called my sister at 3:00 in the morning and talked with her, talked with her about it. And I had to come back to a point of like, yeah, I’m willing to die if I have to.

Newsome values the history of civil rights but decenters it as the primary way to think about and engage in political struggle. Her song #StayStrong, which she wrote in the wake of the Ferguson Rebellion, speaks to this point. She raps, “Y’all be quoting King while you pushing a button to drop some bombs on some babies like you ain’t doing nothing.” Here, Newsome called out Obama’s drone program that killed between 384 and 807

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311 Ibid.
312 Ibid.
civilians\textsuperscript{314} – Obama oversaw more drone strikes \textit{in his first year} than Bush did during his entire presidency.\textsuperscript{315}

To be clear, my aim is not to frame Newsome as Obama’s foil or a flawless model of black activism. It is to show how her political work highlights the contestation of African American mourning, and the more radical aspects of black politics that are often concealed by a liberal politics of grief.

Perhaps what is most fascinating about Obama’s eulogy and Newsome’s reflections on her action and arrest are their similarities. Both employed the symbolism of the African American sojourn soaked in the language of the Black Church; both agreed that the Confederate flag should be removed; and both called for national change in the wake of Roof’s attack. But their similar rhetoric of civil rights activism entailed distinct interpretations of that tradition. Obama’s liberal politics of grief sought to maintain social order, police political behavior, and graft African American mourning into a story of progress. On the other hand, Newsome’s removal of the flag and subsequent remarks regarding her arrest affirmed expressions of black rage; embraced forms of political


\textsuperscript{315} Ibid.
resistance that challenged the logic of law and order; and disrupted the myth of American progress.

In an article entitled “Why Bree Newsome’s Action Was the ‘Amazing Grace’ I Needed,” Tanya Steele, a black filmmaker, told a very different kind of story than Obama about the significance of the Charleston Massacre. Like Newsome, the failure to remove the Confederate flag during Pinckney’s funeral enraged her. She “had been imploding with rage at the fact that South Carolina did not have the decency to take down that flag as the body of Clementa Pinckney...was brought to the state house.” 316 Newsome’s action, however, was a source of hope and healing:

Her act spoke to me in a way that the president’s singing did not. The singing of “Amazing Grace” felt like a familiar trope in the narrative of black America: We suffer, we sing, we forgive. Newsome’s actions were different and more inspired. They addressed white supremacy directly. When many were arguing that the Confederate flag could not be removed because of legal reasons, Newsome removed it. In that act, she reminded us that Americans who want to see change, can write a bolder narrative. 317

Steele’s reflections on the Charleston Massacre and Rev. Pinckney’s funeral ruptures the story of American progress that Obama sought to seal the bloody massacre within.

317 Ibid.
A Rose from Canfield

Did you hear about the rose that grew from a crack in the concrete
Proving nature's laws wrong it learned 2 walk
without having feet
Funny it seems, but by keeping its dreams
it learned 2 breathe fresh air
Long live the rose that grew from concrete
when no one else even cared!^18

You know as well as I do that people who die bad
don’t stay in the ground.^19

Christmas was around the corner, but few of us were in a festive spirit. As families across the country decorated trees to celebrate the birth of Christ, we adorned a tree to honor the death of Vonderrit Myers. Myers’ makeshift memorial was more than a quotidian response to premature black death. Protestors gathered around teddy bears and empty liquor bottles to mourn, sing, strategize, comfort one another, and dream of a world free from racial oppression. The street monument became a rest stop for the weary and a vehicle for grassroots organizing.

Fifteen miles away another makeshift memorial sat in the middle of Canfield Drive. Two months before Myer’s death, white police officer Darren Wilson shot and killed 18-year-old Michael Brown.^20 To add insult to injury, the St. Louis Police

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Department left the unarmed black teenager’s lifeless body on the ground for four and a half hours. Canfield residents immediately took to the street and demanded answers. But the local response exceeded tense conversations with the police.

Before Mike’s blood dried up, residents began to build a memorial in the same part of the street his body laid sprawled.

As local protests coalesced into a national movement, critiques that activists failed to articulate policy demands came out of the woodwork. Such criticisms arose from Hollywood to the White House, and even some Black Lives Matter activists. In an interview with Oprah Winfrey about the popular cable series Queen Sugar, filmmaker Ava DuVernay said she hoped the show would “dismantle the public notion” of Black Lives Matter, which emphasizes “protest and dissent.”

After a White House forum on police reform in 2016, well-known activist DeRay McKesson told reporters that President Obama was “incredibly solution oriented.” According to McKesson, Obama pushed attendees “to think about the concrete things that both the administration could do and law enforcement and activists could

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do to make sure that we address the issue of police violence head on and also that our communities are safe."³²³

The meeting, which included five police chiefs, state and local lawmakers, activist Brittnay Packnett, Reverend Al Sharpton, and former NAACP President Cornel Brooks, was part of a broader effort by the Obama administration to respond to the Ferguson protests. The initiative, entitled the President’s Task Force on 21st Century Policing, released its final report on May 8, 2015. The 38-page document, which contains 59 recommendations and 95 action items, was a push to translate protest into policy. Three of the “Five Things Communities Can Do” involve activists and community members working with police by participating in surveys, community meetings, and listening sessions. The other two recommendations involve lobbying state legislators to hold police accountable and reviewing school policies that funnel black youth into the criminal justice system. In a nutshell, the document sought to convert protests into policy solutions by recommending “simple, concrete actions that would take [BLM] to the next level of mobilization.”³²⁴

Not everyone embraced Obama’s effort. In 2016, Chicago-based activist Aislinn Pulley refused to attend a private meeting with the President and several high profile

³²³ Ibid.
activists, including Packnett, McKesson, and Rev. Sharpton.

I could not, with any integrity, participate in such a sham that would only serve to legitimize the false narrative that the government is working to end police brutality and the institutional racism that fuels it. For the increasing number of families fighting for justice and dignity for their kin slain by police, I refuse to give its perpetrators and enablers political cover by making an appearance among them...We assert that true revolutionary and systemic change will ultimately only be brought forth by ordinary working people, students and youth organizing, marching and taking power from the corrupt elites.\(^{325}\)

Obama retorted by saying that activists have “a responsibility to prepare an agenda that is achievable, that can institutionalize the changes you seek and to engage the other side.” This statement resonated with elements of his eulogy, where he stated that racism won’t change overnight and that “there are good people on both sides of these debates.”

Obama’s task force on policing alongside Mike’s makeshift memorial is a useful way of thinking about a broader set of politics that shaped the development of the BLM movement. If Bree Newsome’s removal of the confederate flag demonstrated a rejection of the politics of Obama’s eulogy, then Mike’s street memorial embodied a refusal of the politics of the President’s task force. To be sure, these tensions do not boil down to different theories of change: the idea that we all want the same

thing but have different ways of achieving it. Nor is it a simple story of protestors versus politicians. The dynamics of the Ferguson Rebellion formed a complex web of state power, local politics, and interpersonal relationships.

In this chapter, I interpret Mike Brown’s street memorial as an act of protest and a useful analogy for a particular way of thinking about contemporary black activism. More specifically, I conceptualize the construction and maintenance of the memorial as a challenge to “protest to policy” political discourse, as well as reigning notions of the political that reduce black activism to formal channels of civic engagement. As BLM critics and sympathizers alike called for Ferguson protesters to create “concrete demands,” mourners were placing rose petals atop the concrete of Canfield Drive. Throughout the Ferguson Rebellion, the street memorial became a site of struggle that animated a particular style of political engagement. This kind of *makeshift politics*, as I call it throughout this chapter, challenged pressures to translate protest to policy while insisting on the value of grassroots social movements, the building of beloved communities, and the persistence of collective grief.

This chapter focuses on the Ferguson Rebellion, but the story I tell here is also part of a larger conversation regarding competing conceptions of contemporary black politics.
To flesh out my argument, I turn to Robin Kelley’s notion of politics from below and Judith Butler’s conception of the politics of the street. Both help elucidate the distinction I make between makeshift protest and protest to policy which, I argue, is a useful way to think about the uprising in Ferguson and BLM protests across the country. I also examine civil rights activist Bayard Rustin’s embrace of formal politics in the context of the struggle between the Democratic Party and the emerging Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. This history helps track a longer tradition of black politics wherein two specific theories of change coalesced and collided. I conclude with a reading of Sharpton’s eulogy of Michael Brown and the broader contest over Brown’s public memorialization.

From Protest to Policy

In February of 1965, Commentary magazine published Bayard Rustin’s “From Protest to Policy: The Future of the Civil Rights Movement.”326 The essay came on the heels of the 1964 Democratic National Convention (DNC) in Atlantic City and Freedom Summer in Mississippi. Freedom Summer was an effort to increase black voter registration, establish freedom schools and, through the formation of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP),

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challenge the state’s all-white delegation. In order to appease civil rights advocates and white southern voters, President Lyndon B. Johnson offered the MFDP two non-voting seats and gave the rest to the segregationist Mississippi delegation. Rustin, an MFDP advisor, urged members to take the offer. MFDP rejected it. Fannie Lou Hamer spoke to the group’s position: "We didn’t come all this way for no two seats when all of us is tired."327

Rustin’s essay criticized MFDP’s decision but affirmed its effort to disrupt politics as usual. “While I still believe that the FDP made a tactical error in spurning the compromise,” he wrote, “there is no question that they launched a political revolution whose logic is the displacement of Dixiecrat power.”328 Still, Rustin worried that ending legal segregation would not improve the material conditions of African Americans. He felt the movement needed to translate direct actions into concrete results. For Rustin, that meant good jobs, decent housing, educational access, urban renewal, and police protection. It meant, in other words, a fundamental restructuring of America’s social, economic, and political institutions. As he wrote,

The civil rights movement is evolving from a protest movement into a full-fledged social movement - an evolution

328 Rustin, “From Protest to Policy.”
calling its very name into question. It is now concerned not merely with removing the barriers to full opportunity but with achieving the fact of equality. From sit-ins and freedom rides we have gone into rent strikes, boycotts, community organization, and political action. As a consequence of this natural evolution, the Negro today finds himself stymied by obstacles of far greater magnitude than the legal barriers he was attacking before: automation, urban decay, de facto school segregation. These are problems which, while conditioned by Jim Crow, do not vanish upon its demise. They are more deeply rooted in our socio-economic order; they are the result of the total society's failure to meet not only the Negro's needs, but human needs generally.\(^{329}\)

Rustin questioned the effectiveness of civil rights demonstrations and emerging formations of black militancy. The next phase of the struggle, he argued, involved a shift from “protest to politics.” By politics Rustin meant lobbying for “functional programs with concrete objectives” that would improve the lives of African American communities. “How are these radical objectives to be achieved?” he asked. “The answer is simple, deceptively so: through political power.”\(^{330}\) Rustin’s vision eventually came to fruition. In March of 1972, black leaders from across the country, from black nationalist Amiri Baraka to the young Rev. Al Sharpton, convened in Gary, Indiana to strategize how to establish Black Power in the electoral realm. It was an astonishing display of the diversity of black political life. Labor unions, militant groups, and establishment

\(^{329}\) Ibid.

\(^{330}\) Ibid.
organizations sat alongside black power activists, liberal-leaning politicians, and community-based organizers. The National Black Political Convention was largely successful.\textsuperscript{331} As Taylor discusses in her book on Black Lives Matter, by the mid 1970s, hundreds of African Americans were elected to office, from mayors of major cities to members of congress.

Much has changed and remained the same since the publication of Rustin’s influential essay. First, black voter registration mushroomed after the passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act.\textsuperscript{332} Despite recent efforts to suppress the black vote, African Americans have significantly more access to the polls. But the power of the black vote has been thwarted by what Paul Frymer calls electoral capture.\textsuperscript{333} Frymer argues that politicians often attract white swing voters by ignoring the interests of African Americans. And because we overwhelmingly favor one party, neither has to address our concerns. Ironically, black Americans, who fought our way into the democratic process, are now seemingly trapped within the Democratic Party.

\textsuperscript{331} I am grateful for my conversation with Eddie Glaude about the rich political diversity of the 1972 “Gary Convention.”
Second, we have witnessed the emergence of black political leadership alongside the maintenance of white supremacy. Forty-four years after the DNC denied black southerners’ access into the democratic process, America elected its first black president. Yet, as I demonstrated in the first chapter, a black presidency did not change the material conditions of most African Americans. Black communities continued to suffer under Obama’s tenure. Time has proved that Rustin was right in the wrong way. His answer to racial inequality - black electoral politics - was more deceptive than it was simple. As KeeangaYamahtta-Taylor wrote, “We got the politicians...culminating in the 2008 election of Barack Obama – but not the welfare state.”

The Ferguson Rebellion revealed this contradiction. Obama’s task force, like his national mentoring program, failed to address the root causes of racism and police violence. The ballot “our ancestors died for” did not keep Mike Brown alive. The streets seemed to be the only viable option for aggrieved black youth to express their rage and push for systemic change.

Politics from Below

Political struggle is about more than voting, legislation, and being a dues paying member of an activist organization.

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People engage in politics in a variety of ways. This is not to say everything is political, but that if we only look for politics in the voting booth or even at a formal activist gathering then we miss a vital aspect of black political life. This is Robin D.G. Kelley’s argument in *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class*.\(^{335}\) Kelley opens the book with a story about him working at McDonalds as a teenager. He and his coworkers regularly stole food, punched timecards before beginning work, played rap music to the chagrin of white store managers, stylized their work clothes and refused to wear hair nets because “to net one’s gheri curl, a lingering Afro, [or] a freshly permed doo was outrageous.”\(^{336}\) To be sure, these were not self-conscious acts of resistance. “The strategies we adopted fell outside the parameters of what most people think of as traditional ‘labor disputes,’” Kelley explains. “But what we fought for is a crucial part of the overall story.”\(^{337}\)

Kelley calls these acts of defiance politics *from below*. The phrase riffs on political anthropologist James C. Scott’s concept of *infrapolitics*. Infrapolitics is to the political what infrared is to light: a lens that brings into view forms of

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\(^{336}\) Ibid., 3.

\(^{337}\) Ibid.
political engagement that are often hidden beneath traditional notions of politics and resistance. As Kelley explains,

If we are to make meaning of these kinds of actions rather than dismiss them as manifestations of immaturity, false consciousness, or primitive rebellion, we must begin to dig beneath the surface of trade union pronouncements, political institutions, and organized social movements, deep into the daily lives, cultures, and communities...Most importantly we need to break away from traditional notions of politics. We must not only redefine what is ‘political’ but question a lot of common ideas about what are ‘authentic’ movements and strategies of resistance.\textsuperscript{338}

Kelley writes about the zoot suit, bebop, and the “hipster ethic.”\textsuperscript{339} These are everyday acts of resistance rooted in black vernacular culture. But they are also informed by the U.S. political economy. Everyone does not have access to formal sites of political engagement. Except in Vermont, Maine, and Washington D.C., inmates cannot vote.\textsuperscript{340} Overworked parents may struggle to attend board of education meetings to voice their grievances. Young people are often marginalized within, or wholly excluded from, mainstream civil rights organizations. This is not to say that poor and working-class people do not engage in activism. Many do. My point is simply that, in the absence of access to more formal channels of civic engagement, oppressed communities invent other ways of doing politics.

\textsuperscript{338} Ibid., 3.
\textsuperscript{339} Ibid., 11.
What is fascinating to me about Kelley’s conception of politics from below is how these acts of defiance not only resist existing structures of domination but also hierarchical fissures within activist spaces. As I mentioned, poor and working-class youth sometimes feel disconnected from traditional civil rights organizations such as the NAACP and Urban League. We saw this when two Ferguson protestors confronted civil rights leader Jesse Jackson. “We don’t want you here in St. Louis!” one said. “When you gonna stop selling us out, Jesse?” My point here is not to affirm their position that Jackson is a sellout but to reject the assumption that establishment leaders and institutions represent the interests of all black people.

Politics from below is a useful way of thinking about Mike Brown’s makeshift memorial. Not because it perfectly maps onto my reading of the shrine, but because it points us to overlooked sites of political struggle that fall outside mainstream conceptions of protest. Street monuments are common responses to premature death in African American communities. Drive around any urban black neighborhood and there is a good chance you will see a memorial on a sidewalk, tree, fence, or some other public space.

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341 "Ferguson Protester To Rev. Jesse Jackson: ‘We Don’t Want You Here, Brother,’” Newsone online, August 23, 2014, 
space. Most of these shrines are built by community members, not community organizers. In this sense, Brown’s memorial, which was initially built by residents of Canfield Drive, is not wholly unique. It is an expression of black vernacular culture.

What makes Mike’s memorial distinct is its context and content. That is, it was built in response to a police killing and it did more than honor a life cut short. The memorial directly challenged power arrangements of racial domination and police violence. The artifacts adorning the shrine demonstrated this. “Justice for Mike Brown” was written on American Flag balloons, illustrating the contradiction that the nation is built on the precepts of “liberty and justice for all.” Between candles and crosses were posters that read “Human Rights Violation” and “Hands Up Don’t Shoot!,” which became a popular rallying cry during Ferguson protests and demonstrations across the country. And behind a grinning Tony the Tiger teddy bear sat a piece of cardboard that read “END POLICE BRUTALITY.” These are but a few examples of how oppositional critiques of the police state stood alongside affirmations of Mike Brown’s life.

Beyond the immediate context of the police killing and the content of the shrine itself, the politics of Mike’s street memorial can be understood in at least three ways, all of which express a politics from below that challenged pressures to translate protest to policy. First, public acts of
memorialization are value statements. They articulate who and what we care about. Broadly speaking, memorialization registers the price of human life and debts we owe to the past. Yet, memorialization is not so much about historical accuracy. We don’t build them to prove someone’s innocence in the legal sense. Memorials are artistic expressions of loss and what those losses might mean for those left in the wake. While the grand jury and even some activists were preoccupied with the details of the case, I believe Mike Brown’s memorial “argued” something more relevant. That stealing blunt raps and walking in the street while black are not excuses to kill. That, regardless of the particulars of the case, another trigger-happy cop stole another precious black life. And most importantly, that we, as a people and a nation, must do something about it.

Second, how we memorialize our dead shapes how we live and move about in the world. In other words, the “debts we owe to the past” are registered in the present. Take, for example, the recent debate around the removal of Confederate monuments. In June 2016, Corey Menafee, a 38-year-old dishwasher at Yale University, got arrested and then fired after shattering a stained-glass window that depicted slaves picking cotton. The incident occurred in a dormitory named after slavery advocate and former Vice President John C. Calhoun. “I took a broomstick,” Menafee said, “and I climbed up...and broke it.
It’s 2016, I shouldn’t have to come to work and see things like that.”\footnote{342} \footnote{342} J. Weston Phippen, “A Shattering Act of Civil Disobedience,” The Atlantic online, July 14, 2016, \url{https://www.theatlantic.com/news/archive/2016/07/yale-smashed-window/490925/}. For Menafee, the price of his dignity cost more than his physical freedom and weekly paycheck. In a sense, his action resembled Bree Newsome’s removal of the confederate flag. Both broke the law and acted without the approval of authorities; both resulted in arrests; and both sparked institutional change. Yale ultimately renamed the Calhoun residential hall and Governor Haley officially removed the flag.

But Menafee’s and Bree’s actions were animated by a somewhat different set of politics. Menafee was not an activist. He was not even aware that students had been protesting Yale’s memorialization of slavery. I do not get the sense that he was motivated by a particular history of resistance. He simply got fed up and broke the window. “When I walked into this job, I wasn’t aware of none of that,” he explained.\footnote{343} “I just said, ‘That thing’s coming down today. I’m tired of it.’ I put myself in a position to do it, and did it.”\footnote{344} Menafee’s aim was not to change policy. It was to change what it felt like to go to work. The destruction of the window, like the construction of Brown’s memorial, was neither planned nor predicated on a preexisting
social movement. But, like Kelley and his coworkers, “what [he] fought for is a crucial part of the overall story.” Politics from below helps bring into view these forms of resistance buried beneath reigning notions of protest and politics. Mike Brown’s memorial, as an act and the actions it spurred, offers an opportunity to think about freedom struggle in ways that exceeds mainstream conceptions of political engagement.

Third, the street memorial helped forge a community of resistance and collective care. The shrine, police department and, later, the QuikTrip, were the three main meet-up spots during the rebellion. Marches began and ended at each location. Prayer circles cascaded into protests throughout the city. Even moments of silence were politically motivated. Most of them lasted four and a half minutes, symbolizing the four and a half hours the FPD left Mike’s corpse on the street. Such moments of silence simultaneously honored the final moments of Mike’s life and embodied a refusal to forget the circumstances of his death.

While the street memorial shared several characteristics with protest activity outside the police department, it also took on a distinct character. Location mattered. Canfield Drive is a residential street nestled two miles away from the Ferguson Police Department. The shrine provided an opportunity to seek solace outside the shadow of tanks and the sting of teargas. It was a place for protestors to rejuvenate after long days in the
sun and before tumultuous nights of battling a militarized police force. The distance also made way for an expansive community to participate in the uprising. More people could collectively grieve in ways that were challenging on a major throughway like West and North Florissant. Many elders, for example, who were not able to join protestors shutting down busy intersections, could safely gather around the memorial for prayer vigils and moments of silence. The same can be said of protestors with felonies who are more at risk of receiving harsh sentences for acts of civil disobedience, or for those who — for whatever reason — were not able or interested in joining protests in the rowdier parts of town. The shrine provided an alternative space to grieve, strategize, and build a community of care within conditions of intimidation and violence.

The QT People’s Park

Rebellions are often told as stories of blight. Buildings were destroyed. Rioters looted. Social upheaval disrupted law and order. On the flip side, such explosions are often viewed as the consequence of a singular event. A cop brutalized a black teenager. A white vigilante murdered a black man jogging through his neighborhood. Missing from these accounts, however, is an analysis of the material conditions that precipitated the uprising and, as I will illustrate, the dynamism protesters and community members cultivated in the midst of the fire.
So much gets lost within our moral obsession with violence. As I argued in the previous chapter, when Vesey’s plot is reduced to an orgy of violence we miss the internationalist elements animating his seditious plan. For the sake of this dissertation, I am not interested in defending or decrying militant resistance or debating the vocabulary of uprisings (whether they should be called riots or rebellions). I have a different set of questions in mind. What remained in the wake of the ruins? What, if anything, rose from the ashes of the Ferguson Rebellion and concrete of Canfield Drive? And what might that mean for the way we think about and engage in contemporary black activism and African American politics more broadly? Implicit in my argument is a belief that what protestors and residents built up is as, or perhaps more, important than what they burned down.

I met Josh Williams during my first visit to Ferguson. He was everywhere. Staring down cops. Speaking at rallies. Marching with Cornel West. People knew him to be a goofball, but he was also a menace to local authorities. At a Ferguson Commission meeting, which took place a month after Myers was killed, Josh called St. Louis Police Chief Sam Dotson a “lying fucking ho.”

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His aggressive style and militant posture was no anomaly. Heated confrontations with police and unruly acts of protest were commonplace in Ferguson. A month after Josh humiliated Dotson, the burgeoning activist set a QuikTrip trash can on fire after stealing a bag of chips. The flames never reached the gas station or convenience store. Yet, at 18-years-old and without any prior criminal record, a judge sentenced Josh to eight years in prison. Many activists believe that his case was an intimidation tactic to scare other Ferguson protestors and activists. As Josh told GQ magazine in a recent interview: “I think they wanted to make an example out of me. The officers that killed Michael Brown didn’t do a day in jail.”

Josh’s plan did not work. But, eleven days after Wilson shot and killed Michael Brown, protestors burned down the QuikTrip on the corner of West Florissant Avenue and Northwinds Estates Drive. While mainstream news outlets condemned the “rioters” for burning and looting private property, protestors were transforming the former gas station into a service station of their own. The scorched QuikTrip became another ground zero throughout the rebellion. And it stood just two blocks away from the candles and flowers adorning Mike Brown’s street memorial.

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In many ways, the gas station and makeshift memorial bore a striking resemblance. Both featured an eclectic array of visual arts that condemned police violence and honored the memory of Mike Brown. At the former QuikTrip, protestors provided cardboard and markers for people to adorn the space. Residents covered gas pumps with protest signs. “His name was Michael Brown” stood on one pump. “RIP Mike Brown” rested on another. One protestor spray-painted the red and white QT logo with the words “The QT People’s Park. Liberated 8/10/14.”

In addition to the signs and protest materials, occupiers of the QT People’s Park (QPP) filled the space with music, dance, improvisational meetings, food and water stations for hungry and thirsty protestors, and vendors featuring community-based organizations such as the Arch City Defenders and local ACLU. The QPP held together a makeshift community of resistance that experimented in deep democracy. Black youth, who may not have felt comfortable congregating outside a church or the office building of a civil rights organization, were able to meet up, express their rage, and have fun in the transformed parking lot. One night, a breakdance crew performed; on another night a punk rock band set up an impromptu concert and a group of silent performance artists put on a play. Many elders worked the stations, from the “cooling centers” to the food tables, while activist organizations distributed material regarding
current campaigns and upcoming actions. “There has not been any single location more central to the unrest in Ferguson as the looted service station,” Wesley Lowery wrote in the *Washington Post*. Like the street memorial, which residents built within hours of Mike’s shooting death, protestors and community members transformed the QuikTrip into QPP in four days. “This is our place. This is what we’ve got,” state senator Maria Chappelle-Nadal told a reporter outside the former gas station lot. “These people have no other place, so they’ve made it their own,” she continued. The dearth of formal spaces to gather required residents and protestors to improvise. Theirs was a politics from below a former gas station canopy.

In my reading, the gas station and street memorial formed a kind of makeshift town square (what I will call the makeshift for short). It was a temporary memorial and site of protest that incubated a style of political engagement which implicitly challenged calls to turn protest into policy, as well as traditional notions of what a rebellion entails. The makeshift was a site of political struggle and collective care where

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348 Ibid.

349 Ibid.
people could not only rage against police violence or deliberate protest strategies but also forge bonds and build community.

Of course, the makeshift was no utopia. Like any rebellion, there were clashes among protestors and occupiers, including those between local residents and activists from out of town. Social movements are messy, and activists are susceptible to embracing the systems we seek or claim to resist. But my aim here is not to judge whether the formation succeeded in practicing a truly democratic grassroots experiment but rather to emphasize what it set out to do. Ultimately, residents, activists, progressive clergy, and protestors from across the country formed a multi-racial, intergenerational community of resistance where occupiers were able to debate, build relationships, and envision a world free from racial oppression.

Grief stood at the center. People did not gather at the street memorial or gas station because they all agreed on this or that policy or particular theory of change. A deep and abiding sense of loss animated efforts to create spaces where residents and protestors could mourn and take action. The creation and maintenance of the makeshift defied the idea that rebellions are all about destruction and that politics is all about policy. As Kelley wrote about his time at McDonald’s, the strategies Ferguson protesters adopted may have fallen outside
the bounds of mainstream notions of the political, “but what [they] fought for is a crucial part of the story.”

While much of the mainstream media attention focused on unruly demonstrations outside the Ferguson Police Department, a new staging ground was emerging in the ashes of the former QuikTrip. The street memorial and people’s park, standing two blocks apart, formed a geography of grief where protestors built community, collectively grieved, and organized resistance.

Assata’s Affirmation

Several chants were popularized throughout the Ferguson Rebellion. “No justice, No peace!” “Hands Up, Don’t Shoot!” “Indict, convict, send that killer cop to jail, the whole damn system is guilty as hell!” Each chant, in one way or another, articulated a critique of or demand from the state. Activists and residents called for Wilson to be sentenced and cops to stop killing unarmed black people. And, if justice was not served, protestors warned authorities, there would be no peace.

But a few chants spoke to a growing set of politics that exceeded external demands for justice. One of the most popular was taken from former Black Liberation Army member and current political exile Assata Shakur. “It is our duty to fight for our freedom,” Shakur wrote in her Autobiography. “It is our duty to
win. “We must love each other and support each other,” she continued. “We have nothing to lose but our chains.”

I think of Assata’s quotation as an interpersonal demand. This is different from critiques of institutional power, pleas for police and governmental accountability, and calls for the implementation of progressive policies, all of which are extremely important to the success of social movements. But also important are the demands protesters make of each other. The first half of Assata’s affirmation calls activists to be victorious in the struggle toward liberation. What victory means is uncertain. But considering Assata’s own struggle - her escape from the Clinton Correctional Prison and political asylum in Cuba - it is fair to assume that she meant more than winning an election or successfully implementing a grassroots campaign.

Assata’s affirmation became as much of a rallying cry as calls to indict Wilson. The enthusiasm in which activists adopted the slogan and fused it into nearly every aspect of the uprising expressed a unique orientation to freedom struggle that not only transcended formal politics, but even traditional ideas of protest. Activists and residents regularly formed circles, locked hands, closed their eyes, and chanted Assata’s affirmation - at protests, strategy sessions, direct action

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trainings and, perhaps most often, Mike’s memorial. Someone usually led the group’s recitation, like a pastor would their congregation. It was a kind of prayer rooted in protest.

The value of social movements is not to get a seat at the proverbial table of power, as Obama asserted. Nor is it reducible to institutional change. In this frame, the power of protest includes, but exceeds, the possibility of transforming society. It also occasions the opportunity for activists to transform themselves. This, in my reading, is precisely what Assata made plain and what protestors strived to make a reality.

Much of that work occurred at the street memorial. It was a sacred place that served as a secular altar. I remember standing a few feet away. Mike had been shot and killed about two weeks prior. Two black women and classmates of mine were weeping around the shrine. Before I knew it a crowd assembled around the candles and protest signs. There were no chants, no bullhorns, no information about the next protest. No words. Just a group of us, mourners, weeping over the memory of a precious black teenager whose life was cut short. After the cries faded, people walked around and hugged each other. Some broke down into tears once again. Such moments of catharsis and collective care were vital. Rage alone can be a dangerous thing. While, in this case, it was directed toward perpetrators of harm, it can boomerang
back onto the aggrieved. “Bitterness is like cancer,” Maya Angelou said.\textsuperscript{351} “It eats upon the host.”\textsuperscript{352}

There is an ethical dimension of political struggle the memorial enabled protestors to exercise. It was a space for mourners to practice care, kinship, and solidarity. This cut against the neoliberal grain of American politics that places profit over people and market value over moral values. To be sure, as Wendy Brown and others argue, neoliberalism is not merely a set of economic arrangements.\textsuperscript{353} It is a cultural force that economizes every aspect of our lives, that puts everything and everyone up for sale. In a neoliberal frame, citizens are reduced to market actors in a world of market forces. However provisional, the memorial occasioned an opportunity to act and be otherwise. Here, mourners exchanged a set of spiritual goods bound up in the priceless value of human life. Tears, hugs, moments of silence became the stuff of politics. Protesters became moral actors in a world of market forces.

\textsuperscript{351} This is taken from season 2, episode 6 of the Sundance TV show Iconoclasts, where Dave Chappelle interviews Maya Angelou at her home in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. It is a remarkable interview that I highly recommend.
\textsuperscript{352} Ibid.
Politics of the Street

In Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly, Judith Butler speaks to this ethical and social dynamic of protest. She argues that the value of social movements, what she calls “public assemblies,” is not reducible to external demands.

How, then, do we think about these transient and critical gatherings? One important argument that follows is that it matters that bodies assemble, and that the political meanings enacted by demonstration are not only those that are enacted by discourse...Embodied actions of various kinds signify in ways that are...neither discursive nor prediscursive. In other words, forms of assembly already signify prior to, and apart from, any particular demands they make. Silent gatherings, including vigils and funerals, often signify in excess of any particular written or vocalized account of what they are about.

Butler’s laying claim to this temporary, non-discursive feature of protest informs my conception of makeshift politics. Implicit in calls to translate protest to policy is an antagonism, whether intentional or not, toward transient forms of activism unmediated by institutional authorities. Such antagonism circumscribes the transformative power of protest movements. Central to that transformation entails opportunities for character formation and community building. The push to get people off the streets, out of the public assembly, to translate temporary occasions of political engagement into formal policy

355 Ibid., 8.
356 Ibid., 7-8.
demands, denies the value of what Butler calls the “politics of the street.”\textsuperscript{357} There is a value to street protest that exceeds its capacity to make demands of the state. As activists seek to make the world anew there arises an opportunity for them to make themselves anew, as well. Protestors need time and space, in the form of public assemblies, to forge those bonds and to break away from the individualizing forces of neoliberal culture.

To be sure, such enactments of sociality are political. Butler demonstrates this, in part, by distinguishing social responsibility from neoliberal responsibilization. “Although ‘responsibility’ is a word that is often found circulating among those who defend neoliberalism and renewed versions of political and economic individualism,” she writes, “I will be seeking to reverse and renew its meaning in the context of thinking about collective forms of assembly.”\textsuperscript{358} Butler wants to reclaim a discourse of responsibility in order to make ethical claims about the power of public assembly or politics of the street.

What function does public assembly serve in the context of this form of ‘responsibilization,’ and what opposing form of ethics does it embody and express? Over and against an increasingly individualiz[ation]...public assembly embodies the insight that this is a social condition both shared and unjust, and that assembly enacts a provisional and plural form of coexistence that constitutes a distinct ethical and social alternative to ‘responsibilization.’\textsuperscript{359}

\textsuperscript{357} Ibid., 74.
\textsuperscript{358} Ibid., 14.
\textsuperscript{359} Ibid., 15.
Whereas social responsibility entails an ethics of collective care and a democratic conception of the common good, neoliberal responsibilization champions rugged individualism and a market logic that distorts democracy into the liberty and freedom to chase profit at the expense of the poor and working classes.

At the heart of Butler’s distinction is a contest over the meaning of democracy. Hers is an expansive vision of democratic life that includes certain moral values. Her recuperation of responsibility as a social good is one example. For Butler, neoliberalism seeks to silence the discourse of social responsibility in the mainstream. Protest can embody that recuperation. “Showing up, standing, breathing, moving, standing still, speech, and silence,” she argues, “are all aspects of a sudden assembly, an unforeseen form of political performativity that puts livable life at the forefront of politics.” She goes on to say that these gatherings “serve as one of democracy’s incipient or ‘fugitive’ moments.” In my mind, this is precisely what happened that day at Mike Brown’s shrine. No words were spoken. No demands were made. Yet, such opportunities to individually and collectively grieve renewed protesters’ spirits, challenged the atomizing forces of late capitalism, and provided the spiritual wherewithal to continue the fight.

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360 Ibid., 91.
361 Ibid., 18.
362 Ibid., 20.
I think of Mike’s makeshift memorial as the place where Kelley’s politics from below meets Butler’s politics of the street. Both frameworks seek to expand and exceed mainstream notions of the political. The former in the quotidian acts of resistance: music, fashion, work. The latter in instantiations of public assembly that transcends the discursive: funerals, vigils, silent protests. “At stake is the question of whether the destitute are outside of politics and power are in fact living out a specific form of political destitution along with specific forms of political agency and resistance,” Butler writes.³⁶³ If we claim the former, she argues, then we “implicitly accept as right the dominant ways of establishing the limits of the political.”³⁶⁴ But to do this is to render black people, in the language of Afropessimism, socially dead.

The memorial brought the dead to life, so to speak. It animated memories of Mike Brown and the agency of those left in his wake. And it did so by taking politics from below, the everyday stuff of black life, into the politics of the street. In this way, the shrine can be seen as a fusion of black vernacular culture and contemporary black activism. Mike’s memorial was not exclusively activist in nature. People could honor his memory by placing candles at his shrine without any

³⁶³ Ibid., 78.
³⁶⁴ Ibid.
commitment to ending police violence or systemic racism. Yet, the memorial also featured protest signs that sat among protesters reciting Assata’s affirmation. It constituted a space of public assembly where people did more than honor Mike’s memory. They protested the circumstances of his death. Perhaps the most visible sign of this is the fact that the memorial was intentionally built in the street. And, despite several instances of vandalization, including Ferguson police crushing flowers and allowing a dog to urinate on the artifacts, residents continued to maintain the shrine for over a year.365

Whose Streets? Our Streets!

The encounter between Mike Brown and Darren Wilson lasted about two minutes. Mike and his friend Dorrien had just left Ferguson Market and Liquor, where Mike allegedly stole several packs of cigarillos. Wilson was on duty heading westbound on Canfield Drive when he saw Brown and his friend walking eastbound in the middle of the street. As the three approached each other, Wilson swerved his Chevy Tahoe SUV and parked diagonally, blocking both lanes of traffic and preventing Mike and his friend from walking past. According to Wilson’s

statement, he asked the two “what’s wrong with the sidewalk?” According to Dorrien, Wilson told them to “get the fuck on the sidewalk,” to which he replied that they were “not but one minute from their destination.” What was actually said is unknown. Consistent throughout both accounts, however, is that the encounter began with Wilson demanding Mike and Dorrien move from the street to the sidewalk, and that they refused.

This detail speaks to the fact that residents built Mike’s memorial in the middle of Canfield Drive. The choice to build a street memorial is significant. The Ferguson municipal code prohibits any “type of obstruction in or on any street...without having authority to do so,” meaning the construction of the shrine technically broke the law. But a lot of illegal activity does not constitute a politics of resistance. The construction of the shrine did not only break the law. It broke the logic of law and order, by which I mean the general idea that the criminal legal system is the ultimate arbiter of justice. This is a constitutive feature of a radical politics of grief. While those who constructed the memorial may not have

thought of themselves as law breakers, for my purposes, that is beside the point. The point is that the memorial laid claim to public space without the approval of and, in certain ways, in defiance to local authorities. It was a concrete reply to the question protesters raised in the popular chant, “Whose streets?” The shrine announced, emphatically: “Our streets!” Similar to Menafee’s and Newsome’s acts of protest, questions of who controls public space and who decides the symbols that adorn those spaces are political questions. And, similar to Mike’s fatal encounter with Wilson, the contest over the street and sidewalk would have implications far beyond Canfield Drive.

Butler writes at length about the practice of social movements laying claim to space. She argues that mass demonstrations blur the lines between the public and the private; call into question the legal forces that can make and enforce such distinctions; and enable forms of non-discursive protest in the appearance and persistence of bodies in the streets. In other words, the occupation of space provides the opportunity for people to make arguments with their bodies.

Although the bodies on the street are vocalizing their opposition to the legitimacy of the state, they are also, by virtue of occupying and persisting in that space without protection, posing their challenge in corporeal terms, which means that when the body ‘speaks’ politically, it is not only in vocal or written language. The persistence of the body in its exposure calls that legitimacy into question and does so precisely through a specific performativity of the body. Where the legitimacy of the
state is brought into question precisely by that way of appearing in public, the body itself exercises a right that is no right; in other words, it exercises a right that is being actively contested and destroyed by military force and that, in its resistance to force, articulates its way of living, showing both its precarity and its right to persist. This right is codified nowhere. It is not granted from elsewhere or by existing law, even if it sometimes finds support precisely there...This persistence requires breaking into the established regime of space with a set of material supports both mobilized and mobilizing.\textsuperscript{369}

Here, Butler captures what occurred in the fatal encounter between Darren Wilson and Mike Brown, as well as what happened in its wake. Mike refused to move his body to the sidewalk, posing a challenge, not only to Wilson, but, insofar as he represented law enforcement more broadly, to the entire Ferguson Police and U.S. policing apparatus. Mike’s body spoke politically, to use Butler’s phrase. It matters that he articulated his “argument” in the street. With little to no access to, or faith in, formal channels of political engagement, black youth such as Mike Brown regularly invent other ways of doing politics, and those forms often happen in the street.

Jaywalking is a normal occurrence in black communities. In a sense, it is a species of black vernacular culture bound up in a broader political economy. Walking in the street can result from a lack of sidewalks, or unsafe spaces to walk. Such was the case of the Canfield community. When I visited the memorial, I

\textsuperscript{369} Butler, \textit{Assembly}, 83.
immediately noticed how narrow the sidewalks were. Of course, Mike would walk in the street, I thought. But I also think something deeper is at stake. Within an increasingly gentrifying and privatizing political economy, jaywalking can be a way, conscious or not, to lay claim to space, especially for residents who do not own property or cars.

Butler’s politics of the street extends this formulation. Within this frame, Mike’s shrine laid claim to the same space that he sought to assert his right to occupy. The makeshift, in effect, was an elaboration of his refusal to obey law and order. It was the artistic expression of the local community “speaking politically.” The presence and persistence of the shrine, like the presence and persistence of Brown’s body, called into question the legitimacy of the municipal code and the local police force that is funded to enforce it.

This formulation of makeshift politics can be elaborated even further. What began as an individual act of defiance (jaywalking) extended into a communal form of resistance (a street memorial), and ultimately a particular style of political engagement (makeshift politics). Mike’s refusal and the construction of his shrine and the QPP, taken together, claimed the streets as the property of the community. In other words, the makeshift preceded and exceeded the shrine. Hence my claim that the street memorial was both an act of protest and a useful
analogy for a style of street politics that pushes back against protest to policy discourse. Mike and Dorrien’s refusal to move to the sidewalk set the stage for the choice to construct a street memorial and QPP, which animated the unruly protests throughout St. Louis and across the country. But the demand for concrete policy solutions continued to abound.

Whose Grief? Our Grief!

“Burn this bitch down,” Mike Brown’s stepfather yelled after a grand jury chose not to indict Wilson. West Florissant was packed. Shouts of “fuck the police” pierced the winter air. By the following afternoon, at least 25 buildings in and around Ferguson were burned to the ground. Criticism of the violence was swift, and it did not only come from the White House.

Back in August, thousands of mourners filled Friendly Temple Missionary Baptist Church in St. Louis for Mike’s funeral. President Obama did not attend but a long list of celebrities and dignitaries did, including Jesse Jackson, Martin Luther King III, and Rev. Al Sharpton, who eulogized Brown. The funeral, like Pinckney’s service, demonstrated a unique African American way of mourning. Sounds from a Hammond B-3 organ shot through the sanctuary as mourners clapped and stomped their

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feet. Poster-size photos of Mike wearing headphones flanked the casket where his signature St. Louis cap rested.

After acknowledging the family and ministers, Sharpton turned to the congregation and gave a charge. “All of us are required to respond to this.” He never explained his vision for how to move forward in the wake of Mike Brown’s death other than calls for “change” and a “movement.” But he did make clear what types of resistance were off limits. “Michael Brown does not want to be remembered for a riot,” he told the crowd.

Of course, Sharpton has no clue how the slain teenager would’ve wanted people to respond if a cop killed him. Mike’s posthumous wishes are beside the point. I read Sharpton’s eulogy of Brown much like Obama’s eulogy of Pinckney: an attempt to police expressions of black rage and the limits of African American politics. “Sharpton delivers more than just a speech to a grieving congregation,” Errin Haines wrote, “he offers his words as a balm for all of black America.” Attorney Benjamin Crump, who represented the families of Mike Brown, Trayvon Martin and many others, echoed Haines’ remark. “He brings his

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372 Ibid.
influence, his platform, his national audience with him when he comes into that church to eulogize those people.”\textsuperscript{374}

Sharpton has delivered dozens of funeral orations, from James Brown to Michael Brown. Over the last few decades, he has become the go-to eulogist for victims of police violence. Sharpton knows how to rock a grief-stricken crowd. But his showmanship can easily mask the politics beneath his familiar sermonic cadence. Like Obama’s eulogy, Sharpton’s remarks during these services express something much deeper than condolences. They attempt to quell expressions of black rage while pushing for efforts to translate protest into policy.

Sharpton’s harangue of angry demonstrations should be understood in this way. It was not only a rebuke of BLM protestors. It was a condemnation of makeshift politics: rebellious forms of political engagement that resist pressures to graft protest energy into policy demands. To be sure, parts of Sharpton’s eulogy aligned with the broader aims of the movement. For example, his critique of the exorbitant funding of the U.S. military and underfunding of public education resonates with BLM’s “invest-divest” campaign.\textsuperscript{375} The initiative calls for divestment from systems of punishment and an investment into communities most impacted by criminalization. Furthermore,

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\textsuperscript{374} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{375} “Invest-Divest,” M4BL, https://m4bl.org/policy-platforms/invest-divest/.
\end{flushright}
Sharpton’s assertion that “the policies of this country cannot go unchallenged” and that “the value of this boy’s life must be answered by somebody,” although ambiguous, speak to many activists’ demand for police and governmental accountability.\textsuperscript{376}

But Sharpton’s eulogy is as much a critique of angry protests and black culture than killer cops and systemic racism. His remarks articulate three important political tropes, all of which distill into an assault on black radical protest. First, Sharpton pathologized black culture. After critiquing unjust policing practices, he told the crowd that “we have to be straight up in our community, too.”\textsuperscript{377} Sharpton repeated this story throughout the eulogy. “We have to clean up our community so we can clean up the United States of America...Nobody will help us if we don’t help ourselves,” he preached.\textsuperscript{378} It is, I think, a misleading and unhelpful response to police violence. As I suggested in the first chapter in regard to Obama’s Morehouse College commencement address, police violence is rooted less in patterns of intracommunal violence and more in policies that have and continue to criminalize blackness.

But Sharpton’s pathologization of black culture is not merely an expression of a bad political analysis. His is a particular disdain toward young people who stand in the way of

\textsuperscript{376}Sharpton, “Michael Brown’s Funeral.”
\textsuperscript{377}Ibid.
\textsuperscript{378}Ibid.
his policing of black activism. This is why his eulogy puts black culture on trial alongside patterns of police brutality. His language is explicit. “But those police that are wrong need to be dealt with just like those in our community are wrong need to be dealt with,” he said before directly addressing the young Ferguson protesters. “Now you wanna be a nigga and call your woman a hoe,” he preached as the congregation rose to its feet.

“Some of us act like the definition of blackness is how low you can go. Blackness has never been about being a gangster or a thug,” he continued. Essentialism aside, Sharpton spent much of the eulogy berating the same young people that put him in the national spotlight. And he used the same conservative terminology aimed at black youth such as Mike Brown - “thug” and “gangsters” - to delegitimize protests that emerged in his wake.

Second, Sharpton condemned black rage. “We can’t have a fit,” he preached. “We gotta have a movement.” Throughout the eulogy, Sharpton expresses anxiety around raw expressions of anger among protestors via claims about the meaning of Mike Brown’s legacy. “Michael Brown must be remembered for more than disturbances,” he insisted. Sharpton’s condemnation of black rage is a common feature of his funeral orations. “His goal for such funerals,” Haines wrote, is to “steer people who may be

379 Ibid.
enraged away from actions that could desecrate the memory of the deceased.” Central to Sharpton’s critique of black rage is a call to concentrate the energy of the movement into a push for policy change. Consider Sharpton’s remarks on police violence.

We need the congress to have legislation about guidelines about policing. We need to have a fair impartial investigation...We are not anti-police. We respect police. The only thing that messes up good apples is if you don’t take the rotten ones out the bushel.

There is much to be said about the “bad apples” argument, but that exceeds my purposes here. I am interested in the way Sharpton’s remarks capture a broader pressure to turn “demonstration to legislation” and how that form of political engagement often (not always) stands over and against makeshift politics. To be clear, Sharpton is not against demonstrations. In fact, his activist brand depends on a certain style of nonviolent protest rooted in a narrow conception of the civil rights movement: marches, charismatic speeches, nationally televised events where he is front and center. Sharpton’s ire is directed toward angry and unruly demonstrations, often led by black youth, that challenge his attempts to control the parameters of legitimate black politics and his image as the quintessential modern civil rights leader. “More people worried about getting on the program than developing a program,” he

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380 Haines, ”Sharpton looks to comfort families after police shootings.”
381 Sharpton, ”Michael Brown’s Funeral.”
382 Ibid.
preached.\textsuperscript{383} (Ironically, Sharpton has appeared on nearly every funeral program of victims of police violence in the last 30 years). This statement should be read in light of criticisms from younger activists that Sharpton is an opportunist who uses instances of police and racial violence to promote his platform. My point here is not to prove such critiques, but rather to demonstrate how the stories we tell of the dead shape the contours of black politics, including the contest over who should be seen as the legitimate leaders of the movement.

Third, Sharpton weaponized the grief of Mike’s family. In addition to telling the congregation how to remember Mike, he tells mourners how to honor the family in the wake of his death. This enabled Sharpton to assert his authority as the arbiter of the meaning of Mike’s legacy. “This is not about your rage tomorrow,” he said at a peace rally the day before the funeral.\textsuperscript{384} He went on to say that the family “had to break their mourning to ask folks to stop looting and rioting. They had to stop their mourning to get you to control your anger. Like you more angry than they are.”\textsuperscript{385} Some might say this is Sharpton simply reiterating the family’s request for peace. But I believe

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\textsuperscript{383} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{385} Sharpton, “Michael Brown’s Funeral.”
something else is at stake (besides, not all members of the family were present at the rally). By claiming to represent the interests of the entire family, Sharpton was able to make claims about which forms of black activism were legitimate and which were off limits. His eulogy made clear the distinction. Turning “protest to policy” was the best response to patterns of police violence. A more radical politics of grief where black rage is expressed and makeshift politics are embraced was, on the other hand, not only undesirable but unacceptable.

‘A Bitter Vengeance in My Heart’

“Hands up don’t shoot!,” protesters chanted outside the church as pallbearers pushed Brown’s casket toward the hearse. It was 100 degrees in St. Louis and the racial climate was sweltering. The scene harkened back to the funeral procession of slain civil rights leader Medgar Evers. Baldwin was in Puerto Rico working on a play when he heard the news of his friend. “I just remembered his face,” he wrote, “and his telling me how the tatters of clothes from a lynched body hung, flapping, in the tree for days, and how he had to pass that tree every day.”

Protests erupted after Ever’s funeral. Dr. King, who was assassinated five years later, led marchers from the Masonic

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[^386]: Baldwin, No Name in the Street, 153-54.
Temple to Collins Funeral Home where Jackson police violently attacked an angry crowd of over 5,000 mourners.\textsuperscript{387}

About a year after Evers’ funeral, Dave Dennis, who was a Freedom Summer organizer and director of Mississippi's CORE, eulogized James Chaney. Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner were field workers for CORE during the 1964 Mississippi Freedom Summer when members of the KKK lynched them for registering black people to vote. Over 500 local African Americans attended Chaney’s funeral service. Family members and local leaders wanted to keep the memorial "very quiet."\textsuperscript{388} But when Dennis looked out into the crowd and into the face of Chaney’s 12-year-old brother, he couldn't contain himself. "Looking out there and seeing Ben Cheney," he said in an interview, “I lost it. I totally just lost it."\textsuperscript{389}

I’m sick and tired of going to memorials! I’m sick and tired of going to funerals! I’ve got a bitter vengeance in my heart tonight! And I’m sick and tired and can’t help but feel bitter, you see, deep down inside and I’m not going to stand here and ask anybody not to be angry tonight.\textsuperscript{390}

It was August 7, 1964. The DNC was less than three weeks away and Rustin’s “From Protest to Politics” would hit the press

\textsuperscript{387} See “June 12, 1963: Medgar Evers Murdered” in SNCC digital archives \url{https://snccdigital.org/events/medgar-evers-murdered/}; and “Jackson Civil Rights Movement” in the online Mississippi Encyclopedia \url{https://mississippienyclopedia.org/entries/jackson-civil-rights-movement/}.

\textsuperscript{388} Freedom Summer, directed by Stanley Nelson, (2014; Firelight Films Production for PBS American Experience), streaming, \url{https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amERICANexperience/films/freedomsummer/}.

\textsuperscript{389} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{390} Ibid.
a few months later. Dennis had become cynical about the viability of non-violent protest. As he approached the pulpit, he met the gentle mood of the service with a militant posture that most would come to associate with Black Power. Rage spewed from his lips. Pain permeated his eyes. Similar to Mike Brown, it was as if his body expressed an argument of its own. A kind of refusal to obey the request for a peaceful service.

Dennis’ eulogy was a scathing critique of Chaney’s lynching and the system of white supremacy that animated such racist vitriol. His remarks, in certain ways, resonate with Sharpton’s eulogy. Both utilized the rhetoric of the black freedom struggle to challenge patterns racial violence; both criticized institutional authorities; and both called mourners to act. But, similar to Obama’s eulogy and Bree’s action, Dennis and Sharpton used similar rhetorical means for distinct political ends.

Whereas Sharpton’s eulogy demonstrated a charismatic style of leadership that emphasized a push from protest to policy, Dennis urged local blacks to assume grassroots leadership in the struggle. “Each and every one of us as individuals is going to have to take it upon ourself to become leaders in our community,” he said with sweat dripping from his forehead.391 While he encouraged the congregation to register to vote, the

391 Ibid.
substance of his eulogy exceeded the ballot. Like Baldwin’s letter to Davis, he cited everything from the devastating impact of World War II on black veterans to patterns of economic inequality. And, like Baldwin, his most consistent message was for black Americans to fight for their own freedom.

The clearest distinction between Dennis’ and Sharpton’s eulogies hinges on the question of black rage. Sharpton explicitly denounced expressions of anger. Dennis unapologetically championed them. In fact, similar to abolitionist David Walker, the young civil rights leader framed acquiescence to racial violence as anti-Christian.⁹²

Don’t just look at me and the people here and go back and say that you’ve been to a nice service...there were a lot of hot-blasted newsmen around, anything like that. But your work is just beginning. I’m going to tell you deep down in my heart what I feel right now. If you do go back home and sit down and take it, God damn your souls!⁹³

My point here is not to defend Dennis’ comments, but to situate it alongside Sharpton’s remarks in order to evidence another mode of African American mourning that affirms articulations of black suffering, challenges the discourse of protest to policy, and embraces a makeshift style of politics. Here, Dennis made a demand of the black people in the congregation as much as the nation. The cadence and content of the eulogy, to me, sounds a

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⁹² See David Walker’s *David Walker’s Appeal* (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 1997).
⁹³ *Freedom Summer*. 
lot like Assata’s affirmation: both can be heard as interpersonal demands that call mourners to “love and protect each other” in the “fight for our freedom.”

According to Bruce Watson, Dennis’ eulogy was a “turning point in the summer.” On the heels of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, with the DNC around the corner, the burgeoning movement leader incited African Americans to do more than vote and push for progressive legislation. Weeks before Fannie Lou Hamer refused to take the bribe in Atlantic City, Dennis told a weary congregation “we all tired.” The civil rights leader had witnessed so many precious black lives cut short, including his friend and comrade Medgar Evers just a year prior. After preaching for nearly twelve minutes, sporadically banging his right fist against the pulpit, fumbling his words in a rageful frenzy, Dennis looked up, seemingly staring into Ben Chaney’s eyes, and challenged the congregation to act. “Don’t bow down anymore! Hold your heads up! We want our freedom now! I don’t want to have to go to another memorial. I’m tired of funerals, tired of ‘em! We’ve got to stand up.”

Ironically, as Dennis walked away from the pulpit, he collapsed into the arms of a local clergy member. Chaney’s funeral would not be his last.

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394 Ibid.
395 Ibid.
396 Ibid.
What’s wrong with the sidewalk?’

A year after Mike’s memorial was built, on the one-year anniversary of his death, the Ferguson city government replaced the street memorial with a permanent monument on the sidewalk. Mayor James Knowles III, who formerly worked in the Ferguson Police Department’s (FPD) communications division and defended the FPD after Brown’s shooting death, made the request. While Knowles’ intention is debatable, his comments around the removal casts light onto the broader context of the memorial. At a press conference commemorating the one-year anniversary of Mike Brown’s death, he described the replacement of the street memorial with the permanent marker as a symbol of hope. He went on to express his condolences within a discourse of universalism and progress. “We understand this situation is not easy for all parties involved,” he told press conference attendees.397 “This event will forever be a part of Ferguson’s history – but it is important that the community moves forward.”398

In many ways, Obama’s eulogy in the wake of the Charleston Massacre mirrored the substance of Mayor Knowles’ commentary in the aftermath of the Ferguson Rebellion. In both instances,

398 Ibid.
grief was universalized; hope was presented as a political virtue toward which citizens should aspire; and racial tragedy was grafted into a story of progress. Remember, Obama said that “there are good people on both sides of these debates” around gun laws. He encouraged African Americans to be “able to walk in somebody else’s shoes and see through their eyes.” And he framed forgiveness as a sign of progress and symbol of hope. During his eulogy, Obama, who sent the DOJ to investigate the FPD after Mike’s death, had a similar message to Mayor Knowles, who defended the officer that took Mike’s life. Their different identities - a white mayor of a midwestern suburb and the first black president of the United States - can easily cloud their political overlap. But it’s important to see through the fog.

The Ferguson Rebellion is a thorny tale. The removal of the street memorial is not a simple story of politicians versus protestors. Mike’s father, Mike Brown Sr., stood somewhere between. He has been critical of the FPD and has worked in collaboration with city officials. In fact, he gave Mayor Knowles his blessing to remove Mike’s street memorial. A year after his son’s death, on what would have been Big Mike’s 19th birthday, Brown Sr. stood alongside Mayor Knowles and replaced the street memorial with a permanent plaque on the sidewalk. Knowles and Brown Sr. were joined by members of the National Urban League, who agreed to house the items of the makeshift
memorial in a nearby storage unit until they could find a permanent home for them. The plaque, which bears Mike’s birth date, the date he was killed, and a depiction of the slain teenager dressed in a cap and gown, reads

I WOULD LIKE THE MEMORY OF MICHAEL BROWN TO BE A HAPPY ONE. HE LEFT AN AFTERGLOW OF SMILES WHEN LIFE WAS DONE. HE LEAVES AN ECHO WHISPERING SOFTLY DOWN THE WAYS, OF HAPPY AND LOVING TIMES AND BRIGHT SUNNY DAYS. HE’D LIKE THE TEARS OF THOSE WHO GRIEVE, TO DRY BEFORE THE SUN OF HAPPY MEMORIES THAT HE LEFT BEHIND WHEN LIFE WAS DONE.399

The message of the memorial is affectionate and straightforward. Honor Mike with happy memories. There is no mention of the circumstances of his death or the community of resistance that coalesced around Canfield Drive, or the BLM movement.

My aim here is not to, by any means, dishonor Brown Sr.’s grief but to demonstrate the complexity of a broader set of politics of mourning at play in the replacement of the street memorial. The permanent monument was not simply a result of the city flexing its political will. It involved a much messier morass of competing and corresponding interests. At the press conference, Brown Sr., who as recently as last year demanded a new investigation into the case, expressed his desire for the city to move forward. After Mayor Knowles finished his remarks, Brown Sr. graced the stage sporting a sweatshirt with his son emblazoned across his chest and a St. Louis baseball cap, the

399 Lee, “Iconic Michael Brown Memorial Torn Down.”
same kind Big Mike wore during his fatal encounter with Wilson. His tone was somber. “Not a day goes by that I don’t think about my son,” he began.400 He went on to thank the DOJ and the city of Ferguson for uniting under a common goal to “help us move forward.”401 One reporter asked him if he had spoken to Canfield residents and local activists about the removal. He had not.

The permanent monument immediately became a site of contestation. Opinions varied. Activist and longtime Ferguson resident Tony Rice said that the removal was done in a “dignified way” but that the “plaque is not enough.”402 According to Rice, “the old memorial symbolized the epicenter of where black lives actually matter. If you ever needed to question how much people care about an 18-year-old black man’s life,” he continued, “you could point to that memorial.”403 Rice’s statement demonstrates some ambiguity over the significance of the permanent marker. He did not outright reject the replacement, but he recognizes its limits. For Rice, the value of the street memorial exceeded the commemoration of Mike Brown. It spoke to the idea that would later become the banner under which the movement emerged and developed: black lives matter.

401 Ibid.
402 Lee, “Iconic Michael Brown Memorial Torn Down.”
403 Ibid.
Although there was no consensus on the significance of the shift from the street to the sidewalk, it is clear that Mike’s street memorial played a significant role throughout the course of the Ferguson Rebellion. His shrine did much more than honor his life. It protested patterns of police violence and gave way to a makeshift style of political engagement that, whether intentional or not, pushed back against calls to translate protest to policy. But pressure to concentrate the energy of the movement into the 2016 presidential election came forcefully.
Mothers of the Movement

Until the killing of black men, black mothers' sons, becomes as important to the rest of the country as the killing of a white mother's son, we who believe in freedom cannot rest...404

I wanted the world to see what they did to my baby.405

The movement born in the wake of Michael Brown’s death bred more than a new generation of young activists. It birthed a group of grieving mothers turned freedom fighters. Sybrina Fulton. Lezley McSpadden. Samaria Rice. Gwen Carr. Lucy McBath. Geneva Reed-Veal. Maria Hamilton. The endless roll call reminds me of Toni Morrison’s lament in her classic novel Beloved. “Not a house in the country ain’t packed to its rafters with some dead Negro’s grief.”406 It is an agonizing reality. The house that race built is flooded with the tears of bereaved black mothers.

Each mother lost their child to police or gun violence. “Sadly it is a club no one wants to join but nevertheless continues to grow,” a Los Angeles Times reporter wrote in an


406 Morrison, Beloved, 6.

The club’s most recognized members were eventually organized under the banner the Mothers of the Movement (MOM). United by grief, the group quickly rose to national prominence and eventually took center stage in the 2016 presidential election.

“Hillary Clinton has the compassion and understanding to comfort a grieving mother,” Sybrina Fulton told a packed crowd at the Wells Fargo Center in Philadelphia.\footnote{Will Drabold, “Read What the Mothers of the Movement Said at the Democratic Convention,” Time online, July 26, 2016, https://time.com/4424704/dnc-mothers-movement-transcript-speech-video/.} Over forty years after Fannie Lou Hamer and the MFDP fought for formal political power at the 1964 Democratic National Convention, Fulton and six other black mothers graced the stage at the highly anticipated 2016 DNC. Each mother shared their personal stories. “A year ago from yesterday I lived the worst nightmare anyone could imagine,” Geneva Reed-Veal, the mother of Sandra Bland, said,\footnote{Ibid.} before calling her presence at the DNC a “blessing” because “Sandy can still speak through her mama.”\footnote{Ibid.}

The presentation opened with a video of Hillary Clinton convening the mothers in Chicago a year prior. When McBath, the mother of Jordan Davis, who was shot to death in Jacksonville,
Florida by a white vigilante, asked the former First Lady what the mothers can do, Clinton responded: “Well, I think, you can continue to speak out, but you will be more effective if you somehow band together so that it’s a constant drum beat.” By election day, MOM had campaigned across the country for the presidential hopeful. The band of mothers became one of the most consistent and consequential voices of the Clinton campaign.

Many of the mothers were already engaged in their own political work before gracing the stage of the 2016 DNC. Several established foundations in honor of their children’s tragic deaths; wrote memoirs and essays that connected their personal stories to broader questions of justice; and organized locally and nationally around issues of gun violence, police brutality, and systemic racism. Their relationship to Clinton’s campaign and the presidential election may reveal the depth to which public acts of grief shape American politics, but it does not represent the breadth of their political contributions.

This chapter examines the activist politics of MOM. I tell the personal stories and analyze the advocacy efforts of Sybrina Fulton, Lezley McSpadden, and Samaria Rice— in particular—in order to think through broader questions of public grief, black

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motherhood, and American electoral politics. I argue that defining the mothers solely, or even primarily, through their common experiences of loss flattens important political differences between them. Instead, I foreground the agency, diversity, and complexity of these activist-mothers to demonstrate how their political work shaped, and was shaped by, Hillary Clinton’s campaign, the Movement for Black Lives, and the long tradition of African American mourning.

While Sybrina, Lezley, and Samaria each established foundations, fought for justice in the courts, and wrote publicly about their journeys from mothers to mother-activists, their political work in the wake of their sons’ deaths was not exactly the same. Sybrina’s advocacy efforts primarily consisted of convening bereaved mothers and lobbying for gun legislation. While she did not completely deny the reality of race in her son’s case, she largely shied away from explicit race talk and emphasized a universal message of national unity. Lezley also established a foundation in honor of her slain son, which provides emotional resources for grieving mothers and educational opportunities for young people of color. She was often unapologetic in her anger toward the system as she spoke powerfully to the particularity of black suffering. But she also held on to a message of hope and change for all Americans as she advocated for criminal justice reform.
Samaria took on a somewhat different set of activist politics. She expressed support for the mothers who endorsed Hillary Clinton for president, including Sybrina and Lezley. But she chose not to support any candidate. While she, too, created a foundation in honor of her son, it does not explicitly work with bereaved mothers. Instead, the organization mainly trains youth to become activists in their local community. In many ways, Samaria took on a kind of makeshift style of politics that did not completely reject formal politics but sought justice far beyond the confines of the courts and national elections.

Singular stories are dangerous. They can circumscribe political imagination. This is how I read Obama’s eulogy of Rev. Pinckney. He told a narrow story of black freedom struggle that confined African American politics to liberal reforms and a stubborn allegiance to the American Creed. In a similar way, I worry that if we reduce MOM to a monolith of bereaved mothers, then we will miss vital aspects, not only of their political work, but of black politics and activism more generally.

We need a bigger story of the Mothers of the Movement. One that rejects the idea that they all want the same thing and share the same theory of change; and second, that the group is a pawn of Clinton’s campaign and the Democratic Party. As I will demonstrate, the activism that Sybrina, Lezley, and Samaria took
up in the wake of their son's deaths shatters both stories. As Sybrina writes in her memoir, “Our grief doesn’t define us.”

Black Feminist Thought

Patricia Hill Collins' classic text, Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment, is particularly useful for thinking through the politics of MOM. In many ways, it gives voice to Sybrina’s insistence that the Mothers of the Movement are not defined by grief while also arguing for the importance of black women’s activism and the complexities embedded within it. Black Feminist Thought, like much of black feminist scholarship, is informed by lived experiences. “When I entered the academy in the 1980s,” Collins reflected in a recent forum, “African American women were largely missing, as were black women’s interpretations of our own and others’ experiences, actions and perspectives.” But the book was not necessarily an attempt to fill a gap in academic literature by including the experiences of African American women. Rather, Collins sought to center how black women interpreted their lived realities on their own terms.

I had no problem finding scholarship that ostensibly was about black women - all I had to do was identify social

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problems for the state and there we were. In Black Feminist Thought, I challenged this treatment of black women as objects of knowledge by valorizing African American women as agents of knowledge. The issue was less one of whether black women could speak, but...to excavate, legitimate and analyze what African American women had already said.\textsuperscript{415}

By doing so, Collins challenged reigning notions of what constitutes knowledge production and intellectual discourse. This epistemological shift served as the launchpad from which Black Feminist Thought emerged into and far beyond academia.

In the second edition of the book, which I use here, Collins moves away from defining black feminist thought and instead delineates its distinguishing features. She names five. First, the realities of gender, race, class, sexuality, and nation make up a “matrix of domination” in which black women in the U.S. experience oppression.\textsuperscript{416} Somewhat different from intersectionality, which legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw coined to counter the idea that a single identity such as gender or race is the sole source of discrimination, matrix of domination describes how those identities (or “interlocking oppressions”) form, develop, and operate within broader systems of power.\textsuperscript{417}

Second, the experiences and ideas of African American women are diverse due, in part, to social stratification but also to the various ways black women interpret their lived experiences.

\textsuperscript{415} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{416} Collins, Black Feminist Thought, 18.
\textsuperscript{417} Ibid.
Third, despite differentiation, there remains a collective identity among black women due to a shared history and common experiences of oppression. Fourth, that collective identity brings into view the unique ways African American women experience injustice and it can form a basis for solidarity against them. For Collins, at the heart of black feminism is a fundamental commitment to fighting all forms of injustice, not only the ways black women are entangled in the matrix. And, finally, she emphasizes the “significance of change” within black feminist thought.\footnote{Ibid., 39.} This last point is especially important to understanding my assessment of the Mothers of the Movement.

In order for Black feminist thought to operate effectively within Black feminism as a social justice project, both must remain dynamic. Neither Black feminist thought as a critical social theory nor Black feminist practice can be static; as social conditions change, so much knowledge and practices designed to resist them. For example, stressing the importance of Black women’s centrality to Black feminist thought does not mean that all African American women desire, are positioned, or are qualified to exert this type of intellectual leadership.\footnote{Ibid.}

Ultimately, Collins argues for a collective identity among African American women rooted in common experiences of oppression, which can form the basis of political activism. But she also insists on the diversity of experiences and ideas among
black women, opening up space to think critically about the complex ways African American women make sense of and respond to injustice. Rather than a static picture of black womanhood, Collins conceptualizes black feminism as a way of critically reading “a shifting mosaic of competing ideas and interests.”

Several aspects of *Black Feminist Thought* are important for my examination of MOM. First, Collins emphasizes the agency of African American women, including black mothers. Of course, black women are not mere objects of oppression. But they can often be viewed as such, especially when tragic circumstances catapult them into the national spotlight. Take Mamie Till. After the brutal lynching of her teenage son, she became a national symbol of the human costs of racial oppression. She is known for her decision to keep the casket open during the funeral service “so the world could see what they did to my baby.” And many have cited, as I did in the second chapter, the significance of that decision in the formation of the civil rights movement. But Mamie’s activism transcended her son’s funeral service. Two days after she buried her baby, she addressed 10,000 people in Harlem during a protest, calling on the crowd to fight for justice. Afterward, Mamie went on tour

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420 Ibid., ix.
422 Ibid., 190-1.
with the NAACP, visiting over 19 cities and 33 states in a single month.\textsuperscript{423} During one speech she explained how,

\begin{quote}
two months ago I had a nice apartment in Chicago. I had a good job. I had a son. When something happened to the Negroes in the South I said, ‘That’s their business, not mine.’ Now I know how wrong I was. The murder of my son has shown me that what happens to any of us, anywhere in the world, had better be the business of all.\textsuperscript{424}
\end{quote}

Emmet Till’s brutal murder was not only a catalyst for the movement. It was motivation for Mamie to become an advocate for racial and social justice. In addition to fighting to get her son’s killers convicted, she worked with young people in Chicago as a public-school teacher, lent her voice at rallies and in documentaries, and wrote an autobiography. Yet, Mamie Till has become a kind of stock photo in the mainstream narrative of the black freedom struggle. It is as if all she did was keep her son’s casket open and wail at the funeral.

Collins conception of black feminist thought creates space for a fuller story of black mothers such as Mamie Till. “Portraying U.S. Black women solely as passive, unfortunate recipients of abuse stifles notions that Black women can actively work to change our circumstances and bring about changes in our lives,” she writes.\textsuperscript{425} Contrary to Afropessimist

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{423} Ibid., 194.
\textsuperscript{425} Collins, Black Feminist Thought, 287.
\end{flushright}
thought, Collins argues that “the existence of Black feminist thought suggests that there is always choice, and power to act, no matter how bleak the situation may appear to be.” As I show in the cases of Sybrina, Lezley, and Samaria, racial violence does not reduce black women into mere victims. Similar to Mamie, each of the mothers took on lives of activism in the wake of their sons’ tragic deaths, including seeking justice in the courts, speaking at rallies, working with young people, and telling their personal stories through memoirs and essays.

But Collins is clear that agency is not necessarily emancipatory. That people can make a change does not mean that they will try, succeed, or change things for the better.

Rethinking Black feminism as a social justice project involves developing a complex notion of empowerment. Shifting the analysis to investigating how the matrix of domination is structured along certain axes - race, gender, class, sexuality, and nation - as well as how it operates through interconnected domains of power - structural, interpersonal, disciplinary, and hegemonic - reveals that the dialectical relationship linking oppression and activism is far more complex than simple models of oppressors and oppressed would suggest.

Matrices of domination can be highly complex, which makes struggles against them challenging and complicated. To put it perhaps too simplistically, people can be oppressed in one situation, place, or relationship and oppressor in another.

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426 Ibid., 290.
427 Ibid., 289.
Oppressed people can also harbor oppressive ideas. This makes social justice work difficult and representational politics dangerous, especially when the symbolism is a black man in the White House or, in this case, black mothers whose sons were killed by a white cop or racist vigilante on a campaign trail. This is, in part, why MOM’s role in the 2016 presidential election was so significant. For many people, the mothers’ mere presence alongside the, potentially, first woman president of the United States was a statement in and of itself.

Black feminist thought provides critical resources to recognize - among other things - the complexity of unjust systems; the material, political, and intellectual differentiation within oppressed communities; and the need for, but limits of, identity politics. In this sense, the Mothers of the Movement are no more prepared to address police violence than the family members of those who’ve been killed in automobile accidents are qualified to fix cars. And we should not expect or require them to be. Uncritical praise may seem appropriate in such a tragic circumstance. But it won’t stop the bodies from piling up. It can, in fact, make things worse.

Collins’ conception of black feminist thought calls us to excise the assumption and expectation that the victimized “desire, are positioned, or are qualified” to eradicate the systems of oppression that not only harm them but impact
countless people whose names we will never know. By doing so, her insights create space for critical debate, unpopular opinions, and diverse theories of change. As we will see, while Sybrina, Lezley, and Samaria each lost a child to police or racial violence, their responses to their children’s premature deaths were not identical; and the differences between them were not reducible to whether or not they endorsed Clinton for president. Their ideas and actions, in my view, cut much deeper.

But to recognize the diversity between the activist-mothers, we must take their ideas seriously as much as their grief. This is a critical aspect of Black Feminist Thought. For Collins, black women of all social and economic backgrounds can and do produce knowledge. The problem is not a lack of knowledge production among poor and working-class black women. Rather, it is a narrow conception of the intellectual as someone who works in academia. “Developing Black feminist thought as critical social theory involves including the ideas of Black women not previously considered intellectuals,” she writes. The aim here is not necessarily to recruit more black women into the academy. It is to fundamentally rethink what knowledge production is, who can produce it, and where it is found. Black feminism demands,

\[\text{428 Ibid., 16.}\]
as Collins argues, “searching for its expression in alternative institutional locations.”

In *Black Feminist Thought*, black motherhood is one of those institutions that incubate knowledge production and political activism. Here, Collins challenges traditional Western feminism that sees “motherwork” as merely a product of patriarchal oppression. “Ideas about Black motherhood emanating from African-American communities have been quite different,” she explains. “Historically, the concept of motherhood has been of central importance in the philosophies of people of African descent.” To be clear, Collins acknowledges the sexist history and reality of mothering in black communities including the controlling images of black mothers as happy slaves, matriarchs always in the service of white men, and even “positive” stereotypes of the “superstrong Black mother” often perpetuated by black men. But she maintains the diverse ways black women define and negotiate mothering in their own communities.

Some women view motherhood as a truly burdensome condition that stifles their creativity, exploits their labor, and makes them partners in their own oppression. Others see [it] as providing a base for self-actualization, status in the Black community, and a catalyst for social activism.
Of course, the two are not mutually exclusive. As Collins clarifies, “these alleged contradictions can exist side by side in African-American communities and families.” As I will show, this formulation of black motherhood speaks powerfully to the experiences of Sybrina, Lezley, and Samaria. Each has expressed how being a black mother is both a beautiful responsibility and terrifying reality. For Lezley and Samaria, who raised their children in poverty, mothering came at a particularly high cost as they tried to keep their children safe while struggling to make ends meet. Yet, Sybrina, Lezley, and Samaria all take great pride and joy in mothering, which informed the passion in which they took on their activism in the wake of their son’s deaths.

In fact, their status as black mothers both politicized them and lent them credibility in their political work. Like Mamie Till, each mother became an activist as a result of their son’s brutal killing and used their identity as mothers to make political claims. As I will elaborate, Sybrina appealed to all Americans by identifying as an “average mom.” Lezley sought to set the terms of appropriate political behavior during the Ferguson Rebellion by defining how her son would have wanted to be remembered. Samaria critiqued the policies of establishment politicians by describing the relentless trauma she experienced.

435 Ibid.
in the wake of Tamir’s death. As Collins lays out, black motherhood “can be invoked as a symbol of power” in political activism. But the question remains: toward what ends and by what means are the politics of the mothers taken up?

Collins helps us think about these questions by mapping a long tradition of black women’s activism in the U.S. As I mentioned, at the core of black feminist thought is a commitment to universal social justice. In contrast to Frank Wilderson’s notion of the “ruse of analogy,” which argues that black suffering is incomparable to other forms of oppression, Collins asserts that “Black feminist thought constitutes one part of a much larger social justice project that goes far beyond the experiences of African-American women.” She cites a long genealogy of black women leaders who championed this humanist vision, including Maria W. Stewart, Anna Julia Cooper, Alice Walker, Pauli Murray, Shirley Chisolm, and the formidable Fannie Lou Hamer, who insisted that “nobody’s free until everybody’s free.” While Collins maintains that “Black women must be in charge of Black feminist thought, she also makes it clear that “being in charge does not mean that others are excluded.”

\[436\] Ibid., 192.
\[437\] Ibid., 23.
\[438\] Ibid., 43.
\[439\] Ibid., 18.
The Combahee River Collective (CRC) captured this dialectic in profound ways. In 1977, the self-identified black feminist lesbian socialist organization argued for an identity politics that centered the experiences and ideas of black women while building common cause with all oppressed people.

Although we are feminists and Lesbians, we feel solidarity with progressive Black men and do not advocate the fractionalization that white women who are separatist’s demand. Our situation as Black people necessitates that we have solidarity around the fact of race, which white women of course do not need to have with white men, unless it is their negative solidarity as racial oppressors. We struggle together with Black men against racism, while we also struggle with Black men about sexism.\textsuperscript{440}

The CRC had an expansive conception of political struggle that sought the liberation of all people which, for them, meant combating capitalism and imperialism alongside sexism and racism. “We realize that the liberation of all oppressed peoples necessitates the destruction of the political-economic systems of capitalism and imperialism as well as patriarchy.”\textsuperscript{441}

I mention Collins intellectual and political genealogy because it helps situate the advocacy efforts of Sybrina, Lezley, and Samaria in a long tradition of black women’s activism. An understanding of this tradition is important because it allows us to tell a bigger story, not only of MOM,


\textsuperscript{441} Ibid.
but of contemporary black feminism and African American politics more broadly. My aim is not to neatly categorize the activist-mothers into one political ideology or another, but to ask what is the substance of their politics shorn of the symbolism of identity? What do we think about Sybrina’s rhetorical appeals to a politics of universalism in light of Collins description of black feminism as a universal social justice project? How do we understand identity politics within Clinton’s campaign considering Combahee’s conception in 1977? In what ways have recent transformations complicated how we think about the interlocking oppressions of race, gender, and class when the historically victimized are at the helm of the matrix?

As Black Lives Matter and the Mothers of the Movement approached the 2016 presidential election, questions regarding the substance of feminism became a site of contestation. The Ferguson Rebellion, which emerged as a formation against police violence and was primarily led by black queer women, began to grow into a black-led multiracial struggle surrounding various social justice issues - from reparations and economic justice to environmental racism and the Israeli Occupation of Palestine. Solidarity around race and gender was being complicated by a diversity of ideas about what freedom entails and what it will take to achieve it. Reform or revolution? Black capitalism or
democratic socialism? Identity politics or a politics of solidarity? Protests or electoral politics?

It was a messy time. Most activists did not fall neatly into either category. Still, fissures emerged, factions concretized, and cops continued to kill black people with impunity, adding more and more mothers to “the club no one wants to join.” The trauma that accompanies inexorable loss also threatened the mental health of protestors and black mothers struggling to live in the wake of their children’s premature deaths. Efforts to win change came at a cost, and their bodies kept the score. Grief stood at the center of it all.

From Mourning to a Movement

Sybrina Fulton was at work when she received the call every black mother dreads. The Florida native left her office at Miami Dade County’s housing agency to call her ex-husband back. He had called twice. “He says something about our son I don’t quite understand, which will soon become clear: the previous night, on Sunday February 26, 2012, at approximately 7:17 P.M., our son, Trayvon Martin, was shot to death in Sanford, Florida, sprawled out on the wet grass of a Florida townhouse complex, a single bullet-hole in his seventeen-year-old heart.” Sybrina’s life

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442 Granderson, “Trayvon Martin’s mom applauds Steph Curry and Colin Kaepernick for taking a stand.”
shattered in seconds. Her baby boy had been shot and killed in cold blood on his way home to watch the NBA all-star game.

“Before that phone call there had been very few dark days,” Sybrina wrote in her co-authored memoir Rest in Power: The Enduring Life of Trayvon Martin.444 Her childhood was marked by upward mobility. The youngest of six children, Sybrina was born in Miami and grew up in the working-class suburb of Opa-Locka. Her mother worked at the post office and her stepfather was a police officer. The family was not rich but Sybrina and her siblings lived a relatively comfortable life. Christmases were big and summer vacations were customary. She eventually graduated from Grambling State University and later took a job at Miami-Dade County, where she met Tracy, her ex-husband, at a Christmas party. The couple married soon thereafter. And, on February 5, 1995, Trayvon was born. He was a playful child. He loved cartoons and adored his mother, who he called “Cupcake” because of her sweet, gentle spirit.445 But his journey from cradle to the grave was short and it left Sybrina in agonizing pain. “It’s something about when you carry the child for nine months, and the child is beating in your heart, in your body,

444 Ibid.
445 Ibid., 11.
the child is growing. Once you have the baby, it’s almost like your heart is walking around outside your body.”

Trayvon, who many knew as “Slimm,” had celebrated his 17th birthday a few weeks before he was killed. Sybrina was thinking about her burgeoning teenage boy, who was training to become a pilot, getting his driver’s license and attending junior prom. But, on March 3, 2012, her and Tracy were preparing for a different kind of ceremony. “I couldn’t fully grasp then, and can only barely remember now, the details of the terrible day when Trayvon’s body was put to rest,” Sybrina recalled.

Initially, Sybrina suffered debilitating grief, what she called a “strange paralysis.” As she wrote, “losing my child ripped my heart in half; it is indescribable pain. I could not get out of my bedroom...I couldn’t eat, couldn’t sleep, couldn’t do anything but lie in bed and cry.” But, a week after Zimmerman shot and killed Trayvon, Sybrina was forced to leave her room and undergo a “grotesque reversal of the usual order of life and death.” She had to bury her youngest son. “My memories from that day are still gray,” she wrote in her

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446 Interviews by Nadia Latif and Leila Latif, "'We know what it is to bury a child' - the black mothers turning mourning into a movement," Guardian online, November 22, 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/nov/22/mothers-of-the-movement-trayvon-martin-sandra-bland-eric-garner-amadou-diallo-sean-bell.
447 Fulton and Martin, Rest in Power, Introduction.
448 Ibid., 67.
449 Ibid.
450 Ibid., Introduction.
memoir.\textsuperscript{451} “The day was just a blur. I don’t remember most of it, except for one image, which kept returning to me again and again over the days that followed: my son lying dead in his casket.”\textsuperscript{452}

Baldwin had a similar experience after witnessing Medgar’s, Malcolm’s, and Martin’s violent deaths. “I remember weeping, briefly, more in helpless rage than in sorrow,” he recalled, referring to the moment he heard about Malcolm’s assassination. “But I don’t really remember that evening at all.”\textsuperscript{453} By the time Martin had been shot and killed, Baldwin was struggling to keep himself together. “After I had left Atlanta, [my mind] began to move backward in time, to places, people, and events that I had forgotten. Sorrow drove it there, I think, sorrow and a certain kind of bewilderment, triggered, perhaps, by something which happened to me in connection with Martin’s funeral.”\textsuperscript{454} Like Baldwin, Sybrina’s memory began to fail and fragment. She describes being dazed the day of Trayvon’s homegoing service. “I was led to my seat, too hurt to even know what I was doing,” she explained. “I only vaguely remember the funeral service.”\textsuperscript{455}

For Sybrina, Trayvon’s funeral marked an end and a beginning. “We buried his shell, but his spirit - who Trayvon

\textsuperscript{451} Ibid., 36. 
\textsuperscript{452} Ibid., 64. 
\textsuperscript{453} Baldwin, \textit{Collected Essays}, 447. 
\textsuperscript{454} Ibid., 358. 
\textsuperscript{455} Fulton and Martin, \textit{Rest in Power}, 54.
was and who he always will be - remains.” Sybrina was wounded as she experienced the phantom pains that came with the trauma of losing the other half of her heart. But Trayvon’s spirit, she insisted, lived on, sparking anger, unrest and, for some, a commitment to turn the trauma into something transformative.

In the wake of his tragic death, Trayvon’s spirit haunted American political life - animating national protests, informing efforts to reform gun laws, and setting the stage for the most powerful social movement since Till’s death. As Sybrina wrote,

Trayvon Martin was soon everywhere: in demonstrations, marches, and rallies; from Miami, the city where he lived, to Sanford, Florida, the small town near Orlando where he was killed, to the Million Hoodie March in New York City, to hundreds of newspaper and magazine articles and millions of tweets and Facebook posts, to endless prayers from untold supporters, and... all the way to the White House. The presence of Trayvon’s loss not only shaped national politics but it motivated his mother’s efforts to avenge her slain son. As protests bubbled up across the country, Sybrina began to muster the strength to fight. “I was going to stand up for my son. I was going to do whatever was necessary to make sure that his death would not be in vain,” she asserted. After those dark days in her room, Sybrina resolved to change her “mourning

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456 Ibid., Introduction.
457 Ibid.
458 Ibid., 72-73.
into a movement, pain into purpose, and sorrow into a strategy.”\textsuperscript{459}

Six months after Trayvon’s death, Sybrina established the Trayvon Martin Foundation alongside Tracy and their eldest son, Jahvaris.\textsuperscript{460} The non-profit organization’s main purpose is to “provide both emotional and financial support to families who have lost a child to gun violence.”\textsuperscript{461} The foundation offers a range of programs, including mentorship and educational opportunities for youth and support for grieving parents.\textsuperscript{462}

Strikingly, the organization does not seem to directly address issues of race. Gun violence, grief support, and youth mentorship are the focal points. Sybrina’s signature Circle of Mothers initiative takes on this race-neutral approach. After a jury chose not to indict Zimmerman, she saw a vision in the same room she could not get herself to leave a few months prior.

The next morning, I knew...I had to do something to help other mothers [who] had lost their children to violence...I would find a way to unite this sorority...So that one day what happened to Trayvon, and has happened to other sons and daughters across America and the world, might someday soon never happen to another mother’s child.\textsuperscript{463}

The program focuses on supporting bereaved mothers and curbing gun violence. The goal of the yearly retreat is to “bring

\textsuperscript{459} Latif and Latif, “’We know what it is to bury a child’.”
\textsuperscript{460} Fulton and Martin, \textit{Rest in Power}, 204.
\textsuperscript{461} “Home,” The Trayvon Martin Foundation, \url{https://www.trayvonmartinfoundation.org/}.
\textsuperscript{462} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{463} Fulton and Martin, \textit{Rest in Power}, 328.
together mothers who have lost children or family members to senseless gun violence for the purpose of healing, empowerment, and fellowship towards the larger aim of community building.”

During the gathering, attendees do healing exercises; build relationships with other mothers; and participate in workshops that help them turn “anger into action.”

In Rest in Power, Sybrina names several attendees of the Circle of Mothers’ inaugural convening, including a Colorado state representative, whose son was shot and killed while sitting in his car at a traffic stop; Afeni Shakur, the mother of Tupac, who was gunned down in Las Vegas after a professional boxing match; and Cleopatra Pendleton, whose 15-year-old daughter, Hadiyah, who performed at Obama’s second inauguration, was shot and killed while playing in a Chicago park.

The Circle is an interesting formation, at least in my mind. While grief and gun violence unite the mothers, many of their individual cases are drastically different. Tupac is perhaps the world’s most famous rapper whose murder is shrouded in conspiracy. Hadiyah was the unintended victim of a targeted gang shooting in Chicago. And Trayvon was stalked, shot, and killed by a neighborhood vigilante, sparking national protests

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465 Fulton and Martin, Rest in Power, 328.
against racial injustice and even prompting President Obama to address the case’s underlying racial tensions.

In many ways, the Trayvon Martin Foundation and the Circle of Mothers, in particular, embodies Sybrina’s broader political analyses and vision for social change. To be clear, she did not discount racism altogether. In an interview at Denison University, she told the crowd that racial profiling played a role in Trayvon’s shooting death. But her analysis is largely and, many times, exclusively centered around gun violence. As she wrote in her memoir, “the killer’s gun told us everything we needed to know about him. Because no matter what else is said about the case, one thing is certain: if he hadn’t been carrying a gun...our son would still be alive.”

While the foundation does not explicitly equate gun and racial violence, the substance of its programs seems to suggest that police killings, mass shootings, violence in black communities, and racially motivated attacks boil down to questions of gun control.

To be sure, Sybrina’s analysis of “senseless gun violence” informed her efforts to lobby for gun control and to organize mothers who have lost their children in incidents that involved a gun regardless of the circumstances. For example, at a Senate

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467 Fulton and Martin, Rest in Power, 82.
hearing in October of 2013, she stated that repealing Florida’s Stand Your Ground law, which she believed emboldened Zimmerman, would “prevent my circle of grieving mothers from growing any wider.” But I worry that statements such as these can easily obscure the context of Trayvon’s killing. If Zimmerman’s gun is the sole, or even primary, culprit then stricter gun laws may have prevented his death. But if race did play a role, as Sybrina acknowledged and the Black Lives Matter movement insisted, then combating racial violence would be at least as, or perhaps more, important than curbing gun violence.

Theoretically, it would be like combatting lynching by lobbying for anti-rope legislation. The noose is the mechanism of execution, but white supremacy is the motivation to kill.

Ironically, Zimmerman’s legal team did not use the Stand Your Ground law during the trial. He was still acquitted.

Responses to Zimmerman’s acquittal varied. Some Americans celebrated. Obama expressed sympathy to Trayvon’s family but appealed to procedural justice. “Once the jury has spoken, that's how our system works,” he said in a White House briefing. Many young people hit the streets. In New York City,

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hundreds marched under the banner Million Hoodies, which later formed into a prominent Black Lives Matter organization. Sybrina and Tracy happened to be in the city at the time and eventually made their way to Union Square to greet the protestors. "We want arrests!" they demanded. "This is not a black and white thing. This is about a right and wrong thing," Sybrina added. Taken together, these statements speak to two important features of her activism. For Sybrina, like many of the mothers, justice - by and large - meant convicting the perpetrator that killed her son. And she articulated this theory of change through a rhetoric of universalism. "I was an average mom to an average teenager." she told the crowd. "I still am. I’m fighting for my child who is not here like any other mom would do." In certain ways, the substance of Sybrina’s political activism, including the Trayvon Martin Foundation and Circle of Mothers program, resonates with the politics of Obama’s presidency. While he did not call for Zimmerman’s conviction, he did view the criminal legal system as the ultimate arbiter of justice and, like Sybrina, he equated gun and racial violence. As I demonstrated in the second chapter, throughout his eulogy of Rev. Pinckney, Obama appealed to the idea of universal grief by - in part - telling a story of “senseless gun violence.”

\[470\] Fulton and Martin, *Rest in Power*, 139-140.
\[471\] Latif and Latif, “'We know what it is to bury a child’.”
\[472\] Ibid.
Remember, Obama compared the Charleston Massacre to mass shootings of primarily white victims and to patterns of gun violence in black communities. “When eight of our brothers and sisters are cut down in a church basement, 12 in a movie theater, 26 in an elementary school, I hope we also see the 30 precious lives cut short by gun violence in this country every single day.”\textsuperscript{473} In the wake of racist violence, Obama and Sybrina both appealed to Americans of all races by framing gun violence as a national, rather than a racial, issue; endorsing procedural justice; and calling for “common sense” gun laws.

Furthermore, Obama’s and Sybrina’s mentorship programs, in my view, are both rooted in an idea of black cultural pathology. My Brother’s Keeper initiative is in both substance and style. During one of the program’s town halls, Obama scolded a group of primarily black boys, saying “if you are really confident about your financial situation, you are probably not going to be wearing an eight-pound chain around your neck.”\textsuperscript{474} (It is an especially odd thing to say to kids from poor and working-class families who are hardly old enough to create a bank account). But, to be sure, the former president’s statement speaks to a deeper set of liberal politics where black culture is seen as

\textsuperscript{473} Obama, “Eulogy for the Honorable Reverend Clementa Pinckney.”
deficient and in need of fixing. The Trayvon Martin Foundation and My Brother’s Keeper can be seen as opposite sides of the same coin. While the former deemphasizes race and the latter capitalizes on racial narratives, both responded to Trayvon’s death by providing support for victimized youth of color. Intentions aside, the programs seem to suggest that an effective way to combat institutionalized racism is to mentor black youth without directly addressing the racial, social, and economic forces that make them vulnerable in the first place.

Sybrina’s political analysis, rhetorical style, and theory of change are inseparable. Her view that Trayvon’s death was an incident of gun violence informed her organizing of other mothers whose children were shot and killed no matter the circumstances, and to lobby for common sense gun laws that she believes will prevent more tragic deaths. Her race-neutral rhetoric appealed not only to grieving mothers of all races, but to people who see gun violence as an American issue and therefore worthy of national sympathy. Sybrina universalized her grief by identifying as an “average mom” and describing Trayvon’s killing as a “right or wrong thing” not “a black and white thing.”475 The message here is not that racism does not exist or no longer matters. But, similar to Obama’s eulogy and,

475 Ibid., 140-150.
as we will see, Clinton’s campaign, the particularity of black suffering is subsumed by a narrative of national unity.

Despite Sybrina’s framing, Trayvon’s killing inevitably became an issue of race. Young people of color were also turning their mourning into a movement. As Sybrina was building out her foundation and trying to hold herself together, a burgeoning organization called the Dream Defenders, which became instrumental throughout the Ferguson Rebellion and the broader BLM movement, staged a 31-day occupation at the Florida State House.476 The group, primarily composed of Florida-based college students, demanded a meeting with Governor Rick Scott; a special legislative session to repeal the state’s stand your ground legislation; and the passage of Trayvon’s Law which would implement best practices for neighborhood watch groups and require data collection on police killings involving people of color.477 Philip Agnew, the organization’s former director, was adamant as he invoked the words of activist Fannie Lou Hamer. “We said if (Scott) would not give us a seat at the table, we would sleep on the floor.”478 Luckily, the activists brought mattresses. The Dream Defenders were resolved in their fight.

478 McGroy, “After 31 days, Dream Defenders end protest at Florida Capitol.”
Each night, as the sun set on the Capitol building, they chanted in the halls of the rotunda: “I believe that we will win!”

Gov. Scott eventually met with the Florida-based organization sporting a pair of cowboy boots emblazoned with the confederate flag. He refused to call a special session or meet any of their demands. It was another blow to the movement. If “this is how the system works,” as Obama declared, then the young activists who voted for him in droves were committed to changing it. The formal channels of political engagement were either unavailable or ineffective. The series of judicial defeats and inaction on behalf of the president began to radicalize young people across the country. While the Florida protestors did not win their list of demands, they began to discover new terrains of struggle.

“I’ve had it going through the normal routes because it doesn’t work,” Ciara Taylor, a 24-year-old Florida A&M University alum, said in an interview during their weeks-long occupation. The movement was growing, but not in the same direction. As Sybrina and establishment organizations such as the NAACP and Rev. Sharpton’s National Action Network (NAN) were pursuing traditional channels of political change and focusing

480 McGroy, “After 31 days, Dream Defenders end protest at Florida Capitol.”
481 Alvarez, “Florida Sit-In Against ‘Stand Your Ground.’”
on translating protest into policy, new formations such as the
Dream Defenders and Million Hoodies were embracing a style of
makeshift politics. To be sure, the young activists in Florida
continued to fight for justice in Trayvon’s individual case. But
their political analysis and platform were quickly expanding to
include issues of mass incarceration, the school-to-prison
pipeline, the war on drugs, and militarized immigration
detentions and deportations.482 A year later, another incident of
state-sanctioned violence sparked national outrage and set the
stage for the emergence of the Movement for Black Lives.

Mike Mike’s Mama

Lezley McSpadden had just taken a lunch break. It was one
of those dog days in “the Lou.” Hot and sweaty, she got in her
car to cool off and enjoy a cigarette. Before she could fully
exhale, the phone rang. “Lezley, somebody been shot on Canfield,
and he just laying there,” her coworker Mario said in a panic.483
Lezley tried to stay calm but the fact that her son was staying
at the Canfield Apartments with his grandmother for the summer
made her palms sweat. Before she hung up with Mario, Lezley’s
sister called. “Nette Pooh, the police just shot Mike Mike.”484
Lezley’s heart dropped. She ran inside Straub’s deli where she

483 Lezley McSpadden, Tell the Truth & Shame the Devil: The Life, Legacy, and
Love of My Son Michael Brown, (New York: Regan Arts, 2016), 9, Kindle.
484 Ibid.
worked and screamed frantically. “The police just shot my son!”\textsuperscript{485}

Trayvon Martin’s and Mike Brown’s mothers have similar stories, but they come from different backgrounds. Whereas Sybrina is a middle-class college graduate who lived a relatively comfortable life, Lezley had Mike Brown at 16 years old, never finished high school and, when she was not on government assistance, “worked for years barely making minimum wage, sometimes at two jobs, to put clothes on [her] children’s backs and shoes on their feet.”\textsuperscript{486} Her mother and grandmother raised her in the notorious Clinton-Peabody housing projects where she fought to protect herself, and where she regularly experienced the deaths of friends, classmates, neighbors, and family members.\textsuperscript{487} Lezley bore witness to patterns of premature black death long before Darren Wilson killed her eldest son.

In \textit{Tell the Truth & Shame the Devil: the Life, Legacy, and Love of My Son Michael Brown}, Lezley chronicles the precious details of Mike’s life and the tragic details of his death.\textsuperscript{488} “He was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen,” she wrote.\textsuperscript{489} His birthmark was shaped like a ham. He loved music. He was a

\textsuperscript{485} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{486} Ibid., 5.
\textsuperscript{487} Ibid., 16.
\textsuperscript{488} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{489} Ibid., 75.
techie. He liked video games and later fixed a computer.\textsuperscript{490} Such memories are now shadowed by that fateful day on August 9, 2014.

I tried to reach for Mike Mike, but it was like trying to grab air. I opened my mouth, and a moan broke loose. I could taste the salt of my tears flowing into my mouth. I exploded in rage, punching the air, swinging in all directions like I was fighting him to the finish, then all of a sudden I was overcome with exhaustion. I fell to my knees, weak, drenched in sweat, and cried out, 'Why, God?' My tears erupted like a volcano. My baby boy was gone, stolen from me, lying under a sheet, surrounded by police, in the hot summer sun...left out like rotting garbage.\textsuperscript{491}

Lezley’s rage jolts off the pages of her memoir. “I’m not going to lie. I’ve been wanting to get mad and just go fuck the world up,” she wrote.\textsuperscript{492} The scene at Canfield Drive was seen by some as a modern-day lynching. “This was a clear act of collective punishment and the residents knew it,” Robin Kelley explained in his 2015 Toni Morrison Lectures at Princeton University.\textsuperscript{493} “This is the point of lynching. The public display of tortured corpses was intended to terrorize an entire community, to punish everyone into submission, to remind others of their fate if they step out of line.”\textsuperscript{494} While Lezley saw her son’s death as bigger than her individual loss, she also laid claim to her personal experience as his mother. “I needed them and the rest of the world to know that Mike Mike did belong to somebody, a whole

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{490} Ibid., 91; 96; 155.
\item \textsuperscript{491} Ibid., 14.
\item \textsuperscript{492} Ibid., 4.
\item \textsuperscript{494} Ibid.
\end{itemize}
damn family, and he was mine before he was anybody else’s.”

Sybrina shared Lezley’s sentiments. “I’m not trying to diminish anybody’s broken heart, to diminish the death of any family member, friend, girlfriend,” she explained, “but to lose a child is totally different.” As the movement grew, the relationship between Lezley’s individual grief and the community’s collective mourning would become a site of tension and transformation.

The tragic day of Mike’s death escalated into a fiery night of intense protest. “Suddenly, I heard the sound of breaking glass, and store alarms began to sound,” Lezley recalled. “I watched black men and women, even kids as young as ten, running afraid. I saw people covering their faces with bandanas and T-shirts, running with everything in their hands from car rims to sneakers to boxes of hair extensions. Car tires skidded and burned rubber out of parking lots,” she continued. Nette Pooh, as she was affectionately called, harbored mixed feelings about the local and national responses to her son’s death.

I was furious as I watched all this. These people were disrespecting the memory of Mike Mike, and none of this was going to do any good for my cause – seeking justice for my son. I was upset about the looting...And I didn’t want anybody doing anything in Mike Mike’s name if it wasn’t about getting that cop convicted. At the same time...I know what it’s like to be mad because you feel like you don’t have any opportunities out there.

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495 McSpadden, *Tell the Truth & Shame the Devil*, 185.
496 Latif and Latif, “'We know what it is to bury a child'.”
497 Ibid., 184.
498 Ibid.
499 Ibid., 184-187.
Lezley felt like the rioting failed to honor Mike’s life and that the looting would not help attain justice for his death which, like Sybrina, primarily meant getting Wilson arrested. Yet, she identified with the rage pouring into the streets and, importantly, her analysis transcended the particularities of her son’s deadly encounter. Lezley framed the protests, not simply as a reaction to Mike’s killing, but as a response to the broader social and political arrangements that left many black youth disenfranchised and destitute. In many ways, the tragedy on Canfield Drive embodied the tragic conditions of post-industrialization and political austerity that defined Ferguson, St. Louis, and black communities across the country.

“Big Mike” grew up in North St. Louis County, which includes Ferguson. Ferguson is a predominately black working-class suburb controlled by a majority white city government and police department. In 2014, the year of Mike’s shooting death, three of the fifty-three police officers were black. On March 4, 2015, the Department of Justice (DOJ) opened an investigation

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into the FPD. The report was damning. Between 2012 and 2014, the 67 percent of African American residents accounted for 93 percent of arrests; 85 percent of people stopped, and 93 percent of people arrested were black; and all 14 canine bite cases involved black victims. The DOJ report also determined that the FPD bankrolled their budget by fining primarily black residents. In 2015, fines and fees generated over $3 million in revenue: nearly one quarter of the department’s operating budget. Furthermore, three out of four Ferguson residents – sixteen thousand out of twenty thousand – had warrants out for their arrest. Nearly all of them were issued because of a traffic fine or failed court appearance.

I do not know if Lezley was aware of these statistics or had read the DOJ report. But she clearly understood what Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor explains in her book on the movement: the Ferguson Uprising was about more than racism and police violence. For Lezley, the rebellion is also a story about class exploitation. Michael Brown’s killing was just the tip of the iceberg. Beneath the storm of police violence, black residents were drowning in a lucrative wave of fines and fees. The fact

503 Ibid., 62; 64; 5.
504 Ibid., 55.
505 Ibid.
that the FPD left Mike’s body on the ground for four and a half hours may have caused residents to explode, but the city was already a powder keg of racial and economic inequality.

As Lezley explained, racial capitalism formed the grounds from which the uprising emerged. “For the black people, Mike getting shot was like an old scab getting pulled off an old wound filled with racism. Young people were mad about not having jobs, money, how the white police be mainly treating young black men.” In addition to her alignment with Taylor’s arguments, Lezley’s analysis reflects Collins’ concept of the “intersecting oppressions” of race and class. While, like Sybrina, Lezley’s idea of justice was a conviction and, as such, she criticized any activity that would hinder that effort, including protests against her son’s police killing, she also identified with the young people's rage and contextualized it within a broader political analysis. To be clear, Lezley did not reject the politics of the street altogether. She joined many of the protests in Ferguson and throughout the country, speaking on behalf of her slain and calling for justice in his case. Rather, she worried that riotous protest would stifle the process of securing Wilson’s arrest and conviction. I think it

506 McSpadden, Tell the Truth & Shame the Devil, 187.
is also important to consider the role of trauma in Lezley’s response to the protests. Her mixed feelings about the rioting, from my reading, reflected her exhaustion and fear of more casualties as much as her particular theory of change. “I just didn’t want any more violence,” she wrote in her memoir. “I didn’t want anybody else to get hurt or killed.” Lezley’s personal trauma was directly informing her political theory.

Like Sybrina, Lezley turned to activism as a way to work through her son’s death. The two met – alongside Valerie Bell, the mother of Sean Bell – before an interview with CNN host Don Lemon. At first, Lezley was skeptical. “When I first met Sybrina, everything was just too fresh and my spirit wasn’t as open. These ladies were nice, but what did they really know about me?” she asked herself. “They had lost their sons senselessly like me, but my life was different than theirs.”

Eventually Lezley embraced Sybrina, who became a model of how she could turn her “tragedy into triumph.” The Trayvon Martin Foundation inspired her to start her own non-profit in honor of her slain son. Established in November of 2015, the Michael O.D. Brown We Love Our Sons & Daughters Foundation hosts four initiatives focused on issues of justice, health,

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508 McSpadden, Tell the Truth & Shame the Devil, 187.
509 Ibid., 238.
510 Ibid.
education, and family.\textsuperscript{512} The organization’s signature program, the Rainbow Mothers Grief Recovery Support Group, provides assistance to “mothers of all races and backgrounds who had either lost a child to street violence, gun violence, excessive police force, or just untimely death due to illness.”\textsuperscript{513} Program resources include individual counseling, group therapy, legal and medical support, as well as a fund for mothers who are struggling financially in the wake of their children’s deaths.\textsuperscript{514}

In many ways, Lezley’s foundation and Rainbow of Mothers program, in particular, speaks to her broader political work. Both provide emotional and financial support for bereaved mothers; educational resources for youth interested in public policy; and initiatives that lobby for changes within the criminal justice system. The word rainbow describes the multi-racial and multi-issue makeup of the organization. Like Sybrina’s Circle of Mothers, Lezley’s group includes mothers of all races who have lost children a variety of different ways, including illness, disease, and freak accidents.

Unlike Sybrina, however, Lezley does not equate all premature deaths, and she does not shy away from race talk. “Too often Black and Latino communities and our children are

\textsuperscript{514} Ibid.
confronted with violence,” she explained. “When tragedy strikes we want to be there with a net to catch our beautiful and brilliant black butterflies.”515 Here, the particularity of black suffering stands alongside the universal experience of motherly grief. Lezley emphasized the black experience while insisting on a rainbow coalition that fights for justice across races and issues. This fusion of identity politics and a politics of solidarity, in a sense, resonates with humanist vision of the black women Collins’ cites in Black Feminist Thought.

Beyond her foundation, Lezley fought for policies to reform the police and hold law enforcement accountable. She championed the use of body cameras, advocated for community policing, and lobbied for legislation in her slain son’s name.516 If passed, the Mike Brown Bill would require data collection from law enforcement on racial profiling; remove federal funding from state and local police that do not work with an independent civilian complaint review board; end the militarization of police departments; and implement use-of-force policies across state and local law enforcement agencies.517 The content of the

515 “Rainbow of Mothers,” Michael O.D. Brown We Love Sons & Daughters Foundation.
bill is rooted in a broader politics of reform that views police violence as the result of a lack of accountability, transparency, and trust between law enforcement and communities of color.\textsuperscript{518} Broadly conceived, this framework argues that the way to fix American policing is through diversity training, body cameras, community oversight, and building trust between police and local residents. As Lezley argued, “body cameras are only a piece of the puzzle when it comes down to the whole picture of police accountability and transparency.”\textsuperscript{519} For her, “good policies, good training, and good community policing programs” are the solutions to patterns of police brutality.\textsuperscript{520}

Lezley’s and Sybrina’s political analyses, rhetorical styles, and theories of change overlapped and diverged. Both established foundations that support bereaved mothers of all races who have lost their children prematurely; both pushed for liberal reforms within the criminal legal system; both advocated for legislation in honor of their son’s memories; both felt guided by the spirits of their slain sons; and both resolved to not let another mother suffer a similar loss. As Lezley said, “one day, I want there to be an end to the rainbow.”\textsuperscript{521}

\textsuperscript{518} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{520} Rosenbaum, “McSpadden provides an assist for Nasheed’s body camera bill.”
\textsuperscript{521} McSpadden, Tell the Truth & Shame the Devil, 251.
But, despite their similarities, there are important differences between the two. While Lezley endorsed legislative approaches to police and state-sanctioned violence, she also grew frustrated by the judicial process. And she articulated her frustration in an aggressive discursive style. For example, after the non-indictment of Darren Wilson, her attorney, Benjamin Crump, told the crowd: “While we understand that many others share our pain, we ask that you channel your frustrations in ways that will make a positive change. Let’s not just make noise, let’s make a difference.”\textsuperscript{522} Lezley was not trying to hear it. “It was all more bullshit to me. I wanted action!” she protested.\textsuperscript{523} She was growing exhausted from the series of judicial losses and was determined to let the world know how she felt. Lezley used similar language when she got to Canfield Drive after hearing that her son had been killed by the police. “Y’all muthafuckas gonna have to answer to this,” she told one Ferguson cop as she pushed through the growing crowd.\textsuperscript{524}

I see these kinds of speech acts as more than cathartic releases. In my view, the tone of protest speech can be as significant as the substance of the protest itself. Malcolm X comes to mind. In April 1962, after the Los Angeles police fatally shot Ronald Stokes, a member of the Nation of Islam, the

\textsuperscript{522} Ibid., 221.
\textsuperscript{523} Ibid., 222.
\textsuperscript{524} Ibid., 14.
minister flew to L.A. to preside over his funeral. More than two thousand people attended. Toward the end of the eulogy, Malcolm demanded the crowd to “stop sweet talking” white oppressors. He wanted black people to tell them “what kind of hell you've been catching and let him know that if he's not ready to clean his house up, he shouldn't have a house. It should catch on fire and burn down.”

This kind of vocabulary of black militancy began to spread like wildfire as formal channels of redress failed to bring about any semblance of justice. Remember Mike Brown’s stepfather calling residents to “burn this bitch down” after Wilson’s non-indictment and enraged protestors setting private property on fire, including the QuikTrip that became an occupation. Many BLM activists were starting to doubt that “we will win” by appealing to the courts, as the Dream Defenders chanted a year prior at the Florida state house. New protest chants captured this mixture of militant rhetoric and liberal reform. “Indict, convict, send that killer cop to jail, the whole damn system is guilty as hell!” Protestors were still calling for Wilson’s arrest. But they were now indicting the entire system.

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526 Malcolm X: Make it Plain, directed by Orlando Bagwell (1994; USA: PBS).
527 Ibid.
528 Ibid., 221.
Lezley embodied this complex set of politics that employed militant rhetoric in order to articulate an increasingly radical analysis while still calling for procedural justice. In many ways, Lezley shared Sybrina’s political analysis and theory of change, but not her rhetorical style. The difference matters because it not only demonstrates the diversity of the Mothers of the Movement, as Collins emphasizes. But it also reveals the broader complexity of African American politics. Whereas Obama and Bree Newsome used similar rhetoric toward distinct political ends, Lezley and Sybrina use distinct rhetorical styles toward certain shared political goals. In this sense, Collins’ conception of black feminism can perhaps be applied to black politics more generally: a “shifting mosaic of competing ideas and interests.”

As more mothers joined Lezley’s Rainbow, and as Black Lives Matter and the 2016 presidential election began to converge and collide, the more complicated the picture became.

Nothing to Lose

On November 22, 2014 two little boys knocked on Samaria Rice’s door. “The police just shot your son twice in the stomach,” she remembered them telling her. Tamir and his

529 Collins, Black Feminist Thought, ix.
sister, Tajai, were at the park playing a block away from her house. Samaria immediately ran down the concrete pathway toward the playground. Tamir’s body was sprawled on the grass. Tajai was sitting in the backseat of a cop car. Police were everywhere. One officer threatened to arrest her if she did not stay calm. Samaria was then forced to choose between riding in the police car with her daughter or in the ambulance with her wounded son. “I choose to leave with my 12 years old riding as a passenger in the front seat, when it was about five or six people in the back with my son and I don’t know what they were doing,” she said. “I had to leave two children at the scene of a crime, a 14-year-old screaming in the back of the car, and my 16-year-old surrounded with eight police officers.”531 At the hospital, Samaria held Tamir’s hand as he underwent surgery, which she was told not to do “because his body was evidence.”532

The next day her baby was gone.

Samaria Rice recalls the day in bitter fragments. She remembers the turkey sandwiches and fruit cups she fed Tamir and his sister before they went to the park. Other details are

fuzzy, but the video footage of the police killing is clear. Officer-in-training Timothy Loehmann shot and killed Tamir within 0.792 seconds of opening his car door. Loehmann and his partner, officer Frank Garmback, were responding to a police dispatch about a “black male carrying a pistol.” The suspect was 12-year-old Tamir playing in the snow with a toy gun.

Three months earlier Wilson gunned down Michael Brown in Ferguson; Black Lives Matter had fully arrived on the national scene; Obama was two years into his second term; and Hillary Clinton was gearing up for her campaign to become the first woman president of the United States. Samaria did not join the movement in the wake of Mike’s killing. “I was just living a normal life, trying to take care of my kids,” she said in an ABC interview.⁵³３ Like many black mothers, “normal” meant that Samaria had to deal with the pressures of raising black children in a racist society while struggling to keep food on the table and make ends meet. “Being a Black mother in America is stressful. I'm nervous and scared all the time.”⁵³⁴ While Tamir’s death was part of a wave of police killings that swept the nation, Samaria was left to work through the intimate loss of her youngest child. “He was definitely a mama’s boy. He loved

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⁵³⁴ Ibid.
sports, video games, cartoons, and big stuffed animals. He loved to crack jokes and prank,” Rice chuckled.535 “He was my big, gentle giant.”536

Like Sybrina and Lezley, Samaria launched a non-profit organization in the wake of her son’s tragic death. “The Tamir Rice Foundation for inner-city youth was conceived because I want to give back to the community,” Rice told Essence.537 The foundation, also known as the Tamir Rice Afro-Centric Cultural Center, focuses on educating youth through the arts, civic engagement, and know-your-rights campaigns.538 “We’re going to offer Pan-African courses and we’re going to teach these babies the truth,” Samaria explained. “We have to start young, so they know they need to love on each other and care for each other.”539 Samaria’s passion for political education stems from her son’s death and her personal experience as a student. “America told me a lie, a big white lie, and I won’t be telling no child a lie. They really had me thinking Christopher Columbus discovered America and I believed it because that’s what they taught me.”540

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536 Ibid.
537 Ibid.
538 Ibid.
539 Ibid.
540 Ibid.
Furthermore, similar to Lezley's organization, the Tamir Rice Foundation “seeks to advocate for police reform by advocating to change laws and implement new policies for the system with community oversight for police accountability and community reform dialogue.” Samaria’s response to her son’s death involved, among other things, lobbying for police reforms such as civilian complaint review boards, independent investigations of police killings, and efforts to build trust between law enforcement and communities of color. She fought tirelessly for Tamir’s case to be tried in court and for the two officers that responded to Tamir's 911 call to be fired.

And yet, like Lezley, Samaria often articulated demands for procedural justice through a militant discursive style. "Her realness is the first thing that stuck out to me," Kadeem Fuller, a student from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, said after traveling 130 miles to hear Samaria’s story. "She says what she wants to say, and there's no filter. It's her unapologetically." Fuller was referring to a speech

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Samaria gave at Indiana University where she told that crowd: "My job is to make them uncomfortable. I don't sugar-coat anything." Samaria’s speeches are passionate and fiery. You can sense the mixture of desperation and determination in her voice. “See, at this point, I have nothing to lose,” she explained. “White supremacy is here, but guess what? I’m going to make them uncomfortable every chance I get.”

In certain ways, Samaria’s activism resembles Sybrina’s and Lezley’s advocacy efforts. Each established foundations in honor of their slain sons; each fought for legislative changes to address systems of harm; and each shared their stories to raise awareness around issues impacting vulnerable communities. But the Tamir Rice Foundation has a somewhat different political analysis and theory of change. While mentorship and educational scholarships are provided, political education, civic engagement, and leadership development form the basis of the organization’s mission. Noticeably absent are resources to support bereaved mothers or language of “senseless gun violence.” The foundation is primarily a vehicle for grassroots organizing that trains young people on how to protect themselves from police and become activists in their local community. “We have to start young, so they know they need to love on each

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544 Savali, “Exclusive Interview: Samaria Rice Shares Memories of Tamir.”
545 Ibid.
other and care for each other,” Samaria insisted. Assata Shakur’s interpersonal demand that could be heard around Mike Brown’s memorial and throughout BLM protests was now shaping the politics of a mother of the movement. As Samaria declared, “at this point, I have nothing to lose.” Another mother, however, had plenty to lose. And she would seek the support of activist-mothers like Samaria, Lezley, and Sybrina in order to help her win the highest office in the nation.

I’m With Her

The Sweet Maple Cafe is known for its biscuits and grilled cheese sandwiches. But this evening the savor of fried okra and pork chops smothered in gravy permeated the cozy Chicago restaurant. Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton invited Sybrina, Lezley, Samara, Gwen Carr, Geneva Reed-Veal, and several other black women whose children were killed by police or gun violence to a private dinner. As servers prepared the table for dessert, the former First Lady took out a pen and pad and asked each mother to share their story. Lucy McBath recalls Clinton looking “visibly hurt” as she jotted down notes. The private meeting, which lasted nearly three hours,

546 Ibid.
547 Ibid.
549 Ibid.
was the germination of a unique public campaign that would reverberate across the country. “You are the mothers of the children who are dying in the streets,” Clinton told the group. “You have a lot of power individually. But collectively, you need to come together. The country needs to hear from you.”

The Chicago meeting was not the first time the Clinton campaign contacted the mothers. Geneva Reed-Veal and Clinton met at a Congressional Black Caucus convening months before she announced her presidential run. “She walked up, held my hand, and said, ‘What is it that you want?’” the mother of Sandra Bland recalled. That Christmas Clinton sent Geneva a personal note. “I know this is the first holiday without your baby,” it read. “Just know, I’m thinking of you.” The card was simply signed: “Hillary.” In the next few months, the campaign invited Geneva to a democratic debate and, after a grand jury decided not to indict anyone for her daughter’s death, Clinton sent another correspondence. “That kind of personal touch inspired Ms. Reed-Veal to join Mrs. Clinton’s campaign,” Amy Chozick of the *NY Times* wrote.

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550 Ibid.
552 Chozick, “Mothers of Black Victims Emerge as a Force for Hillary Clinton.”
553 Ibid.
554 Ibid.
555 Ibid.
Maria Hamilton, as well. Hamilton’s son, Dontre, was shot 14 times by white Milwaukee police officer Christopher Manney.\footnote{Ibid.} When the two met, Hamilton explained,” She didn't present herself as someone running for president. She spoke to us as a mother herself. She asked us what our children were like. She let me cry on her shoulder.”\footnote{Maria Hamilton, “Hillary Clinton will never stop fighting for justice,” Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, March 31, 2016, 11:00 p.m. CT, https://www.jsonline.com/story/opinion/crossroads/2016/04/01/maria-hamilton-hillary-clinton-will-never-stop-fighting-for-justice/84946768/} Clinton’s personal touch began to have a profound public impact. Months after the Chicago dinner, several mothers campaigned across the country, making appearances in churches, hair salons, and major television networks.

A month after the DNC, Sybrina, Lezley, Gwen Carr, and Wanda Johnson appeared on the red carpet at the Video Music Awards at Beyoncé’s invitation. For some, the presence of the mothers alongside the superstar singer was the highlight of the show. “Record-breaking and iconic though her entire night was,” Emma Dibdin of Elle magazine wrote, “the most important thing [Beyoncé] did happened before the show started.”\footnote{Emma Dibdin, “Beyoncé Brought The Mothers Of The Black Lives Matter Movement To The VMAs,” Elle online, August 29, 2016, https://www.elle.com/culture/celebrities/news/a38823/beyonce-black-lives-matter-mothers-of-the-movement-vmas.} Several journalists shared Dibdin’s opinion. One claimed that the
mothers made “a statement with their mere physical presence.” It was a moment shrouded in the symbolism of black suffering. With the movement gaining steam and the election around the corner, the red carpet became a staging ground for a complex set of politics in which race, gender, and motherhood were inseparable. In a way, Butler’s “politics of the street” made its way to the biggest event in Hollywood.

Beyoncé and MOM had already collaborated before the VMAs. In the visual accompaniment to her award-winning album Lemonade, Sybrina, Lezley, and Gwenn held portraits of their sons as the camera lingered before their faces. In certain ways, Beyoncé’s art spoke to a broader conversation around the intersections of race, gender, and police violence. The same video that featured the mothers depicts the singer smashing patriarchy with a baseball bat and a cop car sinking in the floodwaters of New Orleans. Taken together, the images are a visual critique of the spectacular violence of U.S. policing, the governmental neglect in response to Hurricane Katrina, and the agency of women - black women, in particular - in the face of sexist domination.

Beyoncé’s Lemonade caused a firestorm of controversy. Some feminist scholars, such as Brittney Cooper, celebrated the album.

and singer’s explicit engagement with questions of gender. “When I heard Beyoncé articulate friendships with black women as the core of what feminism was for her, it felt to me like she got the core essence of what this is all about,” Cooper wrote in an op-ed for *Cosmopolitan*.\(^{561}\) “I love being a woman and being a friend to other women, should be feminism’s tagline. If this isn’t true for you, you aren’t a feminist.”\(^{562}\) For Cooper, relationships among black women sit at the heart of the feminist project. “Her feminism of deeply connected relationships is one that escapes notice in our rush to make sure our feminism names every ism and every intersectional category in its articulation,” she explained. “It doesn’t matter if we get the rhetoric right...if we still keep treating other women wrong.”\(^{563}\)

Renowned feminist scholar and writer bell hooks had a different take. In “Moving Beyond Pain,” she critiqued Beyoncé’s brand of feminism for failing to take seriously patriarchal domination and other interlocking oppressions.\(^{564}\) For hooks, feminism is not “the social, political, and economic equality of

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\(^{562}\) Ibid.

\(^{563}\) Ibid.

women," as Beyoncé said in her 2013 song “Flawless.” Nor is it primarily about interpersonal relationships between women. Rather, as Collins argues, black feminism entails a thoroughgoing critique of patriarchy which, in hooks’ conception, is not reducible to gender. Hence her notion that “feminism is for everybody.” hooks rejects forms of feminism that conflate gender representation and social transformation. "In the world of fantasy feminism, there are no class, sex, and race hierarchies...no call to challenge and change systems of domination, no emphasis on intersectionality."

In an interview with the Nation about her book *Vexy Thing: On Gender and Liberation*, Imani Perry talked about the importance of tracking the material conditions that shape, and are shaped by, institutional practices of sexism.

I wanted to produce a work of feminist theory, or as I call it, liberation feminism, that would speak to the particular conditions of neoliberal capitalism and the hypermedia age—this eruption of digital media, where things that look like democratic spaces are at the same time corporate platforms. I saw so many uses of the term “patriarchy” that didn’t actually apprehend the structure of domination. Patriarchy is a project that coincided with the transatlantic slave trade and the age of conquest. It’s not just attitudes. It’s legal relations between human beings, which lead to very different encounters with violence and suffering...Feminism is ultimately a way of reading the

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565 Ibid.
568 bell hooks, “Moving Beyond Pain.”
world with an eye towards reducing or eliminating unjust forms of domination, violence, and exploitation.\textsuperscript{569}

Perry distinguishes liberation feminism from corporate feminism. For her, the latter is often a veneer that camouflages structures of domination beneath the imagery of gender equality. Feminism as liberation, rather, grasps the ways patriarchy can flourish within calls to equalize access to corporate power. Here, Perry conceptualizes feminism as, in part, a way of reading the social practices that shape society, including the law, militarism, private property, and global political economy, among other things. It is not that friendships among women are not important, but that interpersonal relationships are not substitutes for just social arrangements. Take, for example, Beyoncé’s clothing company, Ivy Park, which she created “to push a feel-good, woman-power ethos.”\textsuperscript{570} As the superstar singer, who is worth an estimated $600 million, promoted the message of gender equality, her company paid the Sri Lankan women garment workers who made the clothes 64 cents per hour.\textsuperscript{571}

\textsuperscript{569} Nawal Arjini, “Imani Perry’s Liberation Feminism,” The Nation online, May 29, 2019, \url{https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/imani-perry-liberation-feminism-beyonce-lorraine-hansberry/}.

\textsuperscript{570} Tamar Gottesman, “Exclusive: Beyoncé on running the world, being perfect and why she’s raising Blue Ivy to be a feminist,” Elle online, April 4, 2016, \url{https://www.ellecanada.com/culture/celebrity/exclusive-beyonce-on-running-the-world-being-perfect-and-why-she-s-raising-blue-ivy-to-be-a-feminist}.

To be sure, conversations around Beyoncé’s artistic production spoke to broader questions about the meaning of feminism and the intersecting politics of race, gender, and motherhood. Hillary Clinton’s campaign capitalized on the cultural power of this latest surge of feminist discourse. The campaign slogan, *I’m With Her*, spoke to this dynamic.

In her book, *What Happened*, Clinton reflects on her campaign to become the first woman president of the United States. Like Sybrina and Lezley, she connects her personal story to her political work. “My life looked like the lives of all the girls I knew,” she wrote. Clinton grew up in a suburb outside of Chicago where she attended high achieving public schools. Her dad ran a small business while her mom stayed home to watch her and her two brothers. She was a girl scout who liked to hang out with her friends at the movies and skating rinks. “It’s a story that many would consider perfectly normal.”

Clinton acknowledges that her background is different from some other politicians who navigated economic hardship, such as her husband Bill Clinton, and racial prejudice, such as Barack Obama. What makes her life experiences unique, in her view, is

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573 Ibid., 112.
574 Ibid.
575 Ibid., 111-112.
that she is a woman in a predominantly man’s world of politics. “There is another story of my life; one that I believe is as inspiring as any other. It’s the story of a revolution.” Here, Clinton is referring to the fact that she came of age during the 1960s women’s movement. In her memoir, she describes how that time of dramatic social change politicized her, especially around issues of gender inequality. She was the first of many historic feats, including the first woman partner at the oldest law firm in Arkansas; the first First Lady elected to public office; the first woman Senator from the state of New York; and the first woman to be nominated for President of the United States by a major political party. According to Clinton, her struggles and successes navigating a male-dominated political culture demonstrates that she wasn’t only “a participant in this revolution.” She “helped lead it.”

I find Clinton’s story striking for several reasons. First, similar to Obama’s eulogy, black struggle in the face of racial domination is presented as evidence of America’s greatness. She opens the book with a quotation by Harriet Tubman: “If you are tired, keep going. If you are scared, keep going. If you are hungry, keep going. If you want to taste freedom, keep going.”

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576 Ibid., 112.
577 Ibid., 113.
578 Ibid.
579 Ibid., Epigraph.
Here, Clinton seeks to graft Tubman into a narrative of national progress and her own journey into the long tradition of the black freedom struggle. “Despite everything she faced, she never lost faith in a simple but powerful motto: Keep going,” she writes, before asserting that “that’s what we have to do now.”\textsuperscript{580} The former first lady went on to praise the government’s decision to put Tubman’s face on the $20 bill. “If you need proof that America can still get it right, there it is.”\textsuperscript{581} In Clinton’s hands, Tubman’s perilous efforts to free the enslaved confirms, rather than contradicts, the idea that the United States is an exceptional country always in the process of perfecting itself. Here, the ultimate expression of progress is the government’s decision to place Tubman’s face on the currency once used to purchase the people she sought to liberate. For Clinton, this is what it means to “get it right.”\textsuperscript{582}

It is an odd claim, especially in light of the crises facing African Americans and black women in particular. Nationally, black women have a net worth of $200.\textsuperscript{583} In 2015, 9.3% of African American women were unemployed, compared to 3.8%

\textsuperscript{580} Ibid., Author’s Note.  
\textsuperscript{581} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{582} Ibid.  

258
of white women. In 2014, the black infant mortality rate was 11 percent. And, currently, black girls are more than three times as likely to be imprisoned as their white counterparts.

Despite her rhetoric of women’s empowerment and racial justice, Clinton’s policy stances failed to speak to the ongoing severity of the racial wound, including how it systemically harms African American women and their families. She initially did not support a $15 minimum wage, although it could significantly improve black women’s income and reduce economic inequality within communities of color. She did not oppose the racist death penalty and did not support the total legalization of marijuana, which would mitigate the war on drugs. And, Clinton supported her husband’s 1994 crime bill, which accelerated mass incarceration, devastating black communities.

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To be sure, not all black women supported Clinton. “I’m sure for a certain class of women [she] is perfect,” Anoa Changa, a black journalist and single mother, told the Guardian.590 “But there are a lot of issues that affect low-income women, immigrant women and women of color that her brand of doing things is not going to address.”591 Changa was not moved by liberal identity politics around gender or race. “I get to look at someone who looks like me,” she said about Obama’s election, “but what does that mean when my life chances aren’t directly affected?”592 Changa’s comment reflected the sentiments of many activists within Black Lives Matter who took issue with Clinton’s track record. In February 2016, less than a year after Dylann Roof’s heinous attack on Mother Emanuel, a young black woman disrupted a private fundraising event in Charleston, South Carolina. As Clinton discussed the need for body cameras and criminal justice reform in the wake of the Charleston Massacre and Walter Scott’s police killing, Ashley Williams lifted a banner that read: “We have to bring them to heel,” mocking a speech the presidential hopeful gave in support of the 1994 crime bill, where she called black youth “super predators.”593

591 Ibid.
592 Ibid.
593 Tyler Tanes, “Black Lives Matter Activists Interrupt Hillary Clinton At Private Event In South Carolina,” HuffPost online, February 24, 2016,
Protests were rampant along the campaign trail. Many BLM protesters were disillusioned, not only with Obama but also Clinton and the entire Democratic Party. Black millennial activists began to question the legitimacy of the democratic process. Keeping Donald Trump out of office was simply not enough. “What am I supposed to do if I don’t like him and I don’t trust her?” a young black woman from Ohio asked.  

“Choose between being stabbed and being shot? No way!”

Still, there was no consensus within the movement. Several activists that gained popularity during the Ferguson protests endorsed Clinton for president. DeRay McKesson, who had recently run for mayor of Baltimore and lost, supported the former First Lady, citing her growth around issues of race and criminal justice reform. Others, such as Brittany Packnett, were on the fence. “We’re in the midst of a movement with a real sense of urgency,” she told the NY Times. “The conversation that younger black voters are having is no longer one about settling on a candidate who is better than the alternative.”

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595 Ibid.
596 Ibid.
597 Ibid.
598 Clinton, What Happened, 143.
Throughout the campaign, Clinton struggled to address the specificity of race while articulating a universal message that appealed to a broad swath of Americans. Similar to Obama and, in certain ways, Sybrina and Lezley, she grafted incidents of police and racial violence into the category of gun violence. For Clinton, police brutality, mass shootings, rare killings of police, and community-based homicides essentially boil down to the issue of gun control. Throughout her memoir, she cites gang shootings in Chicago alongside mass shootings such as Columbine High School, as well as the killings of Trayvon Martin and Philando Castile with the shooting deaths of two police officers in Dallas, Texas. “The politics of guns have been toxic for a long time,” she writes.599 “This violence - against police, young black men and women, against anyone - must stop.”600

Clinton’s comparison of police violence and violence against police is particularly problematic and not based on evidence. “Every time a police officer falls in the line of duty - something that happens with sickening frequency - it’s a reminder of how much we owe them and their families,” she writes.601 But police fatalities are rare. In Our Enemies in Blue: Police and Power in America Kristian Williams writes.

A study covering the years 2003-2005 found that 380 police died on duty during that time. Only 159 of these deaths

599 Ibid., 180.
600 Ibid., 185.
601 Ibid., 176.
were homicides and 221 were the results of accidents. During the same period, 1,095 people were killed by police...in the process of arrest. That averages 365 each year, or one a day...The police kill almost seven times as often as they are killed. That fact is the police produce far more casualties than they suffer.⁶⁰²

According to these numbers, it is incredibly more dangerous being policed while black than policing black people. And, as the study shows, a police officer is much more likely to be killed in a car accident than a shootout.

By conflating various forms of violence - police, racial, community-based, and mass shootings - Clinton aimed to universalize the grief of black Americans. “It’s a mistake to think that gun violence is just a problem for black people or poor people or only in cities,” she explains.⁶⁰³ “Gun violence touches every class, color, and community.”⁶⁰⁴ This is Obama’s formulation in his eulogy of Rev. Pinkney, when he compared the Charleston Massacre to Sandy Hook in order to speak to “entire communities whose grief overflows every time they have to watch what happened to them happen to some other place.” Clinton and Obama both downplayed the particularity of black suffering in the name of national unity. “And it’s because of the Sandy Hook parents, the Mothers of the Movement...and so many other incredibly brave survivors and family members that I know in my

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⁶⁰³ Clinton, What Happened, 178.
⁶⁰⁴ Ibid.
heart that we will stem the tide and save lives,” she wrote.605 

By couching MOM between the family members of slain police officers and the victims of mass shootings, Clinton aimed to graft the wound of racial violence into a story of American progress.

The Whole Damn System

Meanwhile, Samaria’s public expressions of grief were bursting at the seams of mainstream political discourse. It was not only young black activists such as Changa and Williams who were growing weary of being captured by the Democratic Party. In her op ed, “Why I Have Not Endorsed Any Candidate,” Samaria expressed solidarity with the mothers who endorsed Clinton, and then she spelled out her own political stance.606 “I have watched as my fellow mothers that have lost children have chosen a candidate to invest their faith in, and I support them in their pursuits of justice for their children, and the people want to know where I stand.”607 The essay exposes the fissures within MOM, as well as the presence of a radical politics of grief.

As one of the Mothers of the Movement, I know the death of Tamir has shown many just how important police accountability is. I also know it must be a piece of a larger plan to address the deep corruptions that exist in America. The people should be the ones determining what accountability looks like, not prosecutors who work closely

605 Clinton, What Happened, 191.
607 Ibid.
with police to deny the people justice. County prosecutors, whose job requires them to believe the police the majority of the time, should not be the same people prosecuting them. Police officers may often lie about fearing for their life...True community oversight of the police is one that evens the balance of power and allows the communities police serve to judge how well they are doing their job. My experience has let me know that the system is working just the way the people in power want it to. That is why I refuse to accept plans or support politicians that offer what they propose as solutions, not informed by us, the community. It’s why I won’t accept plans for more “community police” as positive solutions when it was the police that killed my son. I cannot settle for partial solutions and lip service. I know we need real action, and I refuse to endorse any candidate that offers less. 608

The essay is a scathing critique of the failures of the Democratic Party, the limits of electoral politics, and the contest over the meaning of Tamir’s tragic death. For Samaria, something more dramatic than police accountability and community policing is required to combat the “deep corruptions that exist in America.” She does not argue that all reform is useless, but that legislative efforts to improve the criminal justice system, however important, are insufficient responses to patterns of police violence and institutionalized racism. “I have been shown several plans for criminal justice reform, none that address my experience of the entire system being guilty,” she protests. “These plans do not get rid of the trauma of knowing that my tax dollars help pay the salaries of the police officers that killed

608 Ibid.
my son." Here, Samaria departs from the political analyses of Clinton, Sybrina, and Lezley. She argues that the problem with policing is not necessarily a lack of accountability; or distrust between cops and communities of color; or racist prosecutors. For Samaria, policing is a question of power.

Additionally, Samaria’s emphasis on choosing to support a presidential candidate who could have provided “real action” was an implicit critique of the Clinton campaign’s emphasis on gender and racial representational politics. Samaria had experienced the limitations of narrowly conceived identity politics during a previous presidential race. She told Essence in an exclusive interview, “Still, I have no respect for Barack or Michelle Obama,” she began. “All those Black babies that died under [Obama’s] watch? No. And Michelle mentioned Tamir in Becoming and has never reached out to me. I don’t care about him being the first Black President, I don’t. My son’s case is still at the DOJ and it’s going on 5 years – and now we won’t see any movement with Trump in office.” President Obama’s race did not save Tamir’s life, the DOJ did not act on the boy’s death. Hillary Clinton’s criminal justice reform policies that touted the DOJ and community policing – just as President Obama did –

609 Ibid.
610 Savali, “Exclusive Interview: Samaria Rice Shares Memories of Tamir.”
were not enough to win Samaria over, even with the added bonus of electing the first woman president.

I interpret Samaria’s political analysis and theory of change as, in effect, a rejection of liberal reformism and corporate feminism. While she supports the Mothers of the Movement who endorsed Clinton, and identifies with their pain of losing a child, she took on a distinct set of politics that transcends her decision to not support any presidential candidate. She dovetailed her critique of electoral politics and establishment politicians with a call for participatory democracy. “The people should be the ones determining what accountability looks like,” she argued, “not prosecutors who work closely with police to deny the people justice.”

For Samaria, part of what is needed is to level “the balance of power” between law enforcement and communities of color.

To be clear, Samaria does not dismiss the importance of police accountability or electoral politics altogether. She continued to fight for a conviction and has launched voter registration campaigns. “I’ve been speaking out for true action, with changes that would help prevent another tragedy like Tamir’s murder,” she explained, “changes that truly hold these police accountable and give people power in the communities we

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611 Rice, “Why I Have Not Endorsed Any Candidate.”
612 Ibid.
live in.”\(^{613}\) For Samaria, institutional change and grassroots activism go hand-in-hand. Hence her call for people to “vote to make America better for all Americans, all races, colors, religions” alongside her assurance that she is “not thinking about the government” but is rather “here for the people.”\(^{614}\) I read these two statements less as a contradiction and more as a complex political orientation that seeks a multitude of means for social change. It is a profoundly makeshift style of politics that stands alongside a deep sense of personal grief.

A Bigger Story

The activism of Sybrina, Lezley, and Samaria shatters the stories that the Mothers of the Movement are a monolith of bereaved mothers or mere pawns of Hillary Clinton’s campaign. While each established foundations, fought for justice in the courts, and wrote about how their personal journeys influenced their political work, their activist efforts varied. In the wake of Trayvon’s tragic death, Sybrina primarily provided support for other bereaved mothers and lobbied for gun legislation. She did not deny that race played a role in her son’s killing but she emphasized a more universal message of national unity.

\(^{613}\) Ibid.

Lezley also established an organization in honor of her slain son and emphasized the need to reform gun laws and the broader criminal justice system. But, unlike Sybrina, Lezley did not shy away from race talk. She regularly expressed her anger toward the system and spoke powerfully about the particularity of black suffering. Rage spewed from Lezley’s lips as she confronted cops on Canfield Drive and as the courts denied her any semblance of justice in the wake of her son’s death.

While Samaria also established a foundation and, like Lezley, spoke unapologetically about the failures of the system, she took on a distinct set of politics. Unlike Sybrina and Lezley, she chose not to organize other bereaved mothers and, instead, focused on training young people to become community activists. In the aftermath of Tamir’s police killing, Samaria held little faith in the possibilities of procedural justice and criminal justice reform. To be sure, she did not completely reject electoral politics or formal channels of social change, but her political analysis cut deeper than the failures of the system. Her decision to not endorse Clinton represented this broader understanding of the deep crises within American politics and her particular theory of change, which emphasized the power of ordinary people over the promises of establishment politicians. Like Bree Newsome, the Ferguson activists who occupied the scorched QuikTrip, and groups like the Dream
Defenders, Samaria took on a makeshift style of politics that sought justice far beyond the courts and national elections. Her activism captured the growing sentiment within Black Lives Matter: “the whole damn system is guilty as hell!”
Conclusion:

The Mourning After

The race was closer than I could have ever imagined. Donald Trump, the popular real estate mogul and former host of the reality television show the Apprentice, who called Mexican immigrants “rapists” and bragged about grabbing women’s genitalia, had managed to become the Republican Party’s 2016 presidential nominee. Trump supporters swelled in numbers as he stoked the fears of the nation’s new silent majority, and as the Clinton campaign struggled to gain trust in black communities.

Still, most voter polls and mainstream media outlets predicted that Hillary Clinton would become the first woman president of the United States of America. I watched the election results from my hotel room in Cambridge, where I went to attend an event on student activism at Harvard. I tried my best to stay awake, but it was getting late and my eyelids were growing heavy. When I woke up the next morning, I saw a news reporter standing in front of a virtual map of the country splattered in red and blue. The headline read, “Breaking News: Donald Trump elected the 45th President of the United States.”

The following weeks felt like a national funeral. I listened to liberal pundits lamenting Trump’s election and the emergence of an army of Americans that is hellbent on making
America a decidedly white nation again. The country had seemingly reverted to its old, nasty ways overnight.

I was admittedly shocked. I knew I lived in a racist country. All I had to do was wear a hoodie in an affluent suburb and look at how the police looked at me. Or take the Northeast corridor train home to Newark and watch the complexion of the passengers darken as trees disappeared, and the houses turned small and janky. Or go see my nephew in prison and notice how nearly everyone in the visiting room was black or brown.

But this felt different. I didn’t grow up seeing Confederate flags on cars speeding down the New Jersey Turnpike. In high school, a white classmate called me a nigger, but my social environment was thoroughly black and the white people I knew didn’t seem to think of me as some kind of internal enemy of the state. I guess I was accustomed to a quieter, more insidious form of American racism. Explicit white supremacy seemed more like a hungry beast that I knew existed long before 2016, but it lived on the outskirts of my day-to-day reality.

After eight years of Obama, and six years of formally studying issues of race, I should have known better. Trump is not a deviation of “America’s racial progress,” as many claim. He is a manifestation of the lie that racial representation meant we had come so far as a nation. He is, in many ways, the evidence of things most Americans refused to see during Obama’s
tenure. Deepening class inequality. The severe racial dynamics of the 2008 housing crisis. Soaring black unemployment. The historic number of deportations and the hundreds of drone strikes on predominately Muslim countries years before Trump’s wall and travel ban. In a nutshell, the persistence of white supremacy amidst the pronouncement of racial progress.

The greatest tragedy of Trumpism is not so much its extravagant display of bigotry in the wake of Obama’s presidency. It is that the politics of liberalism, in its denial of the severity and ongoing reality of the founding wound, only exacerbated the moral infection that rots at the core of American democracy. To be clear, I am not suggesting that Obama and Trump are the same. I am saying that the endless eulogizing of black people did not begin and will not end with Trump.

But neither will the phantom pains. Black Lives Matter, in all of its shortcomings, continues to call on the nation to mourn the black lives lost at the hands of police, vigilantes, and the slow violence of systemic racism. In the wake of George Floyd’s tragic death, we witnessed the largest protests in American history. Activists, family members, local residents, and ordinary people across the country built a makeshift memorial in his honor that has become a space to collectively grieve and strategize protest activity. It is yet another marvelous display of Amazing Grief in the Shadow of Death.
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296


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