

Race and Visibility: How and Why Visual Images of Black Lives Matter

While there is some literature analyzing moving images and their effects relating to Black Lives Matter, there hasn't been an extensive analysis of the still images associated with this movement. This article analyzes one of the most widely circulated and remarked upon photographs from the Black Lives Matter movement in comparison to several other images associated with the movement so as to illuminate the image's rhetorical function and consequence as well as to theorize the role of images in contemporary discourses about race. Specifically, our analysis demonstrates how an image may serve to shift/change the narrative of an emerging movement and of the perception of African American citizens by making visible realities and experiences not otherwise readily seen or articulated.

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In just a few short years, the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement has contributed to the often-uncomfortable yet urgent conversation on racial inequality in the United States. In response to the acquittal of George Zimmerman, “the phrase ‘black lives matter’ was born in July of 2013 in a Facebook post by Alicia Garza” (Cobb, 2016, p. 2). Jurkowitz and Vogt (2013) cite the Pew Research Center as analyzing “nearly five million tweets about the case in the first 26 hours after the verdict” (p. 1). The movement itself did not begin to gain momentum, however, until 2014 after the killing of another African American teenager, Michael Brown. Through Twitter as well as images and videos, the emerging movement moved from the #hashtags to the streets.

Based on the production, composition, reproduction, circulation, and reception of images highlighting protesters and victims of police brutality, BLM’s social media and protest efforts have been likened to the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. Indeed, both efforts have relied upon and been influenced by the circulation and reception of images, including

images of police officers enacting physical force on the bodies of Black citizens to make visible racial injustice(s) and to transform citizens into activists. Journalist David Halberstam (1983) described the rhetorically significant use of visual media by Dr. King in the 1950s and ‘60s Civil Rights movement by noting, “in effect he took the terrible beast of segregation, which had always been there just beneath the surface, and made it visible” (p. 311). While journalism has changed dramatically in the digital age and the BLM movement has been criticized for a lack of organization, clear leadership and/or specific goals—leading to efforts from self-identified conservative political groups to ascribe racism to the movement itself—the images that define and are central to the collective memory and public identity of BLM share significant similarities and uptake to/with the images from the 1960s. As Gallagher and Zagacki (2007) noted in their examination of visibility, rhetoric, and race in earlier civil rights photography:

photography sometimes presents us with subjects to which we may not wish to attend; in a way photographs may function to force

us to look at subjects we have otherwise chosen to ignore, making us think about them and, even, imagine ourselves in their situation. (p. 116)

In fact, the advent of digital media and mobile technologies have distributed and, some would argue, democratized many functions and features of institutional, creative, and social life, impacting how social and political movements emerge, evolve, and function. In addition to the affordances of connectivity, mobile devices have alleviated temporal and spatial boundaries, broadening audience awareness of instances of racial inequality through social media platforms. The visibility made possible through the advent of these technologies has allowed individuals an opportunity to see more immediately into the lives of others and to witness seemingly “firsthand” their experiences. Visual media also affords the public the opportunity to create narratives about these moments as well as to join the public discourse on the matters at hand through social media platforms.

For this article, we chose to compare three images that gained attention from the BLM movement in an effort to assess their rhetorical functions and consequences. Additionally, we compared these images as a means to theorize the role of photographs in contemporary discourses about race. While there is some literature analyzing moving images and their effects in relation to the BLM movement, there has not been an extensive analysis of the associated still images. Specifically, our analysis demonstrates how an image may serve to shift/change the narrative of an emerging movement and of the perception of African American citizens by making visible realities and experiences not otherwise readily seen or articulated.

At a time when both the study and praxis of social movements is rapidly shifting in tandem with the affordances and quandaries of digital media, it is particularly important to understand how visual images function as well as the consequence of their logic, uptake, and distribution. Combining concepts and insights from scholars, including Hariman and Lucaites (2002, 2003, 2007, 2016), Finnegan (2010), Vanderford (1989), and Gallagher and Zagacki (2005, 2007), we develop a framework to engage in comparative analysis across images. We thereby demonstrate a method for assessing social movements from a visual rhetoric perspective, indicating a path for further research on social movements in a digital age. A key to this method is an examination of how and why certain images may come to be transformative in

the sense that they function rhetorically to shift the narrative of a movement from tactical to strategic, from syncretic¹ (centering whiteness² as dominant) to counterhegemonic (decentering whiteness as dominant).

The Rhetorical Consequences of Photographs: Iconicity, Circulation, and Visibility

Images are crucial for civic life, collective memory, engaged spectatorship, and the narrative framing of complex events (Hariman & Lucaites, 2016), but what makes a photograph rhetorically consequential? Is it determined by whether or not the photograph may be considered iconic? Is it the number of times the image circulates on various platforms? Does it have anything to do with the image being reproduced as a meme, on T-shirts, in cartoons or posters? Is it related to the photograph’s demonstrated ability to make something visible, to bring something previously hidden or ignored before our eyes in a new way?

Hariman and Lucaites (2007) define iconic photographs as

those photographic images appearing in print, electronic, or digital media that are widely recognized and remembered, are understood to be representations of historically significant events, activate strong emotional identification or response, and are reproduced across a range of media, genres, or topics. (p. 27)

Additionally, they posit that “iconic photographs provide an accessible and centrally positioned set of images for exploring how political action (and inaction) can be constituted and controlled through visual media” (p. 5). Aesthetic familiarity, civic performance, semiotic transcriptions, emotional scenarios, and contradictions and crises are identified as five characteristics for closely examining the rhetorical function and potential iconicity of photographs (Hariman & Lucaites, 2007).

In theorizing visual rhetoric, Finnegan (2010) provides five approaches to critically analyzing and evaluating images, particularly photographs. For Finnegan, photography is a form of public address, and the production, composition, reproduction, circulation, and reception of images serve as a framework “for answering particular questions about the roles images play in public culture” (p. 252). Finnegan’s work is particularly useful here because of her emphasis on circulation that “asks the critic to study how the image moves in and through various contexts of public culture” (p. 252).

While these approaches to examining the rhetorical function and impact of photographs and images provide a basis for our analysis, the BLM photographs are both particularly complicated and attention worthy because of their subject matter in relation to race and civic life. Vanderford's (1989) analysis of vilification in social movements is thus useful to illuminating the rhetorical logics of the images analyzed here. Vanderford argues for the possibility of social movements needing to "vilify opponents in order to encourage, shape, and sustain activism" (p. 179). Additionally, Gallagher and Zagacki (2007) explicitly address issues of race in their evaluation of the images in *Life Magazine* depicting the Selma marches of 1965. In their analysis of the 1965 *Life* photographs from the Selma marches, they argue that the images were successful in transforming people's hearts and minds about race because they functioned rhetorically to "evoke common humanity by capturing moments of embodiment and enactment that challenge the established images of blacks, evoke common humanity by creating recognition of others, and challenge taken for granted ideas of democracy" (p. 113). In an earlier essay analyzing Norman Rockwell's civil rights paintings, Gallagher and Zagacki (2005) identify three ways that visual images dealing with race may function rhetorically to create common humanity: (1) disregarding established caricatures, (2) creating recognition of others, and (3) depicting material aspects of American society by showing/reminding viewers that abstract political concepts are always relative to the groups whose lives are most directly influenced by their presence or absence. Gallagher and Zagacki's rhetorical visibility framework is thus particularly useful because of its focus on assessing images that are racially inscribed. In our analysis, we demonstrate how combining the insights and conceptualizations offered by these scholars help develop a social movement. Moreover, they enable us to illuminate and assess photographic images and to address the large question of the role of visual rhetoric in social movements.

Images are vital in understanding governmental actions, they have the potential to legitimize/delegitimize people, and they assist in our understanding of both current and historical events (Corrigan-Brown, 2012). Neumayer and Rossi (2018) note that images are important to social movements because they render "protest events and particular perspectives on political contestation visible or invisible" (p. 4295). In the case of the BLM movement specifically, images are important because they help others "see" in a collective way. According to Mirzoeff et al. (2017),

"seeing is a point of intersection between what we know, what we perceive, and what we feel; it is a collective way to look, visualize, and imagine" (p. 85). By circulating on social media, these images create a space for Black lives to appear.

Image Selection and Rationale

Using Hariman and Lucaites's definition of iconic photographs, we selected three images for this analysis. In deciding on the three images, we chose one image that was deemed iconic by media outlets, one image that had been widely circulated, and one image that had been reproduced in another genre. The image labeled as iconic by the media became the focus of this analysis in an effort to compare its rhetorical function and iconicity with the other images chosen according to their aesthetic familiarity, civic performance, semiotic transcriptions, emotional scenarios, and contradictions and crises (Mirzoeff et al., 2017).

Rhetorical History of an Image: Production, Composition, and Circulation

On July 5, 2016, Alton Sterling was shot and killed by police officers outside of a Baton Rouge, Louisiana, convenience store. Sterling had been selling CDs in front of the convenience store when police responded to a call that a man outside the store had a gun and was using it to harass someone. In the altercation that followed, Sterling was stunned with a Taser gun and then further restrained on the ground, where he was shot several times at close range by the officers. The shooting was recorded by multiple bystanders. As news of the killing spread, mourners and protestors gathered throughout the city. News coverage of the incident and its aftermath was significant in terms of circulation and uptake.

The day following Alton Sterling's death, people witnessed "live" footage of another Black man being fatally shot by a police officer via Facebook. The events leading up to the death of Philando Castile were recorded by his girlfriend as they happened. Castile had been driving home from a grocery store, accompanied by his girlfriend and her young daughter, when he was pulled over by police. He informed the officer that he was carrying a gun for which he had a permit. A misunderstanding developed between the two men, which ended with Castile being shot at close range and killed. The shootings of Sterling and Castile became linked in media coverage because they happened mere hours apart and were similar in nature: Both victims were Black men in their 30s, shot and killed by



Figure 1 *Peaceful Warrior*: Image of Ieshia Evans in Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

police officers at close range in view of multiple witnesses. These events sparked protests, riots, and calls for legal action and drew the attention of political candidates, including those running for president in the 2016 election.

Major news media outlets and social media users circulated the videos of the shootings/killings. Many individuals saw evidence of injustice in these images and were prompted to engage in the social media discussions and public protests that followed. Following the killing of Alton Sterling, Baton Rouge became the site of many protests and arrests. At a protest held on July 9, 2016, a photograph was taken of protestor Ieshia Evans. The image of Evans was instantly hailed as iconic by several media outlets, making it the primary image of our analysis.

Figure 1 shows Ms. Evans calmly standing straight with her feet planted and her arms outstretched. The full-length sundress she is wearing is apparently billowing in a breeze so that viewers can see her legs from the knee down. Her expression is somewhat devoid of emotion but appears calm and unruffled compared to the skirt of her dress and the male police officers, who are dressed in full riot gear and who appear to be rushing toward her at full speed. Behind the officers, a phalanx of other officers is pictured in a straight line with their weapons lowered, apparently witnessing an event that is about to commence.

The photograph was taken by Jonathan Bachman, a freelance photographer for Reuters who traveled to Baton Rouge to cover the protests. *Peaceful. Powerful. Beautiful. Poetic. Iconic.* These are all words that have been used to describe the photograph of Evans, and indeed, Bachman knew that in this image he had something special. Just days after the image was taken, it was reproduced and circulated by news outlets such as CNN and was featured in popular culture magazines including *Rolling Stone*. In one Facebook post shared by a BLM organizer, the image received approximately 30,000 likes. The image also circulated on other social media platforms, including Twitter and Instagram. For this analysis, we refer to this image as *Peaceful Warrior*.

Visual Rhetorical Context of an Image

Since the 2012 shooting of Trayvon Martin, there have been hundreds of photographs shared via social media. According to Mark Speltz, journalist for Time Magazine:

The astounding amount of imagery documenting today's marches and racial struggles is enabled, not surprisingly, by technology. The near ubiquity of cell phones ensures that no poignant moment, clever sign, or altercation goes unrecorded. This also speaks to the many vital roles photos continue to play—they can document,



Figure 2 *Then & Now: Civil Rights and Black Lives Matter.*

preserve, inspire, attest and provide evidence. (Speltz, 2016, para. 7)

Freelance photographers, photojournalists, and bystanders alike have taken to their cameras to highlight what they thought were significant moments from the movement. Ranging from slain bodies to the arrest of protestors, these images have created a visual history/archive of the BLM movement. To begin to unpack how and why the *Peaceful Warrior* image functions rhetorically, as compared to other images of the BLM Movement, we turn to an examination of two other images that form the larger, visual rhetoric context for the *Peaceful Warrior* image.

“Then & Now” and “Fighting Back”

The first image for comparison (Figure 2) presents a combination of two images strategically positioned beside one another. Taken 50 years apart, the image(s) depict a moment from the Civil Rights movement juxtaposed with a moment from the BLM movement. We refer to this image as *Then & Now*. Described by authors Freelon, McIlwain, and Clark (2016) in their research initiative *Beyond the Hashtags*, Figure 2 shows “two moments of confrontation between police and Black protestors side by side: one from the 1960s, the other from Ferguson, Missouri. This image appeared around August 13, 2014, and was the most shared image on Twitter. The implication is that not much has changed over the

time separating these two incidents, and some of the text surrounding this image stated as much directly” (Freelon et al., 2016, p. 31).

Originating on Twitter, Figure 2 had been retweeted 46,506 times as of 2016 (Freelon et al., 2016).

The second image for our analysis (Figure 3a) “went viral” but was also reproduced on T-shirts and in memes. Also originating on Twitter, this image, known as *Fighting Back*, depicts a protestor throwing a fiery tear gas container at police officers during the riots in Ferguson, Missouri. Robert Cohen, a photojournalist for the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, took Figure 3a. In this image, the protestor is seen wearing a T-shirt that displays the American flag.

According to Gary Jeanfaiver, writer for Fast Company, “the next day and for days after, the photograph was celebrated everywhere. The original image was eventually re-tweeted over 10,000 times, and versions of it spread to T-shirts, posters, paintings, and city walls” (Jeanfaivre, 2014, para. 6). Figure 3b shows a man wearing a T-shirt with the image of Crawford reprinted/reproduced on it. The caption under the image printed on the T-shirt reads: “The only weapon we have in our hands this evening is the weapons of protest. THAT’S ALL—Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.”



Figure 3a *Fighting Back*: Edward Crawford seen throwing tear gas back at Ferguson police officers.

Although both images depicted in Figure 2 and Figure 3a generated significant retweets, circulated on other social networking platforms in addition to Twitter, and—in the case of Figure 3a—became reproduced as T-shirt graphics, these images have not achieved the level of rhetorical consequence in relation to the BLM movement as the photograph of Ieshia Evans. One reason for this may have to do with whether or not a given image depicts a movement as a reactive and tactical movement rather than a movement that is strategic and potentially transformative. Both images depict protestors as violent and combative individuals reacting to threats of state sanctioned power and violence. Given the conflicting discourses surrounding the movement, these images provided support for those who seek to perpetuate caricatures of Black citizens such that bodies protesting unequal treatment are cast as violent, threatening, and anarchic Black bodies. To move beyond or to contradict such caricatures, images that could reframe the movement, that could transcend current, individual crises and make people look again and anew were necessary. By contrast then, the *Peaceful Warrior* image, which was also widely circulated, filled this gap by creating a shift in perspective. The image of Evans, as demonstrated in our following analysis, functioned rhetorically by offering a different image of activism for the movement. According to Mazin Sidahmed, a writer for The Guardian, the photograph represents “a symbol

of the civil unrest that has spread across the nation” (Sidahmed, 2016, para. 1).

Analysis

Hariman and Lucaites (2007) identified five vectors of influence that can illuminate the rhetorical power of iconic photographs and that are central to photojournalism. These vectors of influence are: reproducing ideology, communicating social knowledge, shaping collective memory, modeling citizenship, and providing figural resources for communicative action. They argue that

the influence that does occur comes from complex relationships between formal characteristics of the image, its circulation across a range of media, and varied appropriations by diverse actors, all within a rich inter-text of images, speeches, commentary, and other texts. (Hariman & Lucaites, 2007, p. 9)

Additionally, they provide an overview of the assumptions they draw up in assessing the rhetorical power of images: “The iconic photograph is an aesthetically familiar form of civic performance coordinating an array of semiotic transcriptions that project an emotional scenario to manage a basic contradiction or recurrent crisis” (p. 29). Aesthetic familiarity, civic performance, semiotic transcriptions,



Figure 3b BLM supporter wearing a t-shirt with a reproduction of image shown in Figure 3a.

emotional scenarios, and contradictions and crises are the five assumptions that we draw upon here in analyzing the *Peaceful Warrior* image. Following Hariman and Lucaites's method of analysis makes sense for this particular image because of their argument that iconic photographs influence public opinion and "provide an accessible and centrally positioned set of images for exploring how political action (and inaction) can be constituted and controlled through visual media" (p. 5). Examining the image using this framework provides evidence regarding how and to what extent this image functioned rhetorically to shift the narrative of the BLM movement in a way that would generate more involvement from citizens, including from other racial and ethnic group members in the emerging movement without decentering the experiences and knowledge of Black citizens.

An initial reading of this image might be as a vivid contrast. Evans is situated in the middle of the street as a force to be reckoned with. Her stance for justice and peace is seen through her apparently calm demeanor. With her sundress flowing in the wind, creating a goddess affect, Evans seemingly does not resist or run from arrest. As Evans boldly stands in the street facing

several officers who are heavily armed and apparently rushing toward her, it is evident that she is unafraid of what is to come. On the opposite side of the street, police officers wearing riot gear and standing in a military-style straight line seem ready to react to whatever is to come. Depending on how the image is cropped, viewers may only see two officers racing toward Evans or they may see the officers racing toward her with a phalanx of other officers positioned in a solid line in the background. The side view of Evans's face shows an apparent expression of resolve and calm determination. The difference in the attire of the individuals in the image, and the observable fact that the officers outnumber Evans, paints a picture of the officers being the antagonists, yet Evans's stance and the way in which her stance appears to halt the forward motion of the officers indicate that she also has agency and is not simply reacting but also acting. Gender becomes prominent in this image, as we see Evans as a woman of no extreme physical stature, yet strongly rooted to the ground facing male aggressors.

In an effort to assess the iconic status of *Peaceful Warrior* in comparison with the other images, we next analyze aesthetic familiarity, civic

performance, semiotic transcriptions, emotional scenarios, and contradictions and crises.

Aesthetic Familiarity

Hariman and Lucaites (2007) argue that “iconic photos must be structured by familiar patterns of artistic design,” suggesting that they “draw on generic conventions” and “similarly limited repertoires of design and response” (p. 29). The first convention that is seen in this image is a familiar one: police officers protecting and serving. Usually, you see police officers pictured arresting the “bad guys” or helping the “innocent.” In this image, Evans seems to be both. She is on the verge of being arrested, so there is an assumption that she is the “bad guy.” However, she is not shown in motion or resisting arrest, which would suggest that she is not the aggressor. The image, depending on how it is cropped, is in landscape mode, to scale, and with a balanced composition. The selected image for this analysis is cropped in a way that depicts many officers (the ones charging at her and the ones keeping watch in the background) on one side of the image, while she is the only subject pictured on the opposite or other side of the image.

The participants in the image seem to be gazing at each other and not at the viewer. This would indicate that they have something to offer the viewer, such as information, as opposed to demanding something from the viewer. This particular image is a medium shot. According to Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), this type of shot indicates a social distance between viewer and subjects of the photograph. Between Evans and the officers, the distance is shown as what would normally be considered a close personal one, but the participants in this image are clearly not involved in an intimate relationship. As Kress and van Leeuwen indicate,

close personal distance is the distance at which one can hold or grasp the other person and therefore also the distance between people who have an intimate relation with each other. Non-intimates cannot come this close and, if they do so, it will be experienced as an act of aggression. (p. 124)

In this image, you see the outstretched hands of the officers, apparently reaching for Evans. Their legs are also bent in a forward motion indicating that they are the ones moving toward her and not the other way around. Lastly, the eye-level angle of the photograph suggests equality between the viewer and the participants in or subjects of the photograph, thereby suggesting to viewers that they too could be in this situation.

By contrast, aesthetic familiarity is more likely to be misconstrued in the other, similar photograph, *Then & Now*. Because the image itself is a manufactured one made by splicing two images together, it is hard to know the original production and composition of this image. Hariman and Lucaites (2007) suggest that iconic photographs “do not feature the sharp contrasts, double images, or other techniques of avant-garde photographic art” (p. 29). Since the *Then & Now* image is a blend of two images, based on Hariman and Lucaites’s criteria, this image may be judged as lacking the aesthetic familiarity of other images. Additionally, the vantage point of both photos that are merged to form the *Then & Now* image is that of an oblique angle, which Kress and van Leeuwen claim leads to viewer detachment such that “what you see here is not part of our world; it is their world, something we are not involved with” (p. 143). The image is stretched, creating a blurred vision for some parts of the photograph. In the third image, *Fighting Back*, the image is shown in landscape mode and representational realism is achieved, but the horizontal angle and view of the subjects from the side leads to a reading of the image as being offered for our dispassionate reflection (Kress & van Leeuwen, p. 144). As a result, this image works well with the journalistic discourse that surrounded the riots of Ferguson by representing the events that took place and inviting the viewer to participate as an observer.

Civic Performance

The second assumption from Hariman and Lucaites (2007) is civic performance. They argue that the “iconic photograph doesn’t just draw on social knowledge enthymematically but refashions social forms to structure understanding, motivate action, and organize collective memory” (p. 33). Of the three images discussed in this article, *Peaceful Warrior* is the only image illustrating positive action (rather than reaction). Evans is literally taking a stand for something and apparently doing so regardless of the consequences. She is seen to be peacefully acting as opposed to the more aggressive action of Edward Crawford in the *Fighting Back* image. While the *Fighting Back* image shows action by throwing fiery tear gas back at police officers, the many reproductions of it (T-shirts with Dr. King’s nonviolent quotes under the image) seem to contradict the discourse surrounding the image, thus creating a conflicting definition of and motivation for and toward the action.

Additionally, the African American subjects in the two other photographs are depicted as combative individuals. In *Then & Now*, subjects

from both the Civil Rights movement and the BLM movement are seen positioned in a face-off against law enforcement. In *Fighting Back*, Edward Crawford is seen throwing an object at the police. These images play into the stereotype of African American people as violently reactive to state power and thus somehow deserving more extreme versions of state power. However, the *Peaceful Warrior* image shows Evans in a different frame. Here, she is seen as acting rather than reacting. This image within itself “refashions” the social form of the situation and provides understanding for the context surrounding the BLM movement. In the very moment that this image was photographed, the reality of many African Americans engaging in citizenry nonviolently was vividly portrayed and legitimized. Although this image has not been reproduced on other artifacts, it has been widely circulated. The nonreproduction and wide circulation of this image also indicate its strategic consequence: The image helps to organize collective memory about the movement and of African American people in general.

Semiotic Transcriptions

Hariman and Lucaites (2007) posit that iconic photographs present a set of codes that aide in collective experiences. Specifically, “the iconic image fuses these codes together as an image of collective experience, such that they then provide resources for interpreting historical processes and defining one’s relationship to others” (p. 35). There are several codes, including artistic, social, and political, present in this image. As indicated previously, Evans’s dress is seemingly flowing, blowing in a breeze. While her dress is flowing, by contrast the uniforms of the officers are stiff, unmoved by any natural forces. Although this can be mainly attributed to the material of the officers clothing, the flow of Evans’s dress creates an aura around her. This aura depicts Evans in a manner akin to a superhero or demigod, as if she has a force field around her. Again, noticing the bent knees of the officers, this invisible force field appears to be powerful enough to arrest the officers’ forward motion—an irony since they are apparently rushing to arrest her. This “superhero” aura may come to serve as a visual metaphor or narrative: Evans is single-handedly fighting off an army of opposition with no weapon or tool other than her own strength of character.

Social and political codes can be analyzed together given the historical context of this photograph as previously established. These codes are clearly noticeable by the racial divide that is present. All of the officers whose faces can be seen in this image are apparently Caucasian/

White. And Evans is clearly brown skinned. There are two officers running toward her to arrest her while she stands apparently alone in an open public space. Their faces are covered by a transparent face guard attached to a helmet, and they are dressed in a militant style, indicating that they are prepared to meet or enact violence. Evans, on the other hand, is dressed very casually with no armor, no weapon, no one to back her up, with the result that she is clearly vulnerable. Yet she is also clearly the subject to be reckoned with in this picture. These codes coincide with the discourse that the BLM movement seeks to reverse—that African Americans (armed or unarmed) are to be feared and targeted. Hariman and Lucaites (2007) argue that iconic images are iconic because they “coordinate a number of different patterns of identification, each of which would suffice to direct audience response, and which together provide a public audience with sufficient means for contending with potentially unmanageable events” (p. 34). Due to the nature of the events that contributed to the organization of the BLM movement, this image challenges harmful caricatures of African American people and of the current crisis in civic life.

Emotional Scenarios

Hariman and Lucaites (2007) assume that “the iconic image constructs a scenario in which specific emotional responses to an event become a powerful basis for understanding and action” (p. 35). In any image, the viewer is instantly invited into a social relationship with the subjects of the photograph. Consequently, “that relationship is embedded in interaction between media source and audience; each of these interactions occur in conjunction with the other images and agents in the media environment” (p. 35). All three of the images considered here are capable of evoking emotional responses from the viewer.

For instance, the *Then & Now* image may elicit emotions such as anger, fear, disappointment, and confusion. The juxtaposition of an image from nearly 50 years ago depicting the sameness of the social climate can be extremely provocative for viewers. In the *Fighting Back* image, rage, anger, and sadness are all emotions that the image might evoke. Rioting is a reactive, tactical action, and it may have seemed the only viable solution/response at the time for the residents of Ferguson after Michael Brown was killed. The *Peaceful Warrior* image evokes other emotions, including wonder or awe at her presence, indignation regarding her plight, and hope for attaining a better and different world through human agency and action rather than reaction.

Hariman and Lucaites (2007) argue that iconic images are emotional because they are usually born from crises or confusion. Videos and images depicting the wrongful killing of people, whether African American or not, definitely present viewers with a crisis. Depicting different emotions, all three images meet the assumption of emotional scenarios, yet the Evans photo does so in a way that articulates emotions' potential for transformation.

Contradictions and Crises

Iconic images are born from conflict or confusion and, according to Hariman and Lucaites (2007), there are “at least three sources of contradiction that are always present in a political system” (p. 36). These contradictions affect the political system and also apply to the iconic image such that “through subsequent circulation and appropriation the iconic image also aids continued revisiting and revisioning of the original event to negotiate basic questions of legitimacy as they complicate a coherent sense of past, present, and future,” consequently making the icon a “resource for performative mediation of conflicts” (p. 37).

The heavy circulation of these images along with attendant comments from viewers, allowed all viewers to develop awareness of the motivations behind the BLM movement and to revisit and revision the original events that evoked these images. This wide circulation has also invited what we might refer to as “unexpected” viewers to witness the tragedies that evoked the images, images to which—without social media—they might not otherwise have been exposed. The only image featured in this article that has been appropriated for other uses is *Fighting Back*. While this image was reproduced on T-shirts and posters, it failed to capture the “original event” in which the image was taking place, an ambiguity that confounded some viewers. The image was placed on T-shirts to be sold with the caption under it that read “The only weapon we have in our hands this evening is the weapons of protest. THAT’S ALL—Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.” One viewer noted that the image and the caption appeared contradictory, as can be seen in Figure 4.

The creator of this T-shirt sought to evoke a sense of the past in comparison to the present by aligning the image with a quotation from the Civil Rights era. However, the quote was originally used in reference to peaceful protests, not acts of violence or riots. While the *Fighting Back* image was the only one to be reproduced in a different form, it was not the most widely circulated image nor the most impactful. Based



Figure 4 Twitter user responds to the caption under the image printed on t-shirt.

on the numbers of views and shares alone, *Then & Now* is the most highly circulated image examined in this article. While it definitely provides a connection between the past and the present, it also reinforces, through this comparative depiction, the dominant social relations that are still present today. By comparison, taken after the killing of Alton Sterling in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, and the killings of five White police officers in Dallas, Texas, the photograph of Evans contradicts the narrative that had begun to circulate about the BLM movement at that particular time. The media events that surrounded the killings of the five White police officers suggested that the protestors and supporters of the movement posed a threat to law enforcement. In this image, Evans symbolizes a nonviolent and potentially transformative way of enacting the role of protestor, creating an alternative narrative of what power is and how it circulates through force of character compared to military or police force. This image was not appropriated for reproduction, which suggests that the message of the image is powerful just the way it is.

Vilification and Social Movements

In her studies of pro-life and pro-choice rhetoric, Vanderford (1989) considers vilification in social movements. Although her conceptualization of vilification does not focus on the visual rhetoric of a movement, it is useful here to further explore how and to what extent the Evans image functions rhetorically to shift the narrative of the BLM movement. Vanderford defines vilification as “a rhetorical strategy that discredits adversaries by characterizing them as ungentle and malevolent advocates; rather than differentiating opponents as good people with a difference of opinion, vilification delegitimizes them through characterizations of intentions, actions, purposes, and identities” (p. 166). Additionally, she discusses the four most important forms and functions of vilification; “formulating a specific adversarial force, casting opponents in an exclusively negative light” (p. 166), “attributing diabolical motives to foes, and magnifying the opponents’ power” (p. 167).

As previously mentioned, the Evans image depicts the militarized officers as the aggressors or adversaries, which inadvertently allows Evans to be positioned in direct opposition to them. This identification of an adversarial force may serve to unite individuals, thus calling them to action. With the calmness of her demeanor and nonresistant stance, Evans seemingly casts the officers in a negative light—once again, allowing her to be seen as “a moral agent fighting against evil” (The Rhetoric of Confrontation, as cited in Vanderford, 1989). Due to her arrest while peacefully protesting in a public space, the opponents (the officers) are seen as “threatening the basic needs and values of the members of the movement” (p. 167). Lastly, the number of officers who rush to arrest Evans, who is standing alone as onlookers gaze with anticipation, illuminates their exertion of excessive force and places the spotlight on their power.

Visibility and Race

As partially demonstrated, the Evans image functions rhetorically to disregard established caricatures by evoking shared humanity, to create recognition of others through particularity, and to make abstract concepts knowable (Gallagher & Zagacki, 2005, p. 180). Indeed, one prevalent caricature of Black women in America has been the angry, rude, loud, and difficult “snap queen.” Dating back to slavery, caricatures have circulated through various modes portraying Black women not only as the “mother figure” but also as having a sassy and domineering persona. According to Patricia Bell Scott in *Debunking Sapphire: Toward a Non-Racist and Non-Sexist Social Science* (1977), “the term ‘Sapphire’ is frequently used to describe an age-old image of Black women. The caricature of the dominating, emasculating Black woman is one which historically has saturated both the popular and scholarly literature” (p. 864). Presently, scripted television shows as well as reality television continue to reproduce this image. By contrast, Evans is positioned in a strong yet nonreactive stance in front of the officers. Her facial expression, or at least what can be made of it from her side profile, demonstrates a nonconfrontational yet quiet, strong, and determined demeanor. Captured in this very moment, she is not speaking or moving, yet she is exuding force and presence and thereby countering at least some of the caricatured images and narratives of Black women. In this image alone, Evans makes visible an alternate way of being a strong Black woman in the face of threats and challenges.

In the photograph, the particulars of Evans are highlighted in comparison to those of the officers,

thus creating a visual reminder for its viewers of the real situation at hand. To contextualize these particulars, the location of this image is in a public space in Baton Rouge during a peaceful protest. Under the First Amendment, Evans, as well as every other U.S. citizen, has the right to peaceful assemble. She is not shown breaking any laws, as she is situated in a public setting while peacefully demonstrating against police brutality and the mistreatment of African American people. Her appearance—in contrast to that of the officers—shows her as an individual standing in a public space on a sunny day. It is unclear from anything in the image why the officers are dressed as they are or why they are rushing toward her. There is a vivid visual irony in her very stance that is powerful enough to arrest them when they are, in fact, rushing to arrest her—for doing what, exactly? Making these particulars of the human experience recognizable/visible to the viewers of this image aides in reinforcing the original narrative of the BLM movement—the need to make visible the contradictions of lived experience so as to end inequality and police brutality toward African American people.

Lastly, this image makes the abstract concepts of freedom, oppression, and inequality take on concrete form and thereby become knowable to viewers. Two White male officers arresting one Black female could be interpreted as an exertion of power and an expression of fear on behalf of the officers. The racial dynamic of this image could suggest the oppression of a Black woman by White men with power, but her exercise of her freedom to protest is visually depicted as at least equally powerful. The positioning of the officers in contrast to that of Evans therefore serves to raise viewers out of their past vision of events and, as Gallagher and Zagacki might argue, forces them to see a world in which the daily challenges of democracy are unsettling and gritty (2005, p. 190).

Conclusions and Implications

In this essay, we analyzed three images that were published and circulated during the inception of the BLM Movement. Based on the framework of concepts developed by Hariman and Lucaites regarding iconicity, we concluded that the *Peaceful Warrior* image functions iconically due to its exhibition of aesthetic familiarity and civic performance, its illustration of semiotic transcriptions, its evocation of powerful emotional scenarios, and its depiction of contradictions and crises. The *Then & Now* image provides a comparative structure by combining two images taken nearly 50 years apart to

highlight the apparently steady state of racial injustice in America. As previously mentioned, this image was crafted from multiple images and did not portray or evoke civic performance per se; hence, it would be less likely to be judged as iconic. Although the *Fighting Back* image was referenced as one of the most “iconic images from the BLM movement,” our analysis suggests a different conclusion. While this image coincided with the assumptions of aesthetic familiarity, semiotic transcriptions, emotional scenarios, and contradictions and crises, it did not portray or evoke civic performance in a coherent manner. The narratives surrounding the reproduction of this image as well as the conflicting discourse circulating alongside the appropriations of this image make it difficult to articulate or “get” what “performance” is being recommended.

In relation to Finnegan’s conceptualizations of circulation and reproduction/reappropriation, the image of Evans has not yet been appropriated on T-shirts, on posters, or in parodies at the time of this writing. Cited as being circulated on multiple social media platforms, major news outlets, and top pop culture media, this image received over 30,000 likes. Circulation is important to this analysis because it involves the movement of discourse (Finnegan, 2010), assists the formation of public opinion, and provides the public with agency (Hariman & Lucaites, 2007). However, one prevalent finding from this analysis is that the amount of circulation and appropriation that surrounds an image does not necessarily make the image iconic or increase its rhetorical visibility and consequence.

In comparison to the other images, *Peaceful Warrior* portrayed an African American woman in a noncombative yet powerful manner, suggesting an alternate way of protesting and enacting citizenship. This image thus created an alternate narrative to those that had begun circulating about the BLM movement, one that enacts or makes visible a shift from reactive tactics to proactive strategies for living in a democratic society. As established earlier, the Evans image positioned the officers as the aggressors and Evans as the equally strong yet nonviolent, powerful citizen. Given the social climate, it created a narrative that contradicted current and previously articulated negative stereotypes and depictions. *Peaceful Warrior* provided a new insight as to how we may view this social movement. It served to transform the hearts and minds of at least some viewers by shifting the narrative about the movement. What is not yet clear is whether and how the rhetorical consequence of this image will contribute to the

kind of agreement that developed, at least for a time, regarding the moral rightness of the 20th-century civil rights movement.

While Finnegan’s circulation and Hariman and Lucaites’s vectors of rhetorical function and iconicity serve as helpful frameworks for analyzing images in terms of rhetorical function and impact, Gallagher and Zagacki’s rhetoric of visibility serves to deepen assessment of these images in relation to racial dynamics and civic life. Combined with Vanderford’s insights, the rhetoric of visibility and vilification could be used in future scholarship of racialized social movements and the still images associated with them, particularly in relation to cultural projections and the rhetorics of whiteness/blackness. Furthermore, future scholarship might examine an expanded conceptualization of iconicity to include shifting narratives regarding contradictions and crises. As our analysis indicates, identifying the Evans image as iconic based on the framework articulated by Hariman and Lucaites is only the start of understanding its consequence in relation to the larger movement and the ongoing project of producing and distributing images of consequence to our civic and social lives.

Notes

¹ Merelman (1995) identifies four forms of cultural projection: syncretism, hegemony, polarization, and counterhegemony.

² Nakayama and Krizek (1995) identify whiteness as a strategic rhetoric that reiterates white dominance in society.

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