# *Black Lives Matter* or *All Lives Matter*? Color-blindness and Epistemic Injustice


**Abstract**

Those who take 'All lives matter' to oppose 'Black lives matter' take it to mean something like '*Only* black lives matter.' The consensus among those who regard this exclusionary construal as a mistake is that it is due to color-blindness. Butler (2015), for example, suggests that objectors mistakenly assume that an answer to the question 'Which lives matter?' should be exhaustive and racially non-specific so that, as a response, 'Black lives matter' seems to convey the exclusion of non-black lives. It has further been argued that the suppression of racial discourse has resulted in an epistemic injustice, in particular, a hermeneutic or interpretive injustice (Fricker 2007), blinding objectors to the fact that it really means 'Black lives matter, *too*' (Anderson 2017). I will argue that attempts to make sense of these responses in terms of color-blindness are badly mistaken. As I will discuss, the interpretive debates surrounding the words 'Black lives matter' are reminiscent of the interpretive debates surrounding 'Black Power,' associated with radical black liberation movements in the US in the 1960s, long before color-blindness might have been argued to be a prevailing ethos. For many white Americans, these words carried separatist and racist connotations. I argue that these are, fundamentally, the interpretive categories that are applied by white objectors (principally) to 'Black lives matter.' Hearing the words 'Black lives matter' as divisive or as racist in this context reflects not just the anxieties of whites given a long and continuing history of racial oppression but also their racially specific understandings—separatism and racism were not simply feared by whites at the time of those radical freedom movements, they were terms under which they had historically realized their freedom and achieved group affirmation. Critical affirmations such as 'Black Power' and 'Black lives matter' have proved difficult for many interpreters to understand because of the way that they manifest resistance to white supremacy, eschewing both racial exclusion *and* racial inclusion (the latter fact being masked by more inclusive reconstructions of 'Black lives matter'). Insofar as these statements are not intended as contributions to our racial understandings as much as they are intended to disrupt entrenched and oppressive racial understandings (and even to stir the racial sensibilities of whites), I further argue that these forms of resistance are not readily understood within the framework developed by Fricker.

## I Bringing the Questions into View

'All lives matter' has come to be recognized as a statement of opposition to 'Black lives matter.' We know not only that it is intelligible to pose the choice, '*Black lives matter* or *All lives matter*?' but also that the choice is understood to be an exclusive one. This isn't to say that the conflict always takes so stark a form. After all, a common response to 'Black lives matter' is 'Of course, black lives matter; all lives matter.' But though this might seem, at first, to challenge the exclusivity presupposition of that question, it is important to recognize that proponents of 'Black lives matter' are not urging the recognition of an obvious truth. So, obfuscations aside, the choice here is clear just as it is clear that it may be put to anyone (no one is more or less qualified to make it) and that it is politically consequential, revealing differences not just in our understanding of the political significance of race but even differences in race.

Still, we can begin to feel perplexed in the face of this choice. Consider, for a start, that protesters at early demonstrations carried both 'Black lives matter' and 'All lives matter' signs. If we assume that they were acting in solidarity with one another, as I think we should, there is a question about what 'All lives matter' could have meant in this context. In accounting for this, it has seemed tempting to begin with the assumption—though it hardly registers as one—that 'All lives matter' is a political slogan (something like 'Make America Great Again') and, as such, signals one's affiliation with a political group or movement that provides broader context for understanding the meaning of those words. From here it can seem almost obvious that 'All lives matter' has come to signal opposition because it has come to be associated with an oppositional movement (Olasov 2016). But, aside from failing to shed light on why these words were spoken early on,[1] this is less than convincing as an account of how they have come to signal opposition. It is common for 'All lives matter' to be used not to stake an oppositional position, but in an effort to establish or to call

[1] The question is simply side-stepped: "[T]hey [demonstrators using 'Black lives matter' signs and those using 'All lives matter' signs] didn't disagree because 'All lives matter' hadn't yet become the slogan that it is today" (Olasov 2016).

attention to common ground (as though better expressing what is only poorly expressed by 'Black lives matter'). 'All lives matter' is, moreover, advanced as a plain truth. Whatever resonance it has is supposed to come from our shared sense of humanity, not something like party membership or ideology, which is why there is no demand that *these* words be defined and contextualized. So, there remains a question—not a narrow "semantic" one, but a humanistic one—about how 'All lives matter' could have and perhaps still might be spoken in solidarity.

We might find ourselves no less puzzled about how these words could have come to signal opposition. We meet with difficulty in explaining how there can be a conflict between 'Black lives matter' and 'All lives matter' given what we would think of as the logic of these statements. The two are related as particular instance to universal generalization. There is, moreover, a strong temptation to say that if we are committed to the truth of 'All lives matter'—and those on both sides of this debate are prepared to say that it is true—we must also be committed to the truth of 'Black lives matter.' And yet, the affirmation of the universal, the particular, and even the enumeration of particular instances, is seen as signaling opposition. Former democratic presidential candidate Martin O'Malley drew criticism for responding to the concerns of BLM protesters, saying "White lives matter. Black lives matter. All lives matter" (Frizell 2015) as did Rudy Guiliani, who, not to be outdone, summed up his response to such protests by saying, "Black lives matter. White lives matter. Asian lives matter. Hispanic lives matter" (Twohey 2016). But how, despite the affirmation, on both sides, of the particular and the universal, can 'All lives matter' still be seen as a statement of opposition? If this has something to do with a demand that 'Black lives matter' be affirmed without qualification, as seems likely, how should we understand its defenders who say that 'Black lives matter' means 'Black lives matter, *too*'? And why should that demand be met? What could be objectionable about 'All lives matter'?

In an interview conducted by George Yancy (2015) entitled, "What's Wrong with 'All Lives

Matter'?" Judith Butler offers a possible response by way of raising a related sort of puzzle: Why isn't 'Black lives matter' regarded not simply as true, but as a truism? Lives are the sorts of things that are supposed to matter; to the extent that they do not, they are not lives. Butler is not making a purely conceptual point in saying this. She notes that under slavery, not even minimal conditions on freedom were met, like the freedom to move and thrive without being subject to coercive force. She further reminds us that a slave wasn't regarded as having a life, but, quite literally, a fraction of a life.

That is a historical point, though one that needs qualification. After all, it was slave-holding Southerners who, at the 1787 Constitutional Convention, wanted slaves to be counted as full persons—increasing their power in the House of Representatives—not their Northern counterparts (who argued that they should be treated as property for this purpose). Moreover, the lives of slaves certainly did matter to their owners, as evidenced, for example by the fact that they provided them with food and shelter, and, as Robert Paul Wolff has recently had occasion to observe, a kind of sociality and even intimacy was possible between them. However, this was possible, he points out, "because there was a legally enforced absolute divide between the legal status of a white man and the legal status of a slave" (Wolff 2017). The point to stress, then, is that the practices and institutions that embodied respect for human life didn't extend to slaves who mattered differently and that 'all lives' would have meant 'all free persons.' In linking this history of slavery to the present, through debt peonage, segregation, the emergence of a prison industrial complex, to the episodes of police brutality and government sanctioned violence that threaten to normalize lethal violence against vulnerable black populations, Butler wants us to consider the question of whether blacks have ever been free from the coercive force to which she alludes. Her suggestion is that 'Black lives matter' should be obvious, but isn't, because these conditions are not ones that cast these lives as having value in the fullest sense. The problem with those who say "All lives matter" is that they

make the mistake of thinking—neglectful of these conditions—that we can approach the question, 'Which lives matter?' in a "race-blind" way (Butler 2015). Since we cannot take for granted that these lives are understood to matter, that they are included in 'all lives,' we need to acknowledge their exclusion by, among other things, saying "Black lives matter."

The idea that 'Black lives matter' articulates an exclusion is an important one and it seems to me to be universally recognized among those who would say that black lives matter without qualification, but there is disagreement about how this is accomplished. Butler's position is that 'Black lives matter' reveals an exclusion by being itself a (necessarily) partial answer to the question 'Which lives matter?' or, to look at things slightly differently, by showing that it is not possible to respond in fully general way to that question. A more common view, and one that has been defended by Luvell Anderson (2017), is that 'Black lives matter' foregrounds black lives, articulating an exclusion, yes, but in an inclusive way. What it really means is something like 'Black lives matter, too.' The problem, he claims, is that objectors hear it as having an exclusionary interpretation, as meaning something more like 'Only black lives matter.' But if 'Black lives matter' articulates an exclus*ion*, as I think it does, then why it is heard by many as exclusion*ary*?

The emerging consensus appears to be that color-blindness is to blame.[2] Anderson's and Butler's proposals are representative in linking an exclusionary interpretation and the 'All lives matter' objection to color-blindness, though they do so in somewhat different ways. Recall that, for Butler, those who hear 'Black lives matter' as exclusionary make the mistake of thinking that one can approach the question, 'Which lives matter?' in a color-blind way. If the question is assumed to call for both an exhaustive as well as racially non-specific response, then, the suggestion is, that explains why 'Black lives matter' is heard as excluding many people whose lives matter and on the

[2] In addition to the philosophical defenses discussed, see Jonathan Havercroft and David Owen's defense of the claim that "difference-blind" (which I take to mean color-blind) political approaches "as exemplified by political responses to #BlackLivesMatter such as #AllLivesMatter" instantiate soul-blindness (a kind of failure to acknowledge the humanity of others) (Havercroft and Owen 2016). For some instances drawn from popular media, see (Dvorak 2015), (Halstead 2016), (Jonsson 2016), (Kluger 2016), (Damiani 2016), (Victor 2016), and (May 2016).

grounds of their non-membership to that particular racial group. Similarly, Anderson claims that one can only mishear 'Black lives matter' in this way if one makes the mistake of thinking either that we are beyond race (a position that he terms "idiot post-racialism," following Paul C. Taylor (2014)) or if one makes the mistake of thinking that this way of speaking "provokes division and upsets the path to a post-racial society" (Anderson 2017: 10).[3]

In what follows, I want to work through these claims about color-blindness. The first of the two main questions that I will be focusing on is this: Is color-blindness at the root of this conflict of interpretations? That is, is it responsible (i) for the impression that 'Black lives matter' has an exclusionary interpretation and (ii) for the forms of resistance to it that we are seeing, particularly those centering around the 'All lives matter' response?[4] I am going to argue that proposals that appeal to color-blindness in answering these questions are badly mistaken. For one, they aren't positioned to account for the striking parallels between this present-day interpretive conflict and the one that emerged around the meaning of 'Black Power' in the late 1960s, which unfolded long before color-blindness could be argued to have been a prevailing ethos. They also, perhaps in part for this reason, fail to grasp the root of these interpretative conflicts, which spring from the failure of objectors to come to terms with the way in which these affirmations manifest resistance to white supremacy.

These interpretive conflicts also raise questions about how to conceptualize misunderstand-

[3] Anderson's focus is on prescriptive versions of post-racialism, and, in particular, on assimilationist, eliminativist, and color-blind varieties. According to the first, racial categories would, ideally, be regarded as insignificant along moral, political, and economic dimensions; according to the second, racial categories would, ideally, be eliminated altogether; and according to the last, racial categories would, ideally, not make a difference in how people are treated across these domains (including the legal domain). My discussion of color-blindness doesn't follow this taxonomy and is motivated, not by philosophical defenses or dismissals of various post-racial ideals, but by attitudes that might plausibly be ascribed to parties to the interpretive conflict under discussion.

[4] My particular focus will be on objectors who would not deny, for example, that race is a factor in the incidents that have catalyzed the BLM movement and that these incidents have involved excessive force (and who might entertain the suspicion that if Tamir Rice and Trayvon Martin had been white youth that they would likely not have been killed), but who are nonetheless made uncomfortable by 'Black lives matter' and favor 'All lives matter.' I want to set aside, for separate treatment, the question of how to understand the interpretive position of objectors who would deny that race is a factor in these incidents and others that have catalyzed the BLM movement.

ings of this sort. There is support for thinking that these conflicts are not mere misunderstandings, but rooted in structural racial inequalities and so evidence a kind of injustice. Anderson has argued, for example, that proponents of 'Black lives matter,' black Americans, principally, have suffered an *interpretive* injustice in Fricker's sense (2007)—an injustice that manifests in a compromised capacity to render vital aspects of their experience intelligible, which is itself a result of being unjustly marginalized in respect of making contributions to our collective understanding of the social world. While I am sympathetic to the diagnosis, this account of interpretive injustice needs to provide us with a clear distinction between resistant understandings and understandings that are collective in the sense of being *dominant*. Once we appeal to such a distinction, however, it becomes apparent that its companion account of interpretive injustice doesn't extend to the interpretive conflicts surrounding 'Black Power' and 'Black lives matter.' In particular, in suggesting that we compensate for the prejudicial effects of the marginalization of members of these resistant communities by considering whether what they are saying would make sense under idealized conditions (i.e., conditions in which there is no structural racism), we not only reintroduce a form of color-blindness and render the meaning of 'Black lives matter' or 'Black Power' unintelligible, we come under pressure, mistakenly, in my view, to regard its proponents as uncooperative and as acting against their own interests.

## II Color-blindness

Let us revisit Butler's account of the connection between the statement 'All lives matter' and color-blindness. A core assumption is that both 'Black lives matter' and 'All lives matter' provide candidate answers to the question, 'Which lives matter?' Though not itself employing racial vocabulary, Butler argues that the question cannot be approached in a color-blind manner (not if one is concerned to affirm the worth of black lives, that is). The problem lies in thinking that it calls for just such an

approach.

I want to set aside the issue of why 'Which lives matter?' should be thought to call for an exhaustive and color-blind answer not because the issue is unimportant (in fact, I return to this issue after presenting my own account) but because I take the main problem with this account to be that neither 'Black lives matter' nor 'All lives matter' is addressed to any such question, explicitly or implicitly.

This is particularly apparent if we consider the history of the phrase 'Black lives matter.' It originated at the time of the acquittal of George Zimmerman who killed 17-year-old Trayvon Martin in the community that he patrolled as a volunteer neighborhood watchman. The words were, at the time, self-consciously addressed by Alicia Garza, a black woman, to other members of the black community, taking the form 'Our lives matter' (Cobb 2016). Even as it evolved into 'Black lives matter,' it continued to give expression, now implicitly, to a black solidarity movement—an incipient Black Lives Matter movement—and to function as an affirmation in her words of "our contributions to this society, our humanity, and our resilience in the face of deadly oppression" (Garza 2014). 'Black lives matter' was widely adopted after the killing of Michael Brown eighteen months later in Ferguson, but it seems to have retained much of its original character: emerging in response to another instance in a particular pattern of racial injustice, functioning to affirm the value of black life under such circumstances, and recognized as a cry of solidarity centered on black witnesses, protesters, and activists.

This makes it hard to see 'Black lives matter' as a response to a question like 'Which lives matter?' That question is itself completely unmoored in the racial settings in which this phrase emerged and in which it has been deployed. But it is also difficult to see 'Black lives matter' as an answer to that question or any other given that it is addressed, in the first instance, to those who already know that their lives are of value and given that it functions as an affirmation of what they

already know in the face of threats both external and internal.[5] This invites us to conceptualize 'Black lives matter' as an affirmation that was prompted by certain racially specific threats rather than as a response to a question.

There is strain, too, in trying to understand 'All lives matter' as a reply that is addressed to that question or any other. It is important to remember that 'All lives matter' emerged in reaction to 'Black lives matter' and is answerable to no other manifest imperative than that of resisting that formulation, receiving, for example, no serious political or intellectual elaboration. It should also give us pause to consider, as I noted before, that 'All lives matter' is sometimes offered in the spirit of correction ("'Black lives matter' just means 'All lives matter'"). In this light, it seems less like a competing answer to such a question than a "conciliatory" gesture keyed to the racial sensibilities of an audience that stands to be offended by those words. This isn't the only spirit in which the 'All lives matter' response is offered, but it is suggestive.

Butler's approach does not, of course, exhaust the possible attempts to link the interpretive conflict surrounding 'Black lives matter' to color-blindness. It has been suggested, for example, that objectors avoid the use of racial vocabulary and do so because these terms are thought to be divisive. It is the reference to *black* lives, according to this proposal, that brings up a feeling of division, exclusion, and racial antagonism countered by 'All lives matter.' In favor of this proposal, it is sometimes said that 'All lives matter' matches 'Black lives matter' in form but for the word 'black,' which is replaced with a race-neutral term (Halstead 2016). And isn't this precisely the lesson that is, literally, writ large in the excision of 'black' from public signs bearing those words, which are left to read, simply, 'lives matter'?[6]

[5] With respect to this last point, consider that Garza's words were expressed originally as part of a direct appeal to blacks who were unsurprised by the verdict in the Zimmerman case, a stance that was, in her words, a form of giving up on black life (Cobb 2016).

[6] Several Universalist Unitarian churches that undertook racial justice campaigns inspired by the Black Lives Matter movement (a campaign that encouraged media outreach in cases of vandalization) reported that the word 'black' had been cut out of their 'Black lives matter' signs (`http://www.nbcwashington.com/news/local/Black-Lives-Matter-Sign-in-Maryland-Vandalized-for-Fourth-Time-400882371.html`; `http:`

This proposal has intuitive appeal. There are moments in political life when we do avoid using identifications like 'Republican' or 'Democrat' in favor of other, more widely applicable ones (e.g., 'American') precisely because we recognize that those identifications can be divisive (one need only think back to the early days following Trump's election for a recent example). There are, certainly, antagonisms between racially identified groups—principally, whites and blacks—that have surfaced in acute and visible ways around the events that have catalyzed the Black Lives Matter movement. Garza makes reference to crowds of whites cheering the verdict in the Zimmerman case in the same context in which she first wrote 'Our lives matter,' to give just one vivid example. It is also true, and this may leave a particularly strong impression, that a racial label like 'black' is sometimes described as divisive by those who are critical of 'Black lives matter.'

The pattern of avoidance that is supposed to be explained by the proposal is, however, curiously selective. Notice that people who object to 'Black lives matter' don't, in general, avoid racial terms (even if they avoid affirming outright that black lives matter, a distinct issue). They sometimes use racial terms in the same breath as 'All lives matter.' Recall O'Malley's statement, "White lives matter. Black lives matter. All lives matter." That is not uncharacteristic. Notice also that objectors have routinely made reference to "black on black crime" in their criticism of the presumed political agenda of the Black Lives Matter movement, though this doesn't seem to rankle in the same way. Why not? The suggestion is that if BLM advocates stand by the view that black life has value, then, "black on black crime" should not only be on the agenda, but perhaps even a focus of protests and organizing efforts. "Black on black crime" is thought to be a manifestation of the very phenomenon under protest since blacks who are implicated in these crimes do not, it is assumed, take black life to have value.

These observations expose the *ad hoc* nature of this proposal. Objectors are supposed to prefer

//us7.campaign-archive1.com/?u=f168d0e642d03cd6a42764552&id=5eb10a8c83; http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/black-lives-matter-sign-vandalized_us_55cb64b3e4b0f1cbf1e6f0bf).

‘All lives matter’ to ‘Black lives matter’ because they want to avoid the divisive term ‘black.’ However, they not only use racial terms in the contexts at issue, objectors repeatedly use the offending term, and none appear to be especially offended by a social critique that takes for granted that the disregard for *black life*—the outlook that black lives don’t matter—is rampant (at least among black criminals if not also among the activists and community leaders who are supposed to have turned a blind eye). These attitudes, articulated in explicitly racial terms, can be identified and criticized, but, somehow, to avow that these very lives have value is supposed to be divisive. It seems, in light of this, that the claim that the word ‘black’ is divisive is specific to the case of people, many of them black, who say “Black lives matter” to affirm their humanity in the face of lethal oppression. Why should that be? Why should they be regarded as inciting racial division rather than as calling attention to it and expressing opposition to it?

Maybe the issue has less to do with the terms that are being used and more to do with how they are being used. It is significant, perhaps, that when particular instances are affirmed they are often presented plurally or in a way that suggests that they are subordinate to ‘All lives matter,’ as if to say that it is the truth of human worth (not membership to a particular race) that provides the ultimate basis for the truth of these instances. According to the third and final proposal that I will consider, then, the problem with ‘Black lives matter’ is that it is racist. It assumes that race is a basis for taking some lives, but not others, to have value. ‘All lives matter’ is a way of challenging that assumption, not by negating the statement, but by affirming that everyone’s life matters, irrespective of race, a point that can be made in a number of ways, including by enumerating the lives that matter, racial category by racial category, as Rudy Guiliani did, who has himself alleged that ‘Black lives matter’ is racist.

Why, though, should anyone think that ‘Black lives matter’ suggests or claims that someone’s being black is a basis for treating them as exceptional in having lives of value (or of greater value)?

The key presupposition appears to be that, in saying these words, one either affirms the value of non-black lives or else is to be understood as denying or diminishing the value of those lives. If one assumes that 'Black lives matter' affirms the value of black life without qualification, that would, against this background, invite the conclusion that 'Black lives matter' means something like 'Only black lives matter.' But we should wonder, who presupposes this, under what circumstances, and with what support? Note that this presupposition is not itself an artifact of color-blind thinking. This is clearly true if color-blindness is assumed to explain the antagonism toward 'Black lives matter.' After all, as I discuss further below, this presupposition is shared by many defenders of 'Black lives matter' who, in offering defenses for these words, imply that 'Black lives matter' would be exclusionary were it not for the fact that 'Black lives matter' *is* an inclusive statement.

Despite its influence on parties on both sides of this interpretive conflict, I will argue that this presupposition obscures the meaning and purpose of 'Black lives matter.' In what follows, I will offer an account that makes sense of it in terms of long-standing structural inequalities between blacks and whites and that relates these two quite different views about the relationship of 'Black lives matter' to this presupposition to differences in the positioning of black and white parties to this debate.

## III Beyond Color-blindness

It would be satisfying to explain the resistance to 'Black lives matter' in terms of some version of color-blindness, in terms of the various platitudes about race of which we are already critical and to which we are already alert. But appealing to these platitudes won't explain why 'Black lives matter' should be heard as racially divisive or racist. Nor do they come close to explaining or even take into view, it seems to me, an aspect of these interpretive responses that is difficult to acknowledge: that 'Black lives matter' is wounding to objectors who take themselves to be sensitive to racial injustice. I

want to suggest that if in giving our explanations we fail to uncover something of the truth in these feelings of exclusion (which is not to say that we should soothe them), we will stop short of a deep and potentially transformative understanding of this conflict. So, there remains for us a question about why 'Black lives matter' is heard as exclusionary and, beyond that, a question about how to understand this conflict of interpretations, which sees 'All lives matter' as being in opposition to 'Black lives matter' and that obscures the possibility of speaking those words in solidarity.

I want to address these questions in what follows, but I want to first note some difficulties with the preliminary characterizations of it that have been offered. As I said, Anderson characterizes the debate as dividing up into two sides: those who hear 'Black lives matter' as having an inclusive interpretation (as meaning something like 'Black lives matter, too') and those who hear it has having an exclusionary interpretation (as meaning something like 'Only black lives matter'). This is the way that commentators have tended to divide up the debate.[7] However, in doing so, it is assumed that the parties to it take 'Black lives matter' to mean something *else*, to take a stand, in particular, on the value of non-black lives. Why think that 'Black lives matter' evinces any such concern or that it should?

I reject this characterization, in part, because it presents us with a false dilemma: we are supposed to think that either those who say "Black lives matter" are affirming the value of non-black lives or they are rejecting the value of those lives and since we have reason to deny the latter, we are left with the view that 'Black lives matter' is, when you think about it, really quite reassuring. And some well-intentioned people do go to great lengths to offer this sort of reassurance. Obama has said, for example, that "When people say 'Black lives matter,' it doesn't mean blue lives don't matter; it just means all lives matter" (making reference here to the position that 'Black lives matter' evinces a lack of respect for the lives of law enforcement officers) (Obama 2016). One can attempt

[7] This narrative persists to the present day. See (Moshman 2017) for an example.

to dismiss this as a rhetorical gesture, but it is also possible to see it as a betrayal of meaning, which in this context is not to distinguish it from a political betrayal. And yet, as I will discuss, I suspect that the suggestion is not so very different from the suggestion that 'Black lives matter' means 'Black lives matter, *too*.'

Another problem with characterizing the debate as being between those who hear 'Black lives matter' as inclusive and those who hear it as exclusionary is that this is just too simple. The ways that we hear (or mishear) 'Black lives matter' do not divide cleanly into two. Aside from the fact that some hear 'Black lives matter' as racially divisive and others hear it as racist, there are some people who don't quite know what it means but are, nonetheless, are made nervous by it, and even sense a threat of violence in it. In fact, there might be an intimate connection between the opacity of these words for some and the sense that they threaten violence. After the killing of five police officers in Dallas in 2016, one headline raised the question "What does the slogan 'Black lives matter' mean now?" (Devichand 2016). There is no evidence that the lone sniper who committed these murders had any affiliation with an organized movement like Black Lives Matter or any other group of people present at the protest that day, which brought attention to the killings of Philando Castile and Alton Sterling in the days before. It is curious, then, that the sniper's targeting of white police officers, his acting alone in doing so, should raise a question about what 'Black lives matter' means. One would think that the killings of Trayvon Martin, Philando Castile, Alton Sterling—the lives and deaths that are witnessed by 'Black lives matter'—would be those that bring its meaning into focus. The truth is that people already sense in 'Black lives matter' a threat of violence. They already feel that it is divisive, that it stirs racial antagonisms, even before having a clear understanding of what it articulates and without having to have an understanding of what it articulates since what it means or can mean is constrained, for them, by anxious presentiment.

There is, I submit, a historical precedent that can help us to understand why this interpretive

conflict pulls in these various directions. Stokely Carmichael, a prominent black activist and intellectual associated with the Black Power movement in the 1960s, addressed a similar controversy around the meaning of 'Black Power,' claiming—in a piece titled "What We Want" (1966e)—that 'Black Power' could be clearly defined for those who didn't attach the fears of white America to it.[8] This atmosphere of fear gave rise to repeated requests for the definition of 'Black Power' on the part of the white intelligentsia of his time though one has to wonder why that is; its meaning was clear enough to the poor, uneducated, and disenfranchised blacks to whom it was, in the first instance, addressed. I would venture that its meaning was clear to them, though not to white Americans, because it spoke to their exclusion from the field of power and articulated this exclusion in a way that wasn't calibrated to white racial sensibilities,[9] which, I will argue, also goes some way toward explaining why granting requests for definition did nothing to quell the suspicion on the part of white objectors that 'Black Power' was divisive or worse, evidence of separatism, and even racism.

The parallels to our own time are striking and they raise, to my mind, the question of whether 'Black lives matter' is so poorly understood because those who don't understand it also attach the fears of white America to it. The meaning of 'Black lives matter' seems clear enough to some but not others, dividing people along racial lines, and in the reactions to 'Black lives matter' we see an echo of the fearful associations to which Carmichael alludes—racial division and violence, separatism, and racism. It presents us, it seems, with another instance in which whites have interpreted a

[8] Carmichael later changed his name to 'Kwame Ture,' publishing his major work *Black Liberation in America* under this name in 1967. As most of the cited works in this paper were presented by him under the name 'Stokely Carmichael,' I will adopt the practice of using this name throughout, with the exception of the publication just mentioned.

[9] That this was deliberate and was meant to distinguish Black Power activism and its leadership from more mainstream currents within the civil rights movement is suggested by the following remarks:"I think the greatest thing about Black Power is for once black people are going to use the slogan that they want to use; they don't give a damn who likes it. And that's very important because the white press is trying to stop the use of that word, Black Power. And the black people are going to legitimize it and we're going to see how the white press is going to start addressing itself to us, rather than we addressing ourselves to them. It seems to me that one of the jobs of an organization is to speak to this country in the tone of its community. Not to be a buffer zone but to speak in the tone of that community and we [SNCC] intend to do that" (Carmichael 1966a: 74). This seems to me to cut against the claim that "[T]he radicals [within the civil rights movement]—mainly within the SNCC [Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, of which Carmichael was a chair]—never fully repudiated the leadership ideology which reinforced the movement's character as an elite brokerage relation with powerful whites outside the South (Reed 1986: 71).

black-affirming statement as anti-white, despite the opposition of those who are responsible for its authoring and, more broadly, in the face of efforts toward collective self-expression and self-definition. I am not, however, claiming that these interpretive conflicts align perfectly. There was, for example, no real possibility in the context of the black liberation movement associated with the call for 'Black Power' of allaying white anxieties by suggesting that 'Black Power' meant 'Black Power, too,' an affirmation, among other things, of white power.

A more detailed examination of the controversy around the meaning of 'Black Power,' including an examination of what power it was that was being claimed, ultimately brings to light other common aspects of these interpretive conflicts, including, in my view, their deepest source. Carmichael himself makes the connection between 'Black Power' and the grass-roots political efforts that he and many others had been undertaking explicit in a number of speeches and articles touching on its meaning. At the time, much of his organizing efforts had been focused on the South and, in the months leading up to and following his statement, his energies were focused on securing voting rights in Lowndes County, Alabama, where blacks, over half of whom lived below the poverty line, comprised the vast majority of the population (80%) (Carmichael 1966e) and, yet, where property ownership was virtually the sole prerogative of whites (according to Carmichael (1967), 86 white families owned 90% of the land). Carmichael and other members of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee formed the Lowndes County Freedom Organization in 1965, with the aim of registering voters, and in 1966, the year in which he would first call for 'Black Power,' the hope was to form an independent political party, the Lowndes County Freedom Party, by running candidates for local offices and winning at least 20% of the vote.

The decision to organize an independent political party wasn't evidence of separatism, however; it was evidence of participation. It was forced by the fact that neither the Republican nor Democratic parties accommodated the political participation of blacks, certainly not the poor share-

cropper who was evicted by his landlord-employer for registering to vote through the Lowndes County Freedom Organization.[10] It was in the midst of these efforts, and in the face of uncertainty about whether they would bear fruit, that Carmichael called for 'Black Power.' Its meaning was, indeed, manifest on a small and intimate scale in Lowndes County. It meant meaningful participation in the democratic process, which in turn required the facilitation of civics workshops so that residents would understand the duties of sheriff and tax assessor and could run for these offices (Carmichael 1966c). It meant undermining the ideological barriers that stood in the way of political engagement, which involved undermining racist and classist ideas about qualification for democratic participation (Carmichael 1966f), including the concern about whether whites would approve of it. It meant political and economic critique, which meant speaking honestly about the need for a reallocation of wealth and land in Lowndes County so that, in concrete terms, blacks could participate in local politics without fear of homelessness, joblessness, and ostracism. It meant, fundamentally, recognizing and breaking the bonds of dependency on whites.[11]

This dependency made it difficult for Carmichael to take requests for the definition of 'Black Power' at face value since it was black power that had, in his words, been taken away by whites since the country's inception (Carmichael 2003). It is this historical context and its legacy in the present that, in Carmichael's view, provided the explanation for the anxiety that he describes. It

[10] The Democratic party in Alabama had raised its qualifying fee from $50 to $500 in order to exclude blacks from participation (Carmichael 1966e; Hulett 1966). The Democratic Party had in any case contributed to this loss of trust when it failed (partly through the intervention of Lyndon Johnson) to recognize the claim of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) as the official Democratic party organization in Mississippi despite its persuasive case that its rival, the Mississippi Democratic Party, had suppressed the votes of blacks and was, therefore, not comprised of democratically elected delegates (Carmichael 1966d; Ture and Hamilton 1967).

[11] Carmichael was also critical of black leaders who didn't aim to secure collective political power for blacks (despite their being oppressed, he observed, as a group). He was, for example, critical of black leaders who represented middle class interests, a failing that he took to characterize the civil rights movement. It was no accident, in his view, that the two oldest civil rights organizations (NAACP and the Urban League) had constitutions that explicitly barred "partisan" political activity, which positioned them to act as liaisons between dependent black communities and powerful white ones. This was, for him, rooted in a faulty ideological outlook according to which there was no need to organize politically around the interests of black communities (to form political parties like the Lowndes County Freedom Party) since blacks would ultimately "blend into white society" (**?**: 78). This failure also led, in his view, to unstable coalitions with whites and tokenism, both dramatically illustrated by the rejection of the MFDP by the Democratic Party and that party's "compromise" offer of two symbolic (i.e., non-voting) at-large delegate seats chosen by the Democratic Party, rather than by the MFDP.

wasn't just that "the history of every institution of this society indicates that a major concern in the ordering and structuring of the society has been the maintaining of the Negro community in its condition of dependence and oppression" (Carmichael 1966d: 643) it was that blacks lived in a situation of such profound dependency that he thought it should be analyzed as a kind of colonial dependency (Ture and Hamilton 1967).[12] Any serious challenge to the power structures that maintained this dominance, whether taking the form of the political and economic critique that Carmichael articulated or not, was going to be met with resistance on the part of those who benefited from it or would not want to see themselves as complicit in it.

The words 'Black Power' were also a form of resistance against these power structures. For one, the call for black *power* signaled a departure from the civil rights movement associated with the leadership of Martin Luther King, Jr., which seemed benign by comparison with the Black Power movement, which is even today popularly viewed as its "destructive coda" (Joseph 2010). It was power—in some cases political control—that was at issue, not freedom. To call for black power was to abandon appeals to conscience and, so, to implicitly recognize the failure of these appeals, to demand a place in political life whether that seemed good (or timely) to whites, and to abandon the shared pursuit of the freedom promised to all (since it is power that people can have over you, not freedom).[13] But the call for 'Black Power' served as a critique of white supremacy in a more direct sense, too. Carmichael's call for 'Black Power' implied that there was need for it and, equally, that there was no need to call for 'White Power' since, as those for whom these words had resonance knew well, power was white (Carmichael 1966e).

Carmichael saw inquiries into the meaning of 'Black Power,' which were no less opportunities to raise questions of legitimacy, as a further occasion for maintaining white supremacy, but what

[12] For a defense of this view within sociology, see (Blauner 1972).

[13] 'Black Power' can, in a way, be seen as an appeal to conscience in its taking the form of a self-address; though Carmichael rejected appeals to the conscience of whites, he did speak approvingly of James Baldwin's characterization of blacks as the conscience of America. This is consistent, too, with Carmichael's characterization of Black Power as "a positive and redemptive force" (Carmichael 1966d).

about the resistant interpretations of its meaning? How do they fit into this historical context? In a number of writings, Carmichael connects these responses to white fears associated with groups of blacks organizing themselves for political ends. These fears were, for him, an echo of earlier ones concerning the possibility of slave revolts. But why should white fears associated with the political self-determination of blacks have resulted, among *progressive* whites, in distorted understandings of the meaning of 'Black Power' rather than in, say, critiques of the emerging politics of Black Power understood on its own terms or even in conspiracies rather than distortions of meaning? Then, again, why wouldn't such fears have been allayed by the abundant counter-evidence including explicit disavowals of separatism and racism?

Something like Carmichael's analysis was also articulated by James Baldwin whose work explored, with great subtlety, the complicated political, social, and psychological dependencies between blacks and whites. In one of his last interviews, Baldwin is reflecting on desegregation and comes to what he takes to be the source of the deep ambivalence toward it on the part of whites, including progressive whites, saying, "No matter how Southerners, and whites in the rest of the nation, too, deny it, or what kind of rationalizations they cover it up with, they know the crimes they have committed against black people. And they are terrified that these crimes will be committed against them" (1989: 8). But if we assume that separatism and racism were feared by whites because they were guilty of them and that 'Black Power' was a *condemnation* of these crimes—Carmichael brings the themes of black power and condemnation into association more than once—we have to wonder why it should be so natural for whites to imagine that those very crimes might then be perpetrated against them.

The anxious questioning of the meaning of 'Black Power' and the resistant interpretations that emerged are more closely related than this narrative suggests. To begin with, I want to challenge Carmichael's assumption that white objectors surely knew what black power was because they

were responsible for having taken it away. I agree that these demands for definition should be regarded as suspect. It is striking, as I said earlier, that its meaning was understood by poor, uneducated, and disenfranchised blacks and not by the white intelligentsia of Carmichael's time and I agree that these responses should be seen as responses that helped to buttress white supremacy. I would suggest, however, that the relevant point of criticism is not that white objectors had an understanding of black power that they failed to acknowledge, it is that they understood white power only too well. These resistant interpretations are its elaborations.

As I remarked before, 'Black Power' posed a challenge to white supremacy in that it made manifest and opposed the way in which power was (already) racialized. The accommodation of black power would require an adjustment to this status quo and a renegotiation of white identity. But what adjustments would have to be made? And renegotiated how? At what cost? There is room here for genuine uncertainty because black power needn't have been and was not, at least in many respects, a transposition of white power.[14] The anxiety that Carmichael observed was, in my view, in reaction precisely to this challenge to white supremacy and to the uncertainty surrounding the renegotiation of power that it would require.[15]

Though Carmichael himself claimed that the meaning of 'Black Power' was clear and though we may be able to take this perspective on this history as well, this is compatible with his interlocutors and contemporaries—those being confronted by these words—failing to see this clearly. Understanding 'Black Power' would have required, among other things, some investment in the political work of achieving critical distance from white conceptions of racial power. Those who at-

[14] On this qualification, see (Lorde 2007).

[15] Carmichael himself thought that radical change was required and acknowledged that the question of how to bring it about was an urgent and difficult one: "[I]f the ghetto had been formally and deliberately planned, instead of growing spontaneously and inevitably from the racist functioning of the various institutions that combine to make this society, it would somehow be less frightening. Without bothering to list the historic factors which contribute to this pattern—economic exploitation, political impotence, discrimination in employment and education—one can see that to correct this pattern will require far-reaching changes in the basic power-relationships and the ingrained social patterns within the society. The question is, of course, what kinds of changes are necessary, and how is it possible to bring them about?" (Carmichael 1966d: 644-5)

tached the fears of white America to the words 'Black Power' failed to achieve this critical distance. Separatism and racism were not simply feared by the white audience to whom Carmichael was responding; they were terms within which whites had historically realized their collective power (of course, with legal, political, economic, and police force that made possible the enforcement of separation or segregation). The failure to see that 'Black Power' was not a call to perpetrate these wrongs was a failure to understand how power might be claimed by blacks in ways other than whites had claimed it. For this reason, revenge perhaps, but not justice, could be heard in the call for 'Black Power.'

Discussions of integration provide a clear example of just how radical a departure from white conceptions of power would be needed to keep pace with the emerging Black Power politics. In response to accusations that 'Black Power' stood for separatism, it was not enough for Carmichael to reject separatism; he rejected integration as well (Carmichael 2003). Though this would certainly have seemed radical both to his white interlocutors and to black civil rights leaders alike, both, in his view, left white supremacy unquestioned. Integration wasn't championed by progressive whites to protect the right of affluent whites to move into black ghettoes, but, he claimed, to allow for exceptional blacks to move in white circles of privilege. It wasn't about empowering blacks and black communities, for Carmichael, it was fundamentally about negotiating the terms of inclusion into white society. As long as integration was understood in these terms, there would be no challenge to the presumption that everything good was white (Carmichael 1966b) so that even if blacks were afforded more access, it would still be on the condition of assimilation into the white mainstream. These were terms that Carmichael refused and this is why we find him distancing himself from the goal of integration saying, "For a real end to exclusion in American society that society would have to be so radically changed that the goal cannot really be defined as inclusion" (Carmichael 1966f). If integration meant the inclusion into white society (on white society's terms), that wouldn't do,

but neither would separatism if that meant adopting the values reflected in white institutions or withdrawing from them, something he probably would have regarded as an impossibility (recall his assessment that they were designed in part to maintain "the Negro community in its condition of dependence and oppression").

The racial sensibilities of progressive whites were inflamed by 'Black Power' fifty years ago and they are inflamed by 'Black lives matter' today. The interpretive conflicts that emerged in both cases result, in my view, from a failure to come to terms with the way in which these affirmations manifest resistance to white supremacy. Just as 'Black Power' implied that there was need to call for black, not white, power because power was white, so too, I understand 'Black lives matter' as articulating the need to affirm the worth of black, not white, lives because the lives that are recognized as having worth are white. It isn't a question like 'Which lives matter?'—one allegedly requiring a fully general response—that explains the sense, inchoate to some, that 'Black lives matter' is an attempt to articulate an exclusion (though this is, perhaps, why it appears, *deus ex machina*, in Butler's account), but a shared heritage, the presumption that the lives that matter are white. This way of articulating an exclusion is not simply addressed to the presence of racial injustice. Nor, against popular belief, is it merely a matter of prioritizing, highlighting, or foregrounding the vulnerability of blacks. The root of the problem isn't any violation of color-blindness, but resistance to the implication that there is not need to affirm the value of white lives. The failure to achieve critical distance from white supremacy and to engage with this critical stance on these terms leads to the resistant interpretations that we find. They result from construing these racialized assertions in terms that are native to white conceptions of power/racial affirmation as traditionally exercised. 'Black lives matter' isn't importantly different from 'Black Power' in this respect.

As I understand it, then, 'Black lives matter' isn't an exclusionary statement in any sense that might be suggested by the resistant interpretations that we find, but neither is it a statement that is

inclusive in the sense of affirming the value of white lives (among other racially identified groups). Insofar as it is a statement that is critical of prevailing assumptions, institutions, and practices that inform our sense of the lives that have worth it is not to be understood as providing reassurances that those assumptions, institutions, and practices are viable and should be upheld. Just as it would have been a mistake to assume that the call for 'Black Power' should also stand as an affirmation of white power, so too, the position that 'Black lives matter' should be seen as extending to white lives (as they are valued) is entirely misplaced. Again, I think it is as accurate to say in our present context that the goal is neither the exclusion of whites nor the inclusion of blacks within a system of values that currently excludes them as I think it would be true to say of the program of political reform associated with the Black Power movement (which is not to say that these programs are identical in either their particular goals or in their strategies for achieving them).

This is the basis for my concerns regarding the cogency of the 'Black lives matter, too' response. This formulation is offered in defensive contexts, against the charge that 'Black lives matter' is exclusionary. It is an attempt to show that 'Black lives matter' is not, in fact, exclusionary, by suggesting that it has always, at least tacitly, had the form of an inclusive statement. But this is a way of repositioning, not clarifying, 'Black lives matter.' 'Black lives matter, too' gives the impression that the goal is the inclusion of blacks within a system that does protect and reflect the value of human life and simply needs to be made to be more racially inclusive. But I do not see this as being consistent with the radical political outlook of the Black Lives Matter movement, including its recognition of the lethal oppression confronted by black men, women, and children. The response doesn't seem to acknowledge the fact that dominant ways of recognizing the value of human life, including the provision of protection and security for those lives, marginalize and exclude black lives, that this sort of exclusion is not a sign of a break-down in this system but a sign of its operation (in something like the way that feminists have argued that rape isn't aberrant

but endemic to patriarchy). This is what is given expression in the feeling that there was no way for Philando Castile, for example, to have protected himself against the police officer who had identified him as a threatening (possibly criminal) black man, not his compliance with the law nor his failure to comply with the law (with respect to his disclosure of a firearm).[16] So, 'Black lives matter, too' seems to me, on this way of hearing it, to fail to provide a defense of 'Black lives matter' that rejects the charge that it is exclusionary while also rejecting the requirement that it be shown to be inclusive, the false dilemma I spoke of earlier, and the ideological trap that Carmichael traced to white supremacy.

Those objectors who respond by saying 'All lives matter' also reinforce the idea that 'Black lives matter' is exclusionary if it isn't an affirmation that extends to white lives. They assume that racial injustices—to the extent that they are recognized—can be addressed independently of white supremacy, which is not to say that 'Black lives matter' isn't registered, in some way, as implying that it exists and that it is the target of critique, if only in being heard as implying that there's no need to affirm the value of white lives, an implication that is potentially wounding if misunderstood (just as white allies of the civil rights movement were wounded who failed to understand that 'Black Power' was only anti-white if whites made it so). As I have argued, however, the failure to appreciate the relationship between the issue of racial injustice and white supremacy and the failure to achieve distance from a white supremacist framework, makes it natural to understand 'Black lives matter' in terms of its fundamental interpretive categories, e.g., the poles of exclusion (separatism, racism) and inclusion (assimilation and integration, in Carmichael's sense). It becomes natural to think that 'Black lives matter' excludes white lives but, particularly if one is sensitive to the cause of racial justice, that this is adventitious, that racial injustices can and, so, should be addressed in a way

[16] The officer who killed Castile told investigators that he stopped Castile's car because he resembled a suspect in a robbery that occurred days earlier, not on account of a broken taillight, which was the answer he offered when asked for his reason for making the stop (Berman 2017). Castile immediately disclosed that he was carrying a firearm, one that he was licensed to carry.

that better aligns with one's values (hence the sense that 'Black lives matter' poorly expresses what could be better expressed by 'All lives matter'). 'All lives matter' is, however, just an endorsement of the "common sense" position that appears to be rejected by the Black Lives Matter movement—namely, the view that the system fundamentally recognizes the value of human life, even if only imperfectly. While it is true that 'All lives matter' doesn't invoke overtly racial language, it is, for this reason, as much a racialized assertion as 'integration' was a racialized concept on Carmichael's analysis.

If the 'All lives matter' response presents itself in the fashion of a humanism, one that fails to be deeply responsive to the oppression faced by blacks, how can we understand 'All lives matter' as an expression of solidarity? The answer to this question is, I think, suggested by the analysis: these words are spoken in solidarity when they are spoken in a way that contests this false humanism, that exposes its exclusivity. It has been suggested that this is what was intended by the sanitation workers in Memphis whose protests for decent working conditions marked the last era of the civil rights movement that would be witnessed by King and whose signs read simply 'I am a man' and 'Justice and equality for all men' (Bernasconi 2001). These protesters were not expressing their faith that social institutions adequately recognized their standing as men (human beings). That these words needed to be spoken suggests that they were spoken in the face of their exclusion.

One has to take some care, though, in understanding this exclusion, that is, in understanding what the charge of dehumanization comes to in this historical context as well as in the present day. I don't think it would be right to take this exclusion to mean that blacks are not regarded as human beings and, yet, we are seeing a humanism that opposes the assertion that black lives matter. Nor would it be right, *a fortiori*, to take this exclusion to mean that blacks are not regarded as having lives. This is, in part, why RZA's response in *Rolling Stone*, "Of course black lives matter. All lives matter; that's why I don't eat meat" isn't obviously a defense of 'Black lives matter,' though

it is in its own way an illuminating formulation ("RZA on Black Lives Matter," 2016). We instantly realize and are surprised, perhaps, to confront the realization that we were not thinking of animals as having lives (some of us are surprised because we think of animals as being meat). But while this formulation may be useful in drawing our attention to the status of animals, it doesn't directly address the dehumanization of black lives that is witnessed by 'Black lives matter' (and may, for this reason, cause deep offense). We don't think of black lives as less than lives, though this is partly what is at issue in our thinking about animals, about the ethics of eating them, for example. We wonder, Are they sentient? Do they experience pain? In a conversation with someone close to me in which I expressed my horror at the practice of grinding male chicks once they've been separated from the females, my conversation partner answered quite simply, "They're barely alive." This response makes a certain kind of sense to us, even if we have never quite heard things put in this way, even if we disagree or find it abhorrent. These are the sorts of questions we confront when it comes to animal life. In my view, they are also questions of value. Though they are different, it would seem.

I am reminded, nonetheless, of Butler's thought that the problem with 'All lives matter' is that black lives aren't included in 'all lives,' that black lives have historically been counted as less than full human lives, but also, from the other direction, that to the extent that lives are not regarded as mattering, they are not regarded as lives. This orthodoxy is certainly not original to Butler (it has been claimed, in fact, to be a moral intuition recognized by every human civilization (Taylor 1989)), but I do wonder how it can seem plausible when it is plain that 'Black lives matter' is assumed by so many to be in opposition to a humanism that they can accept, that aligns with their values. What does 'dehumanization' label if not the possibility of a rupture between having a life and having a life that matters? What is suggested by the conceptualization of human lives as illegal or as criminal, a classification that can bring about the civic death (Alexander 2010) of a human

being, a living death that is perhaps not so far off from being barely alive, after all?

## IV Hermeneutic Injustice

The interpretive conflicts around 'Black Power' and 'Black lives matter' provide us with case studies in how differences in power—political power, in particular—can shadow and render obscure the experiences of those who are politically marginalized. The distorted interpretations of these statements (labeled in a rather loose way as 'exclusionary') reflect racial understandings, true, but not ones that are suitable to interpreting statements that are resistant to them. Patterns of white supremacist thought surface not only in these distortions of meaning but also in a response like 'All lives matter.' What these interpretive responses to 'Black lives matter' suggest, particularly clearly when taken together, is that the options are either exclusion or inclusion, either a rejection of the value of white lives (principally) or an endorsement of a system that shows them to be valued and is presumed to be fundamentally racially inclusive. They fail, in this way, to be responsive to these forms of witness against that very presumption.

It would be a mistake, however, to conclude that these interpretive reactions simply miss the point and that there is, as a result, a misunderstanding that might easily be remedied. To begin with, the exclusionary interpretations of 'Black Power' and 'Black lives matter' and countervailing responses like 'All lives matter' do not make room for these statements to be heard. From within the interpretive framework that gives these responses their sense, there isn't a way of hearing these critical statements, which refuse the ideal of "inclusivity," that isn't a way of hearing them as exclusionary. Matters are further complicated by the fact that this framework is itself a powerful one, not least because it appears today to present a gratifying (even if not uncontested) claim to constituting an insight won from multi-generational efforts to recognize the equal worth of all people. That these responses (uncritically) recapitulate aspects of the system of values that is under

protest also adds distinctly to the difficulty of coming to a clear understanding of the issues.

These barriers support the idea that there is a kind of injustice in evidence in these interpretive responses that might be described as an 'interpretive injustice.' They suggest that these interpretive conflicts aren't best analyzed as involving simple misunderstandings or differences of opinion, but manipulations of meaning, their hostile resettlement, their forced confinement, responses that are continuous with other politically unjust forms of interaction and limit the ability of those who do not actively resist them to see these challenges clearly. They also present difficulties and distinct risks for those raising these challenges. In contrast to 'All lives matter,' for example, statements like 'Black lives matter' and 'Black Power' raise questions of meaning and legitimacy, which have been hostage to the racial anxieties of whites. This is, of course, due to the fact that these statements express resistance to entrenched patterns of racial thinking, so entrenched, in fact, that resistant defenses of these resistant meanings are required.

The idea of interpretive injustice is implicit in some of Carmichael's remarks addressing the distortions to which 'Black Power' was subject. In one his most sustained discussions of this topic, Carmichael treated these distortions as a facet of a more fundamental problem, namely, the dependency of blacks on "forces and institutions within the white society which have little interest in representing us honestly" (1966d). The debates around the meaning of 'Black Power' were, for him, even more evidence of the need for black power—for organization around the collective interests of black communities that would allow those interests to be honestly represented among a plurality of others in the political arena. In this way, he invites us to see that the political power exercised against these communities is also exercised through "the dictatorship of definition, interpretation and consciousness," not in a metaphorical ways, but as a form of real political control, resulting in political incursions into the collective self-understanding of a subordinated group (1966d).

As with the interpretive conflict around 'Black Power,' the interpretive conflict around 'Black

lives matter' has also been treated as an exhibit of interpretive injustice, a diagnosis made explicit in Anderson's work. While Anderson appeals to Fricker's more epistemically focused account of interpretive ('hermeneutic') injustice, there are some notable points of overlap between the two discussions. For Fricker, as for Carmichael, interpretive injustice—in its systematic rather than incidental forms—involves the discriminatory restriction of access to resources that would aid a social group to articulate their social experiences but also shows up in other forms of political powerlessness that are rooted in structural prejudices against such a group.[17] Moreover, both are concerned with barriers to the articulation of experiences which it is in their interests to understand and which are due to the dominant positioning of other social groups and to their exclusion from these spheres of power.

There are, however, some important respects in which Fricker's characterization of interpretive injustice fails to capture features of these interpretive conflicts that appear to warrant the diagnosis. This emerges most clearly if we consider one of Fricker's central cases of interpretive injustice drawn from Susan Brownmiller's (1990) memoir of the women's liberation movement in the 60s. The protagonist in this case is, Carmita Wood, an administrative assistant in Cornell's Department of Nuclear Physics, who had disturbing encounters with a professor in her workplace, which she struggled to articulate:

> As Wood told the story, the eminent man would jiggle his crotch when he stood near her desk and looked at his mail, or he'd deliberately brush against her breasts while reaching for some papers. One night as the lab workers were leaving their annual Christmas party, he cornered her in the elevator and planted some unwanted kisses on

[17] Interpretive injustice is a purely structural notion for Fricker in the sense that it is not perpetrated by any social agent (including collective agents) (Fricker 2007: 159). The same cannot be said on Carmichael's behalf and the claim doesn't seem to me to be clearly motivated (especially if agents can be responsible for the marginalization of such groups). The petitions on the part of the Fraternal Order of the Police to have 'Black lives matter' merchandise removed for sale from Walmart and Amazon (though not requesting the removal of 'Blue lives matter' merchandise) would seem to be a prime example of how such efforts can be perpetrated by agents. Why rule out the possibility that these agents might be responsible for the fruits of such efforts?

> her mouth. After the Christmas party incident, Carmita Wood went out of her way to use the stairs in the lab building in order to avoid a repeat encounter, but the stress of the furtive molestations and her efforts to keep the scientist at a distance while maintaining cordial relations with his wife, whom she liked, brought on a host of physical symptoms. Wood developed chronic back and neck pains. Her right thumb tingled and grew numb. She requested a transfer to another department, and when it didn't come through, she quit. She walked out the door and went to Florida for some rest and recuperation. Upon her return she applied for unemployment insurance. When the claims investigator asked why she had left her job after eight years, Wood was at a loss to describe the hateful episodes. She was ashamed and embarrassed. Under prodding—the blank on the form needed to be filled in—she answered that her reasons had been personal. Her claim for unemployment benefits was denied. (Fricker 2007: 150)

Of course, in reading this description, we today don't struggle to find the words to articulate this experience. But it was only after meeting with other women who had experienced similar disturbing encounters, in settings in which these incidents might be freely discussed and analyzed in light of other experiences faced by women at this time, that an incipient consciousness of this phenomenon emerged. When these women decided to take action but needed to name what it was that they were experiencing, they decided on 'sexual harassment.' Before this, these women might only have been able to articulate their experiences in the terms that would be offered by men in their workplaces, including those guilty of this misconduct: perhaps flirtation or excessive flirtation.

What makes this case a case of interpretive injustice for Fricker? Well, to begin with there's the fact that Wood is unable to articulate an aspect of her experience of the social world that it was very much in her interests to articulate and to understand. Fricker describes this as a form of "cognitive

disablement," one that left Wood "deeply troubled, confused, and isolated" (Fricker 2007: 151). The *only* readily available language for describing her disturbing interactions with the professor would have been terms like 'flirtation' that not only failed to capture what was going on and why it was a problem but that would have reflected the interests of her harasser and the impoverished understanding, one assumes, of the men around her. Moreover, the fact that she was a woman and he a man was not incidental to Wood's incapacity. Wood's inability to articulate her experience was connected to the marginalization of women's voices with the academy, within the law, politics, and other spheres of influence. She was unable to articulate what she was experiencing because she and other women were unjustly excluded from contributing, in Fricker's parlance, to the collective understanding of what was for them a highly significant aspect of the social world.

Once we have a clear picture of the features of what Fricker takes to be a central case of interpretive injustice, it becomes plain that there are several striking disanologies between the interpretive debates surrounding 'Black lives matter' and the situation of Carmita Wood and many other women of her generation who weren't yet able to diagnose the predatory sexual behavior that they encountered, at least as characterized by Fricker.[18] For one, I would not describe black Americans—the group of marginalized speakers that Anderson identifies in the context of this interpretive debate—as cognitively disabled (in Fricker's sense). Carmichael's words resonate here: the meaning of 'Black lives matter' is clear to those who don't attach the fears of white America to them and though I have claimed that these speakers give ground to these fears in their defenses of these words—in saying, for example, that 'Black lives matter' means 'Black lives matter, too'—this doesn't detract from the fact that these words, particularly when spoken outside of defensive contexts, are understood and used with clear purpose.

The crux of the problem here concerns the way in which 'collective understandings' is being

[18] For an alternative characterization, see (Mason 2011).

invoked to account for systematic cases of interpretive injustice. In the case of Carmita Wood, one can see the point in Fricker's making reference to collective understandings in characterizing the injustice that she suffers. The difficulty there was that a certain inadequate understanding of her encounters with the harassing professor was hegemonic; it wasn't simply that Wood and the professor shared the same understanding of their encounter but that it was the *only* going understanding. This is a context in which there was a struggle to come to an adequate understanding and to give voice to it. But are we forced, if we want to bring out the interpretive injustice in the Wood case, to construe 'collective understandings' as hegemonic in that sense?

There is, it seems to me, no reason to think so or to hold Fricker to such a view. When we begin to rethink the notion, different possibilities emerge, of course. There may, for example, be understandings of aspects of the social world that are shared in the sense of being intelligible to us all but that are nonetheless at variance with one another (this captures important features of the relationship between Democrats and Republicans, for example). However, in thinking through the interpretive conflicts around 'Black Power' and 'Black lives matter' it is particularly useful to appeal to dominant and resistant understandings, where dominant understandings need not be collective in either of the above senses—neither hegemonic nor even universally intelligible—but rather in the sense that one can be subjected to them. Fricker herself discusses the possibility of resisting "authoritative constructions" (e.g., the construction of homosexuality as a 'sin,' at one time at least) that can impinge collectively but not uniformly, which I take to be rather close to the suggestion that I am making (Fricker 2007: 165-6). Though her particular illustration focuses on an individual rather than communal form of resistance, it is worth noting that Fricker describes the individual's critical response as a form of "rebellion" (a term resonant with collective political associations) that can catalyze other rebellions, and then pivots as, one might expect, from the individual case to a collective one, citing the consciousness raising efforts in which Carmita Wood herself eventually

participated (Fricker 2007: 167).[19]

It seems to me, then, that if one wants to treat these cases as cases of interpretive injustice one has to avail oneself of the distinction between resistant understandings and the collective (i.e. dominant) understandings to which they are addressed. This gives us a way of acknowledging that 'Black live matter,' for example, does express an understanding of the shared social world (one that is resistant). It also allows us to get a grip on an initially puzzling feature of the interpretive conflict surrounding these words, namely, the diminished intelligibility of each position in this debate to those holding an opposed position. I have argued that 'All lives matter' proponents fail to understand 'Black lives matter,' but proponents of 'Black lives matter' have also failed to diagnose the motivation for thinking that 'Black lives matter' is exclusionary. If the one articulates a dominant understanding and the other a resistant one, we can appreciate the possibility of this kind of alienation. This way of theorizing about the cases that I have taken as central also allows us to develop in a very natural way on the idea that there are prejudicial interpretive lacunae: resistant understandings, challenges to dominant racial understandings, are another natural site of interpretive injustice.

These adjustments to Fricker's account can be made rather smoothly, but they have quite far-reaching implications for her companion account of interpretive justice. Fricker's basic picture assumes that the structure of the interpretive situation is something like a great conversation to which some parties are unjustly excluded. The Carmita Wood case provides a dramatic illustration of the possibility that some may, through their exclusion, have no voice with which to speak out. This kind of exclusion or marginalization is, by definition, for Fricker, always socially coerced (not a matter of 'opting out,' for instance) and, in her view, invariably constitutes a form of pow-

[19] For these reasons, while I am sympathetic to the distinction that Mason (2011) draws between dominant and non-dominant discourses in her criticism of Fricker, her charge that "Fricker's analysis of hermeneutical injustice does not account for the possibility that marginalized groups can be silenced relative to dominant discourses without being prevented from understanding or expressing their own experiences" is somewhat overstated. For a similar, but more nuanced criticism, see (Medina 2012) and Chapter 3 of (Medina 2013).

erlessness (Fricker 2007: 153). This form of marginalization is harmful, primarily, in that one's exclusion from "the pooling of knowledge" (Fricker 2007: 162) results in a collective impoverishment and, therefore, critically, in the diminished intelligibility or outright opacity of the experiences of those who are marginalized. This basic structure invites (though doesn't necessitate) a certain conception of interpretive justice, one that consists in securing the full participation of all parties in the great conversation, enabling speakers who had been marginalized to articulate and contribute their understandings for collective benefit. Justice requires listening to these speakers in a way that approximates (and facilitates the development of) the ideal of a fully inclusive conversational situation.

Once we move away from this basic picture and acknowledge that there may be resistant and dominant sites of interlocution, however, this vision of interpretive justice no longer seems appropriate. To begin with, one's marginal participation in a community of dominantly-positioned interlocutors may afford one with opportunities for developing forms of resistance, including radical forms of resistance, to dominant understandings. So even if the exclusion of these speakers within dominant communities is forced, that is not to be confused with its constituting a form of powerlessness, not as long as we acknowledge the existence of resistant communities and give consideration to the vulnerability of these speakers who are subordinated within dominant ones. Far from being disempowering, then, this exclusion can provide the basis for solidarity with other subordinated speakers, shared understanding, and even liberation. When these channels for formulating resistant understandings are available, one must ask what would be gained from aiming for full participation in conversation with dominantly positioned speaker; no longer can we draw the conclusion from collective impoverishment to the impoverished understanding of marginalized groups.

My central cases offer, in fact, strong considerations against this sort of reconciliation. We

learn from these resistant struggles that the ideal of inclusion, whether cited in connection with interpretive or other political contexts, is not itself beyond critique. We should, in fact, be particularly wary of the suggestion that inclusion in the great conversation constitutes an ideal of justice when it has come under criticism by those engaging in such struggles and may itself (as I have argued) obscure the aims of such resistant communities.[20]

Along these lines, it is worth bearing in mind that, for some within the Black Power movement, it was a presupposition of coalition-building that dominantly positioned parties wishing to be allied with resistant communities in anti-racist efforts—and here there is no deep division between political and interpretive efforts—organize themselves and develop an anti-racist politics *before* the feasibility of coalition could be assessed. The reasons for this were, in part, practical, a matter of how to best allocate resources and a matter of risk calculation, but also (as we might describe it) epistemic; the questions posed for communities of dominantly positioned parties, even those committed to anti-racist struggle, are in many cases different than those faced by resistant communities and the responsibility for answering to them is not in every case shared.[21]

This raises connected questions concerning whether we should envision the ideal interpretive situation not only as one where marginalized groups join the conversation as equals but also as one where their distinctive contributions are brought forward to be taken up (if fit to be) as collective understandings for collective benefit, though, most especially, for the benefit of marginalized groups who suffer the collective lack most acutely. This might represent one kind of reconciliation, but it won't serve as the model for my central cases. As a preliminary, it would be useful to

[20] It isn't an accident that Carmichael invokes a negative formulation just where he's expressing opposition to this ideal. ("For a real end to exclusion in American society that society would have to be so radically changed that the goal cannot really be defined as inclusion.")

[21] In this, I am in agreement with Medina's view that "differently situated subjects' obligations with respect to hermeneutical [interpretive] justice need to be assessed in a pluralistic and relational way," (2013: 117) despite the fact that his illustrations, which focus on situations in which these obligations may be suspended and even reversed (drawing, for example, on discussions of strategic ignorance in (Hoagland 2007) and (Bailey 2007)), hang on prudential rather than epistemic considerations and are aimed at preserving or inducing ignorance in dominantly-positioned parties.

consider what might appear, against this theoretical background, to be a peculiar stance toward what would widely be cited as among the most important interpretive gains—shifts in collective understanding—of the civil rights movement:

> I maintain that every civil rights bill in this country was passed for white people, not for black people. For example, I am black. I know that. I also know that while I am black I am a human being. Therefore I have the right to go into any public place. White people didn't know that. Every time I tried to go into a public place they stopped me. So some boys had to write a bill to tell that white man, "He's a human being; don't stop him." That bill was for the white man, not for me. I knew I could vote all the time and that it wasn't a privilege but my right. Every time I tried I was shot, killed or jailed, beaten or economically deprived. So somebody had to write a bill to tell white people, "When a black man comes to vote, don't bother him." That bill was for white people. I know I can live anyplace I want to live. It is white people across this country who are incapable of allowing me to live where I want. You need a civil rights bill, not me. The failure of the civil rights bill isn't because of Black Power or because of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee or because of the rebellions that are occurring in the major cities. That failure is due to the whites' incapacity to deal with their own problems inside their own communities. (Carmichael 2003)

Carmichael's stance seems strange against the ideal articulated by Fricker. Not only does he insist on the importance of continuing to regard understandings that have been taken up as *resistant* rather than collective but he also stresses that these understandings are, if I may put it this way, for the epistemic benefit of whites, not blacks. Why, though, would it be of importance to understand the Civil Rights Act, for example, as a document that tells whites what blacks already know?

I take it that the central concern for Carmichael in this passage, and in many other places

throughout his body of work, is to make the point that whites are responsible for undertaking anti-racist efforts (including, where appropriate, the failure of such efforts) and that some of these anti-racist efforts need to be addressed to the "incapacities" of whites. If civil rights bills didn't articulate rights that had to be understood by blacks, that should make a difference to our understanding of where the burden of responsibility lay for their success or failure and also to our understanding of what it was to exercise responsibility for their success. The exasperation in this passage isn't in reaction, merely, to the fact that whites needed to be told that blacks were permitted to move unmolested through public spaces but, more fundamentally, to the incapacity that is manifested in the need to be told. An account like Fricker's that would see civil rights legislation as a contribution to our collective understanding of race, with its focus on testimony and model listening as a locus of interpretive justice, isn't well positioned to capture the fact that being told, in some cases, is besides the point and even marks a division between these communities.

What, then, do we make of the racial understandings articulated by 'Black Power' and 'Black lives matter'? Aren't these statements to be taken up as collective understandings? It is far from obvious to me that they are.[22] The just listener, for Fricker, is a person who has a critical awareness of her social identity in relation to social identities of marginalized speakers and its potential bearing on the intelligibility of this sort of speech. She uses this awareness to correct for the distorting influence of prejudices attaching to the speaker's social identity that may become activated in an

[22] Gaile Pohlhaus Jr. seems to make a similar assumption in saying that "When one genuinely cares to know something about the world as experienced from social positions other than one's own, one must use of epistemic resources suited to (and so developed from) those situations" (2012: 731). She does note that a "prerequisite" for acquiring these epistemic resources is an interest in learning to use them, and in some cases, perhaps, the issue to focus on is the misuse of resources drawn from resistant communities. As I write, criticism is being voiced against those using the hashtag #SayHerName to witness the death of Heather Heyer, a white woman who was killed by a white supremacist in Charlottesville, VA (Gray 2017). The objection is that a hashtag that is associated with a gender-inclusive racial justice movement that focuses particular attention on police brutality against black women is misused in calling attention to the death of a woman who, on account of being white, isn't at risk of race-based invisibility (one can imagine that she used her visibility as a white woman for the purpose of lending visibility to the counter-protest she attended). I think it is important to be critical, however, of the assumption that these resources—among them, critical affirmations like 'Black Power' and 'Black lives matter'—are in every case to be used by dominantly-positioned parties (even if they genuinely care). This seems to me, to adapt Pohlhaus's beautiful formulation, to confuse an attempt to know with another with an attempt to know as them (2002).

encounter, aiming to correct for these distortions by considering whether what the speaker is "struggling" to say—or, we might now say, what the listener is struggling to hear—"would make good sense if the attempt to articulate it were being made in a more inclusive hermeneutical climate—one without structural identity prejudice" (Fricker 2007: 170). Again, if we are guided by Fricker's account, the participants in the resistant struggles that I have been discussing seem to work against themselves; they not only speak in ways that inflame the racial sensibilities of well-intentioned interlocutors but they appear not take it as a goal to avoid this result. But it seems to me that their efforts are not counterproductive or uncooperative, but rather, that Fricker's account obscures aspects of these interpretive encounters that are of vital importance.

The resistant struggles that have come to expression in these ways militate against the forms of idealization that are central to Fricker's account. The motivation for these forms of idealization is clear enough: one has to take account of the prejudicial impact of a speaker's marginalization on one's attempt to understand what the speaker is saying and on the speaker's attempt to say it or mutual understanding will suffer. The mistake, however, is to assume that one has to suppress one's understanding of structural racial prejudices and even the expression of one's racial sensibilities to do that.[23] The point of this resistant speech is not to be found in an ideal interpretive setting. When Carmichael called for *Black* Power, the basis for his identification was the oppression of blacks as a group and, as I have argued, both 'Black Power' and 'Black lives matter' have the point

[23] Pohlhaus makes a similar point when criticizing Fricker's claim that Atticus Finch and his daughter Scout exercised virtue in receiving the testimony of Tom Robinson by "forgetting" his skin color (Fricker 2007: 96), saying "[I]t seems that race *ought* to figure somehow here and not just in the sense that Finch, recognizing his whiteness in relation to Robinson, might self-reflectively try to correct for prejudice...Indeed, if Finch were to disregard race, how is it that he understands very clearly that the jury *will not believe* Robinson? And if Scout, in imitating Finch's practice of "listening without watching" really *is* able to believe Robinson because she has forgotten his race, why does Scout conclude that Robinson must be telling the truth because, "a respectable Negro would never go up into somebody's yard of his own volition"?" (Pohlhaus 2012) Of course, in suggesting that we interpret the words of others in a setting without structural identity prejudice—racial identity prejudice being our focus—it would be open to Fricker to defend the claim that aspects of the racial identity of a speaker may come into view (in the same way that some advocates of color-blindness allow for the recognition of suitably modified (depoliticized) racial categories). I take the point, however, to be that we have to understand Tom Robinson's speech (both its actual meaning and the meaning it will be taken by the jurors to have) against the context of the white supremacist society in which he finds himself.

that they have by articulating an exclusion in a way that disrupts structural racism and the racial sensibilities in harmony with it. Insofar as one can't begin to make sense of these statements without understanding them as issuing from a racially oppressed group of speakers, one cannot begin to understand what they mean under such an idealized setting, which is, indeed a form of color-blindness (though markedly different than misinterpreting these statements in the ways described above). If the goal of resistant communities isn't inclusion in the conversation with dominantly-positioned parties, if marginalization isn't invariably a form of powerlessness, and if the point of speaking out isn't to contribute an understanding for collective benefit, then we can make much better sense of resistant speakers who appear to be saying what they already know in the way that they know it and demanding that those who don't take responsibility for that. When we think of interpretive justice in the case of this sort of speech, it is important to recognize it as resistant speech and to recognize that its effects are meant to be disruptive and disorienting; those who need to hear it would benefit from the critical use of their responses, not idealization. Interpretive justice, in this setting, consists at least in part in an attempt to discern the ways in which this resistant speech disrupts racial systems that are oppressive for those who are speaking out. From this perspective, to hear 'Black lives matter' as aiming to exclude or as expressing a desire for inclusion (perhaps confusedly) is to find one's footing but at the cost of missing an opportunity to lose one's orientation.

## V Conclusion

I began with two sets of puzzles concerning the interpretive conflict around 'Black lives matter.' First, what did 'All lives matter' mean in the context of early protests if it wasn't used in opposition to 'Black lives matter'? Second, how can there be an opposition between these statements today and how can 'Black lives matter' be taken to be exclusionary if it is meant to draw our attention

to an exclusion? Beginning with the second, I argued that while 'Black lives matter' draws critical attention to the exclusion of black lives from among those lives that are shown to matter, it does so neither by claiming that only black lives matter nor by claiming that black lives matter, too, where that is understood as an affirmation of the value of white lives and as a claim for black lives to be recognized as sharing in this value. In much the same way, 'Black Power' drew critical attention to the fact that (political) power was white but was neither a call for black separatism or anti-white racism nor an affirmation of white power and a call, in addition, for blacks to have a share in it. The hope was for a transformation so radical that it couldn't be described as inclusion in white society, a hope that I take to underlie the Black Lives Matter movement as well. But this is, in large part, what makes statements like 'Black Power' and 'Black lives matter' difficult for many to understand. The ideal of racial inclusion and the endorsement of our political life as, fundamentally, racially inclusive—which is given expression today in the 'All lives matter' response and which was contested earlier by those very words—is a piece of common sense among white interpreters and departures from it are understood in terms of traditionally white exercises of political power and group affirmation.

If this account is right, then 'Black lives matter' isn't misunderstood because it expresses something poorly (despite the claim that it would have been understood if only the 'too' had been expressed overtly (Simon 2016)), but because the interpretive deck is stacked against it. The very forms of racial understanding that it aims to disrupt make it difficult for many white interpreters to understand and it is clear that political resources have been heavily weighted in their favor. There is, then, good support for treating its diminished intelligibility within this community as an instance of interpretive injustice just as there is good support for Carmichael's assessment that the failure on the part of progressive whites to understand the meaning of 'Black Power' demonstrated the need for black power and reflected a history of the "dictatorship of definition, interpretation

and consciousness." However, once we reflect on the ways in which 'Black lives matter' and 'Black Power' express resistance to dominant racial understandings, the more ill-suited Fricker's account seems, particularly given that its dominant epistemic image is that of the pooling of knowledge and its dominant image of interpretive justice is that of the ideal conversation. From this perspective, it is difficult to understand the importance of and to properly accommodate such observations as that a statement like 'Black lives matter' reflects the knowledge of *black* communities, that it is spoken as an affirmation of what is known by these communities, that it shouldn't have to be told, but when it is, it is told for the epistemic benefit of whites, that it remains, in other words, a resistant form of understanding. It is, moreover, difficult to understand the fact that it isn't calibrated to white racial sensibilities, that it cannot be understood within the idealized setting that Fricker recommends, and that the interest in saying it is less to enter into conversation than to provoke a realization of how much needs to be done before there can be conversation.

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