

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 THE INTERPRETIVE DEBATE

The phrase ‘Black lives matter’ began its life as ‘Our lives matter.’ It was first articulated at the time of the acquittal of George Zimmerman for the murder of Trayvon Martin, an unarmed black teenager he killed in 2012. It circulated more widely two years later under the now familiar guise of ‘Black lives matter’ after a police officer killed Michael Brown, another unarmed black teenager. Large-scale protests in response to the killings of unarmed black men, women, and youth perpetrated and excused under the auspices of law enforcement have made ‘Black lives matter’ a familiar phrase, but one that remains opaque to many.

‘Black lives matter’ is construed by many, principally white, interpreters as having an exclusionary interpretation, as meaning something roughly along the lines of ‘*Only* black lives matter.’ This is a misunderstanding and one so striking that it calls for explanation. A point of consensus among those who would affirm that black lives matter is that this affirmation points to an exclusion, i.e., the exclusion of black lives from among the lives that are shown to matter. Some have even suggested, when pressed to defend these words, that ‘Black lives matter’ calls attention to an exclusion in an inclusive way; it really means ‘Black lives matter, *too*.’ How is it, then, that though these words are meant to draw attention to an exclusion, they are taken by some interpreters to be exclusionary? And why is it white interpreters, principally, who have misunderstood ‘Black lives matter’ in this way?

Similar questions might be raised in connection with the ‘All lives matter’-response to ‘Black lives matter.’ What motivates the opposition expressed by these words and why is it expressed in just this way? That it does express opposition is clear despite obfuscations like ‘Of course, black lives matter; all lives matter,’ which makes ‘Black lives matter’ out to be a trivial consequence of an obvious truth. The fact is that it is neither taken to be trivial by the person who affirms these words without qualification nor by the person who offers this qualification with the aim

of neutralizing them. It has been suggested that ‘All lives matter’ has come to have this power to express opposition, despite being offered as an expression of solidarity in early Black Lives Matter protests, through its association with an oppositional movement (a standing possibility, it is assumed, for any political slogan, which it is taken on this proposal to be) (Olasov 2016). However, even granting the assumption that these words were used in solidarity early on, this proposal not only fails to address the question of what those words meant in that early context,¹ it fails to make sense of important features of the resistance they find. ‘All lives matter’ is often put forward in a conciliatory spirit, in an effort to establish common ground, rather than in the spirit of staking an oppositional position. It 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.

Still, something close to a consensus has emerged on the part of theorists who have offered detailed answers to these interpretive questions. It is that these interpretive responses are rooted in an ethos or ideology of color-blindness, one that has flourished in the post-civil rights landscape.² As an ideal, color-blindness directs us to aim to make race an insignificant category in public life; it tells us that race should not matter. Though it has been argued that taking color-blindness as an aim is compatible with adopting public policies under conditions of racial inequality that are color-conscious rather than color-blind (e.g., affirmative action) (Gutmann 1996), the versions of this ideal that have come under heavy criticism either promote the adoption of color-blind public policies as an integral part of realizing a public realm in which there is no racial inequality or have

¹ Or rather, this isn’t recognized as a question at all on this approach: “[T]hey [sc. 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).

² In addition to the philosophical defenses discussed, see Jonathan Havercroft and David Owen’s diagnosis of the ‘All lives matter’-response and, in particular, their 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).

resulted in a rejection or significant qualification of the claim that we live under conditions of racial inequality at all. The view that color-blindness, as it manifests in these ways, is at the root of the debate around 'Black lives matter' is evident, for example, in the responses of Judith Butler (2015) and, more recently, Luvelle Anderson (2017). Butler, for instance, claims that though each of the parties to this debate is attempting to address the question, 'Which lives matter?' those objecting to 'Black lives matter' assume that this question calls for a "race-blind" (and, presumably, exhaustive) answer (Butler 2015). If one takes this color-blind perspective, then 'Black lives matter' would appear to be exclusionary and also to fall short of the ideally inclusive answer, namely, 'All lives matter.' Similarly, Anderson claims that 'Black lives matter' can only be understood as exclusionary if one is committed to a post-racial ideal (the sort that engenders a commitment to a race-blind public realm under conditions of racial inequality) or believes that race no longer matters (a view that he labels 'idiot post-racialism,' following Paul C. Taylor (2014)). The 'All lives matter'-response, by contrast, conforms to the requirement that public discourse be color-blind and to the world view of those who do not see the Black Lives Matter movement as responding to instances of racial injustice.

This style of explanation would seem to be supported by a number of recent works (in jurisprudence and sociology, for example) that take color-blindness to be the prevailing racial ideology of our time. In *The New Jim Crow*, for instance, Michelle Alexander claims that we are living in an era of color-blindness, an era in which "it is no longer socially permissible to use race explicitly as a justification for discrimination, exclusion, and social contempt" (2010: 2). According to Alexander, however, this has not altered basic forms of racial domination that were manifest in the time of Jim Crow as much as it has made them harder to discern:

Rather than rely on race, we use our criminal justice system to label people of color "criminals" and then engage in all the practices we supposedly left behind. Today it is

perfectly legal to discriminate against criminals in nearly all the ways that it was once legal to discriminate against African Americans. Once you're labeled a felon, the old forms of discrimination—employment discrimination, housing discrimination, denial of the right to vote, denial of educational opportunity, denial of food stamps and other public benefits, and exclusion from jury service—are suddenly legal. As a criminal, you have scarcely more rights, and arguably less respect, than a black man living in Alabama at the height of Jim Crow. We have not ended racial caste in America; we have merely redesigned it. (2010: 2)

She elsewhere characterizes color-blindness in descriptive terms as a “consensus that prevails in America today, i.e, the widespread belief that race no longer matters,” a belief that she claims “has blinded us to the realities of race in our society and facilitated the emergence of a new caste system” (2010: 11-12). In *Racism Without Racists*, Eduardo Bonilla-Silva develops a very similar critique. Where Alexander speaks of the New Jim Crow, Bonilla-Silva speaks of the new racial structure that comes into place in the post-civil rights period, a racial structure that he elsewhere describes as a white supremacist structure. Color-blindness is, for him, an ideology that emerges at this time and though this carries no implication of distortion—a racial ideology is simply, for him, a racially-based framework that actors use to explain/justify/challenge the racial order under which they live—it is, on his analysis, an ideology that is used by whites to reinforce a (new) white supremacist racial order.

These critiques have made color-blindness so focal it is tempting to think that the interpretive responses to ‘Black lives matter’ have to be explained in terms of it. In fact, if we continue looking in this direction, we might see ‘All lives matter’ as the perfect evocation of the era of color-blindness. It is possible, however, to be overly impressed by the explanatory reach of this line of research. One of my central aims in this paper is to address the interpretive questions raised above by considering

the interpretive debate that emerged around 'Black Power' in the 1960s, long before color-blindness could be said to be a prevailing ethos. As I will argue, the debate around 'Black lives matter' bears striking similarity to that debate, suggesting that color-blindness is not central to an explanation of it. An examination of that earlier debate and the setting within which it took place sheds light on the current racial order, but it also reveals the ways in which appeals to color-blindness add to the distortions to which 'Black lives matter' is subject. What becomes apparent when we consider these historical parallels is that these appeals (1) locate the power these words have to provoke in the wrong place (it lies in their exposing systems of value/power as white, not in the invocation of blackness itself); (2) misrepresent the nature of the provocation (it lies not in identifying whiteness as a politically significant category but in identifying it as a locus of domination); and (3) misrepresents the way in which 'Black lives matter' manifests resistance to white supremacy and so isn't well-positioned to account for the misunderstandings and reactions it finds (missing, for example, the points of connection between 'Black lives matter, too' and 'All lives matter').

The account that I develop sees 'Black lives matter' as a critical affirmation of what is known by black Americans, the referent of 'Our lives matter,' in response to threats, among other things, to that group-understanding. As we will see, thinking of 'Black lives matter' as a critical affirmation of what is known by the black community in the face of threats to it will be important in evaluating the suggestion that the interpretive responses under scrutiny in this paper are evidence of an *interpretive injustice* (Anderson 2017). This kind of suggestion was made early on by Stokely Carmichael who first spoke the words 'Black Power' and who also claimed that the confusion regarding its meaning was evidence of the need for Black Power (1966d). A version of this idea has recently been articulated by Miranda Fricker (2007) who uses it to capture the situation of social groups that are, due to systemic group prejudice, unjustly harmed in being prevented from communicating an understanding of vital aspects of their social reality. Fricker's central cases are ones

where this failure is due to inarticulacy; an absence of a social understanding where one should be. However, if Fricker's account of interpretive injustice is to be brought to bear on my central cases, it has to be modified so as to accommodate the presence of an understanding (expressed by 'Black lives matter'). As I discuss, it can be modified in this direction, but this modification brings out difficulties associated with her companion account of interpretive justice. In particular, I argue that this account offers an ideal procedure for understanding 'Black lives matter' that promises to obscure its meaning. I also suggest that some of Carmichael's remarks on the interpretive shifts occasioned by the Civil Rights movement can help to bring out the ways in which Fricker's account of interpretive justice fails to illuminate and to do justice to several striking features of the interpretive debate around 'Black lives matter.'

II SEEING PAST COLOR-BLINDNESS

I want to focus here on the question of why 'Black lives matter' is heard as having an exclusionary interpretation and why those who hear it in this way take 'All lives matter' to be an appropriate response. As I remarked earlier, I take these interpreters to be expressing their opposition in this way but I neither assume that they are aiming to stake an oppositional position, one that they take to be unavailable, in principle, to their interlocutors, nor that these interpreters are all of them insensitive to racial injustice. In fact, in pursuing these interpretive questions, I will be particularly concerned with white interpreters who are alive to issues of racial injustice, understand 'Black lives matter' as a response to instances of racial injustice, and yet still regard these words as failing to align with their most deeply held values. In offering answers to these questions I will also depart from other accounts, including those I earlier outlined, which do not take seriously, 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 debate.

Before approaching these questions directly, it will be useful to note some difficulties with the preliminary characterizations of this debate that have been offered. Commentators have tended to divide the debate 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 as having an exclusionary interpretation (as meaning something like ‘Only black lives matter’). This is, for example, the way that Anderson, who endorses the view that ‘Black lives matter’ means ‘Black lives matter, too,’ characterizes the debate.³ However, in presenting the debate in this way, one gives the impression that it is common ground that these words take a stand on the value of non-black lives and, in particular, on the value of white lives.

I take issue with this characterization, in part, because it presents us with a false dilemma. We are 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, but ‘Black lives matter’ need not be understood as doing either. On its face, it does not and so one must ask why it has seemed obvious to parties on both sides of the debate that it issues in such an evaluation. Even if it is assumed that ‘Black lives matter’ points to the exclusion of black lives from among the lives that are shown to matter, still we might wonder why ‘Black lives matter’ should be thought to raise the question of the value of white lives and, beyond this, why exclusion and inclusion are assumed to be the terms within which this question should be framed (though perhaps the focus on exclusion in that formulation goes some way toward suggesting this). These are issues to which we will return. For now, we can think of this as a presupposition of the interpretive debate around ‘Black lives matter,’ one that is

³ See (Moshman 2017) for another recent example.

shared by those expressing opposition to these words as well as by many of those defending them who in offering defenses for them imply that ‘Black lives matter’ would be exclusionary if not for the fact that ‘Black lives matter’ *is*, implicitly, an inclusive statement.

Another misleading feature of this preliminary characterization is that it overlooks the fact that reconstructions like ‘Black lives matter, too’ are offered in defensive contexts. These are contexts in which there is not only pressure to correct the misunderstandings of white interpreters but also to provide reassurances to those who hear ‘Black lives matter’ as having an exclusionary interpretation. Some well-intentioned people have gone to great lengths to offer this kind of reassurance. President 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 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*.’

To speak of this inclusive interpretation standing opposed to an exclusionary one also obscures how various the misconstruals of ‘Black lives matter’ are. Aside from the fact that some hear ‘Black lives matter’ as racially divisive while others hear it as racist, there are some interpreters who don’t quite know what it means but, 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 earlier 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.

These observations suggest an alternative characterization of the interpretive debate around 'Black lives matter.' What they suggest, in particular, is that 'Black lives matter,' though ostensibly focused on black lives and though giving voice to a black solidarity movement that is centrally concerned with ensuring the security of those lives, is nonetheless perceived by many white interpreters as raising a challenge to the value that white lives are taken to have and, specifically, that 'Black lives matter' is a form of group affirmation that is racist, racially divisive, or otherwise poses a threat to those lives. There is also a widely shared presumption that the alternative to a system of values that is, broadly speaking, racially exclusionary is one that is inclusive of whites, an ideal that is manifest in both the 'All lives matter'-response as well as in inclusive reconstructions of 'Black lives matter' such as 'Black lives matter, too.'

There is, I submit, a historical precedent that can help us to understand why this interpretive conflict takes this form. 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.⁴ 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,⁵ 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 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,

⁴ 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.

⁵ 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).

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%) and, yet, where property ownership was virtually the sole prerogative of whites (according to Carmichael, 86 white families owned 90% of the land)(Carmichael 1966e). Carmichael and other members of the Student Non-violent 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 (Carmichael 1966c).

The decision to organize an independent political party was not 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.⁶ It was in the midst of these efforts, and in the face of uncertainty

⁶ 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 contributed to this loss of trust when it failed

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.⁷

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 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

(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).

⁷ 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” (Ture and Hamilton 1967: 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.

in a situation of such profound dependency that he thought it should be analyzed as a kind of colonial dependency (Ture and Hamilton 1967).⁸ 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 themselves 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).⁹ 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 about the oppositional interpretations of ‘Black Power’? How do they fit into this historical context?

In a number of writings, Carmichael connects these responses to white fears associated with groups

⁸ See also Baldwin’s (1966) description of Harlem as an occupied territory with respect to policing practices. For a defense of this view within sociology, see (Blauner 1972).

⁹ ‘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).

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 oppositional 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, un-

educated, 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 oppositional 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 inherited white status. 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.¹⁰ 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.¹¹

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 attached 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

¹⁰ On this qualification, see (Lorde 2007).

¹¹ 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)

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 ghettos, 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. In working through the historical parallels between them, I want to begin with the question of why ‘Black lives matter’ should be thought to bear at all on the value of white lives.

I would like to propose that 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 shown to have worth are white. This does not merely mark an exclusion, which might be incidental, but a feature of a system of domination.¹² So against what is suggested by popular defenses of ‘Black lives matter,’ these words do not merely convey a need to prioritize, highlight, or foreground the vulnerability of blacks, leaving aside all question of how it is that white lives are valued. Nor, against color-blind approaches, does the provocation lie in the invocation of blackness, but in the implication that there is (already) a racialized system of value in place, a white system of value, that excludes in virtue of being a locus of domination. It is in the idea, in other words, that there is not need to affirm the value of white lives, an implication that could easily be misunderstood and that I think has been by progressive whites who are wounded by it (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).

Like ‘Black Power,’ ‘Black lives matter’ poses a challenge to a racialized system of value/power but one that has likewise proved difficult to understand because this system has deeply influenced

¹² Butler gestures at this sort of complexity in the context of thinking about the lives that we take to be grievable, saying, “I am referring not only to humans not regarded as humans, and thus to a restrictive conception of the human that is based upon their exclusion. It is not a matter of simple entry of the excluded into an established ontology, but an insurrection at the level of ontology, a critical opening up of the questions, What is real? Whose lives are real? How might reality be remade? Those who are unreal have, in a sense, already suffered the violence of derealization” (Butler 2004: 33).

the interpretive resources available to understand it. Again, the problem is not that racial discourse has been suppressed, it is that the racialized conceptions—roughly, of exclusion and inclusion—that have framed the interpretive responses to ‘Black lives matter’ are inadequate in the case of critical understandings that would eschew both (recall Carmichael’s statement that a transformation so profound was to be hoped for that the goal could not properly be stated in terms of inclusion).

‘Black lives matter’ has, on the one hand, come to be associated with a variety of exclusionary interpretations that are, in essentials, the very ones that arose in connection with ‘Black Power.’ These interpretations result from construing these racial assertions in terms that are native to white conceptions of racial power/group affirmation as traditionally exercised. This is, in my view, an explanation for the confusion on the part of black proponents of ‘Black lives matter’ regarding these misconstruals. It does not stem from the fact, as it is sometimes claimed, that ‘Black lives matter’ simply means ‘Black lives matter, too.’ That is a way of repositioning, not clarifying, ‘Black lives matter’ and not, in fact, a defense of these words if, as I have proposed, they expose a white system of values as a locus of domination. There is no question, in that case, of recognizing white lives as they are valued alongside black lives, as though the issue were simply one of the equal recognition of difference.¹³ ‘Black lives matter’ could no more be said to mean ‘Black lives matter, too’ than ‘Black power’ could be said to mean ‘Black power, too.’ The ideal of inclusion that is reflected in this line of response is, on my proposal, as much a racialized ideal as integration was for Carmichael. For this reason, then, ‘Black lives matter, too’ fails 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.

In this way, my account sees the exclusionary construals of ‘Black lives matter’ as being of a

¹³ See (Olsen 2004) for a criticism of the ways that defenses of a politics of recognition (following in the tradition of Charles Taylor’s (1992) defense of multiculturalism) can obscure issues of power in discussions of racial injustice.

piece with its more inclusive reconstructions and sees the latter as giving expression to an understanding that surfaces also in the 'All lives matter'-response insofar as it too is sometimes offered as a way of expressing clearly what is only poorly expressed by 'Black lives matter.' Color-blind approaches have, in focusing on the ostensibly racially neutral form of that response failed to see that they can give expression to the same ideal.

It is worth emphasizing, however, that these inclusive reconstructions are unique to our own time. As I said, 'Black Power' was not likely to yield the defense that it meant 'Black Power, too.' What might account for this difference?

There is, in my view, an important difference between an emphasis on power and on value. Again, Carmichael talked about power, in part, because it brings the issue of domination into focus. The link between value and domination is much less clear, particularly, against the background of a racialized ideology of inclusion (and of shared values, more generally). That is not to say that matters of domination and value cannot be linked or even that they cannot be linked via an appeal to humanity. I take it that this was precisely 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 Martin Luther King and whose signs read simply 'I AM a man' and 'Justice and equality for all men' (Bernasconi 2001); this is a way of contesting an existing system of values, not of endorsing it, or demanding a share in it.¹⁴ These themes were also brought together when Baldwin (1966) described his report on policing in an "occupied" Harlem (and all other Harlems) as a plea for "the recognition of our common humanity," adding that without this recognition "our common humanity will be proved in unutterable ways."

One has to take some care, though, in understanding how issues of power and value might be related, in understanding, for example, what the charge of dehumanization can mean in the

¹⁴ This may have been the spirit in which protesters at early Black Lives Matter demonstrations intended 'All lives matter.'

world that we inhabit. There are complexities here that we may not be attending to as closely as we should. 'Black Power' and 'Black lives matter' can, on my view, be regarded as refusals to accept the value that certain lives hold without thereby implying that those lives are regarded as having diminished worth or no worth at all. Might it not also be possible, under conditions of injustice, to recognize the humanity of others and yet to fail to value those lives as one should? I do not think it would be right to understand the exclusion that is being called out by 'Black lives matter' as *having* to be understood as implying that black Americans are not regarded as human beings and, yet, we are seeing a humanism that opposes the assertion that black lives matter.

Of course, we have even less reason to take this exclusion to mean that black Americans are not regarded as having lives. This is, in part, why RZA's statement in *Rolling Stone*, "Of course black lives matter. All lives matter; that's why I don't eat meat" is not obviously a defense of 'Black lives matter' ("RZA on Black Lives Matter," 2016). This formulation may be useful in drawing our attention to the status of animals, but it does not directly address the dehumanization of black lives witnessed by 'Black lives matter' (and may, for this reason, cause deep offense). We do not think of black lives as less than lives, though this is partly what is at issue in our thinking about animals and other creatures, about the ethics of eating them, for example. We wonder, Are they sentient? Do they experience pain? But even here matters may be more complicated than we might expect. In a conversation with someone close to me in which I expressed my horror at the practice of grinding male chicks once they have been separated from the females, my conversation partner answered quite simply, "They're barely alive." That is not to say that they are only partly alive, but rather, that their being alive does not compel a certain regard for life. This response makes sense to us, even if we have never quite heard things put in this way, even if we disagree or find it abhorrent.

There is a barrier, however, to acknowledging something like this possibility in the realm of human value where it is held to be a conceptual truth that to the extent that human lives are

not regarded as mattering they are not regarded as lives. This orthodoxy is invoked by Butler in criticizing the ‘All lives matter’-response, which fails, according to her, to take into account that black lives may not be included in ‘all lives.’ Butler cites in this connection with the historical fact that black slaves were counted as having a fraction of a life, as if it testifies to both to its truth as well as to the terrible possibilities opened up by it.¹⁵ 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. Why shouldn’t ‘dehumanization’ also serve to capture the fact of distance between having of a life and having of a life that is shown to matter? 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?

We confront further complexity in thinking through the relationship between power and value when thinking about the place of recognition in these confrontations. Claudia Rankine (2015) has, for example, made recognition central in her account of the aims of the Black Lives Matter movement. As with Butler, Rankine articulates the sort of misrecognition that is at issue in terms of being seen as less than human, citing the same point of history as Butler as showing that black lives have not been, and given a continuing legacy of racial oppression, are not yet recognized as full (human) lives.¹⁶ It is, in large part, this focus on matters of recognition that distinguishes the Black Lives Matter and Black Power movement for Rankine. Whereas the latter was, in her view, agonistic and focused on segregation for the sake of self-preservation, the Black Lives Matter movement does

¹⁵ This historical point is less revealing than it might be thought to be. 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).

¹⁶ According to Rankine (2015), “The legacy of black bodies as property and subsequently three-fifths human continues to pollute the white imagination.”

not deny the basic fact of relationship to white America (the fact of “stuckness” as Rankine would have it)¹⁷ and it is also oriented toward producing a more internalized change, namely, recognition (where misrecognition is described by Rankine, in one place, as a “a lack of feeling for another” (Rankine 2015)).¹⁸

I have already expressed some doubts about whether the animating concern of this movement should be cast in terms of a (longstanding) failure to recognize black lives as (fully) human lives and think that it is not obvious that this way of framing issues of social recognition would properly bring into view legal and political categories that are sites of domination and that shape what we take to hold value. However, I also take issue with the narrative that Rankine presents around the Black Power movement and with the way in which it seems to prejudge the importance of matters of recognition. I have argued that Carmichael’s advocacy for Black Power suggests a very different picture than the one that Rankine presents. If we think of the Black Power movement’s most radical idea as being that black Americans, regardless of class and class interest, should participate meaningfully in democratic politics, as suggested by my reconstruction, then I do not think we would be so inclined to read it as being agonistic. If it seems to have pursued a separate course, that should be taken to reveal something about the conditions under which this participation was taking place, not to reveal a desire for separation or a fantasy of eventual separation. (The absurdity of these suggestions were not lost on Carmichael who sometimes responded to them by pointing

¹⁷ This echoes Martin Luther King’s central criticism of the Black Power movement: “In the final analysis the weakness of Black Power is its failure to see that the black man needs the white man and the white man needs the black man. However much we may try to romanticize the slogan, there is no separate black path to power and fulfillment that does not intersect white paths and there is no separate white path to power and fulfillment, short of social disaster, that does not share that power with black aspirations for freedom and human dignity.” (King 1968: 52)

¹⁸ That the Black Lives Matter movement aims for more than mere self-preservation, is supposed to be brought out by its focus on the dead and on mourning the dead. In fact, Rankine suggests that we understand the Black Lives Matter movement as a movement oriented toward a democratic project of collective mourning (so that mourning would be an expression of the recognition that is, on Rankine’s view, being sought). For an interpretation of this suggestion and an account of what such a project might look like, see (McIvor 2016). See also (Sharpe 2016) for an account of ‘wake work’ that while “attentive to mourning” is also responsive to the challenges associated with the task of mourning an “interminable event” and with mourning or memorializing the everyday or quotidian aftereffects of slavery (2016: 19-20). See (Butler 2004) for a development of the idea that mourning far from being de-politicizing “furnishes a sense of political community of a complex order.”

out the plain fact of separation between white and black across the country (1966a).) So I reject the contention that this politics was pursued in denial of “stuckness.” More importantly, this should caution us against moving too quickly from an acknowledgment of this fact of relationship to taking matters of recognition to be focal. One senses that this fact of relationship is invoked in this context as though it itself lends motivation to, even necessitates, a focus on matters of recognition. It is significant, then, to consider that it was not central to the Black Power movement (nor, relatedly, were appeals to conscience). I am not convinced that it is central to the Black Lives Matter movement either.

This focus on misrecognition can create the impression that ‘Black lives matter’ might be an articulation of what it is that white Americans need to understand, what their recognition would consist in. An alternate possibility is that it is an articulation of a group understanding, an understanding that gives expression to a black solidarity movement, with a very different function than this in relation to white Americans. It is possible to understand it as having, among its aims, the aim of provoking white Americans into developing a more adequate, more racially aware, group understanding.

III INTERPRETIVE 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. It would be a mistake, however, to conclude that the interpretive reactions under criticism simply miss the point and that there is, as a result, a misunderstanding that might easily be remedied. The exclusionary interpretations of ‘Black Power’ and ‘Black lives matter’ and responses like ‘All lives matter’ do not make room for those 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.

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 that 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. Unlike 'All lives matter,' for example, statements like 'Black lives matter' and 'Black Power' have been taken to raise questions of meaning, which have been hostage to the racial anxieties of whites. This is hardly surprising given that these statements manifest resistance to entrenched patterns of white political thought, so entrenched, in fact, that resistant defenses of these resistant meanings are called for.

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 way, 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 been taken to support the case that its proponents have suffered an interpretive injustice, a diagnosis made explicit in Anderson’s work. Though 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 powerlessness that are rooted in structural prejudices confronting such a group.¹⁹ Moreover, both are concerned with barriers to the articulation of experiences that are in their interests to articulate though, too often, not in the interests of those who are powerfully positioned to have articulated.²⁰

There are, however, some important respects in which Fricker’s characterization of systematic cases 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

¹⁹ Fricker describes systematic cases of hermeneutic justice as stemming from structural inequalities of power, particularly those that effect people in virtue of an aspect of their social identity (their belonging to a socially vulnerable group), and sees them as part of a broad pattern of susceptibility to hermeneutic as well as other kinds of injustice (Fricker 2007: 156). Systemic cases of injustice reveal themselves in the hermeneutic marginalization of these subjects and tend to be cases in which they are persistently denied full hermeneutical participation in connection with a wide range of social experiences (where this renders them vulnerable to other forms of injustice across a variety of non-hermeneutic social activities) (Fricker 2007: 155). Incidental cases don’t stem from social oppression and hermeneutical marginalization in these cases tends to be fleeting and localized (Fricker 2007: 156).

²⁰ 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 well 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 clear example of how (collective) agents can be responsible for restricting the participation of certain groups in practices that help to generate social understandings. Why rule out the possibility that these agents might be responsible for the fruits of such efforts? Fricker’s only motivation for restricting the concept in this way appears to be given by the observation that “a situation of hermeneutical marginalization erupts in injustice only when some actual attempt at intelligibility is handicapped by it” (2007: 159) and not necessarily at the time when the hermeneutical marginalization occurs. However, this seems to raise a practical issue (How can we locate the agent responsible, if any?), not a conceptual one.

in Cornell's Department of Nuclear Physics who had disturbing encounters with a professor in her workplace that she struggled to capture in words.

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 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, many of us today do not struggle to find the words to capture what was happening. 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* (had they been British it might have been *pestering*).

What makes this case a case of interpretive injustice for Fricker? Well, to begin with there is 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 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 disanalogies 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.²¹ In particular, 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. ‘Black lives matter’ expresses a

²¹ For an alternative characterization, see (Mason 2011).

shared understanding of a highly significant aspect of the social world. There is not, in this case, a lacuna where a social understanding should be but isn't. This claim does require some qualification, though, and here we might revisit an insight of Carmichael's and say that 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 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. Failing to provide an appropriate defense of these words no more reveals a failure to understand them than failing to defend a charge of sexual harassment against the claim that it threatens sexual freedom would reveal that one does not understand sexual harassment.

What, then, has gone wrong? Fricker's account doesn't accommodate my central cases, I claim, because of the way that 'collective understanding' is construed on her proposed account of the impact of structural power inequalities on our collective understandings (or on the collective hermeneutical resource). In the Wood case, Fricker takes the absence of a collective understanding to imply a lack of understanding on Wood's part.²² For this to make sense, one has to be thinking that the collective interpretive resource provides the only available understanding and, in that case, 'collective understanding' really amounts to a *hegemonic* understanding. This construal is an appropriate one in the Wood case; the difficulty there wasn't merely 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 to construe 'collective understandings' in this way if we want to account for systematic cases of interpretive injustice?

²² That Fricker takes this to follow is evident from the following remark: "The primary epistemic harm done to her [Wood] was that a patch of her social experience which it was very much in her interests to understand was not collectively understood and so remained barely intelligible even to her" (2007: 162).

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. 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 in America, for example), though in thinking through the interpretive conflicts around ‘Black Power’ and ‘Black lives matter’ it seems 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 collective 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).²³

It seems to me, then, that if one wants to treat my central 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’ does express a shared understanding of the social world (one that is resistant). It also allows us to get a grip on an initially puzzling feature of the interpretive conflict surrounding

²³ 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).

these words, namely, the diminished intelligibility of the claims made by each of the parties to this debate to the other. 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 powerlessness (Fricker 2007: 153). This form of marginalization is harmful, primarily, in that it prevents one from participating in the “the pooling of knowledge” (Fricker 2007: 162) where this 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 epistemic benefit (though most especially for the benefit of those who can join in on the spreading of knowledge). Short of collective action for social change, justice will require that we receive the word of others in a way that approximates

and facilitates the realization of the ideal of a fully inclusive conversational situation (where what is said would be made sense of as though said in a setting without structural identity prejudice) (2007: 170).

Once we 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, give consideration to the vulnerability of these speakers who are subordinated within dominant communities, and attend to the strategic and cognitive benefits of having limited forms of contact with dominantly positioned parties. 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 speakers. We can no longer move blithely from a collective impoverishment to the impoverished understanding of marginalized groups.

My central cases offer, in fact, strong considerations against this conversational model. 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.

Along these lines, it is worth bearing in mind that, for some within the Black Power move-

ment, 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 confronting 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.²⁴ This raises a question concerning whether we should envision the ideal interpretive situation not only as one where marginalized groups are included in the conversation with dominantly positioned speakers 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 who have suffered the “epistemic harm” of being held back from spreading their knowledge.

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 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

²⁴ 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.

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, 'receiving the word of others' is just a euphemism for needing to be told and marks a division between 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? If they constitute deep and important understandings of the social world, isn't this knowledge to be pooled? It is far from obvious to me that this is so, though it is worth noting that this assumption has been promoted in philosophical discussions of epistemic justice that explicitly concern race. Gaile Pohlhaus Jr., for example, claims that "When one genuinely cares to know something about the world as experienced from social positions other than one's own, one must use epistemic resources suited to (and so developed from) those situations" (2012: 731). Pohlhaus does note that a "pre-requisite" 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.²⁵ However, I think it is important to be critical 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*

²⁵ 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).

them (2002).

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—as they would inflame the sensibilities, one imagines, of Fricker's ideal interlocutors who would be considering whether what these speakers are “struggling to say” makes “good sense” if said in the absence of any structural identity prejudice—but they appear not take it as a goal to avoid this result (Fricker 2007: 170).²⁶ 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. 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).²⁷ 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

²⁶ Recall Carmichael's remark that the greatest thing about 'Black Power' is that for once black people are going to use the slogan that they want to use; they don't give a damn who likes it.

²⁷ Pohlhaus goes on to comment that “[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).

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.

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 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. 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 epistemic 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 have to be told 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.

IV CONCLUSION

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, which is given expression today in the ‘All lives matter’-response 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 its emphasis on the pooling of knowledge, receiving the word of others (or model listening), and the inclusion of marginalized speakers in a conversational setting that abstracts from structural racial prejudice. From this perspective, it is difficult to understand the importance of and to properly accommodate the observation 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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