Solidarity in Photography

Reconsidering Images of Protest and Practices of Looking

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1. Introduction: Reconsidering Seeing

In his TED-Talk on the hidden patterns that shape racialized perceptions, comedian and author Baratunde Thurston talks about being burdened with other people's fears. His Blackness continuously determines how strangers see him and how he feels he has to behave. In many cases, this fictive and fabulated Blackness labels him as ostensibly suspect, while walking down the street, driving with his family in the car, or shopping in an affluent neighborhood. This burden results in a deep-rooted anxiety of being singled out and thought a criminal; of having to explain why you are where others think you do not belong: "I walk around in fear because I know that someone seeing me as a threat can become a threat to my life, and I am tired. I am tired of carrying this invisible burden of other people's fears, and many of us are, and we shouldn't have to [be]." He continues to describe this process as a system of "collective stories we all buy into".[1] These stories are deeply engrained in culture and society. They frame and determine lives and living conditions.

Entailed in this burden of collective stories is a system of surveillance and profiling that predominantly targets Black people. Constant and drastic policing of Blackness, also known as walking or existing while Black, has become visible in infamous cases where customers were thrown out of coffee bars, graduate students were reported to campus police for falling asleep in common rooms, or hobby ornithologists were threatened with the police for no apparent reason at all.[2] These seemingly sim-

1 Cf. Thurston, Baratunde: How to Deconstruct Racism, One Headline at a Time. In: TED, 2019, https://www.ted.com/talks/baratunde_thurston_how_to_deconstruct_racism_one_headline_at_a_time?language=en. Accessed March 9, 2021.

2 In an article for The Atlanta Journal Constitution, Ernie Suggs writes about these recent instances of "existing wile Black"; the birdwatcher in New York's Central Park was accused of harassing a white woman, who falsely reported him to the police. Cf. Steward, Nikita: The White Dog Walker and #LivingWhileBlack in New York City. In: The New York Times, May 30, 2020. https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/30/nyregion/central-park-video.html. Accessed September 15, 2021.

ple events are an essential part of a larger pattern that differentiates between those needing to constantly explain themselves and those who do not. This profiling continuously causes altercations that do not always end as leniently, leading to events such as those connected to the names of Trayvon Martin or Michael Brown, Breonna Taylor or George Floyd.[3] These names bespeak the fact that the burden Thurston speaks about is not merely a question of inconvenience and lacking respect, but a racialized structure that underlies social and political life, that discriminates against and threatens minorities in the U.S. It is linked to images and fabulations, depictions and imagined representations. It connects to stories of ostensible Black behavior and imagined tropes of poverty.

In this article I address this idea of stories we all buy into and connect it, metaphorically, to the images we have of others. Quite literally, I am going to discuss images and photographs that engage in and defy assumptions of racialized narratives. For, what Thurston's remark reveals is a pattern of systemic inequality, which is latently engrained in our ways of thinking and seeing. It describes a form of post-intentional racism[4] that links stories to an understanding of the world and shapes ostensibly rational presumptions, civil and legal institutions, as well as mundane everyday actions. In looking at photographs and the ways they can fix meaning, I am proposing to engage in a practice of solidarity that questions the connections between seeing and making sense, seeing and understanding, and seeing and defining others by what we think we see: Regularly and without noticing, we engage in systems of policing that are based on stories, assumptions, and biases. Seeing, looking, and forming images can therefore be understood as a practice of engaging with others, determining what we see, whom we recognize, and how we treat who we see. In this sense, solidarity becomes a practice of looking that is aware of its own positions and entanglements. It functions as a visual process of seeing through, not with, stereotypes or confining images.

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3 On February 26, 2012, Trayvon Martin was shot in Sanford, Florida by a vigilante who mistook the teenager walking home for a burglar. The watchman had been been cautioned by the police not to use any force and to stop following his suspect (Taylor 13); on August 9, 2014, Michael Brown was fatally shot by a police officer in Ferguson, Missouri. Supposedly, he was talking back and refusing to move off the street and onto the sidewalk (Taylor 13); on March 13, 2020, Breonna Taylor was shot when a narcotics division squad raided her home in Louisville, Kentucky. Her house was invaded illegally at night on behalf of a drug violation charge filed against someone else (Willingham); on May 25, 2020, George Floyd choked in Minneapolis, Minnesota, when a police officer knelt on his neck for more than eight minutes. Other officers stood by and did not interfere, despite Floyd's repeated pleas for air. He had been accused of having paid with a counterfeit 20-dollar bill (Cobb).

4 Cf. Perry, Imani: More Beautiful and More Terrible: The Embrace and Transcendence of Racial Inequality in the United States. New York 2011, 11.

In the first part of this essay, I am considering the ways in which photographs, as well as narrations and mental images, fix meaning and thereby influence lives and reputations. The second part analyzes photographs of the Black Lives Matter Movement that defy such fixation and unsettle seemingly fixed understandings and assumptions. In different ways, photographs have the capacity to unfix and unsettle definitions, to play with contrasting meanings, and to examine underlying patterns of thought and perception. In looking at images published in relation to the Black Lives Matter Protests in the United States in 2014, this article considers such links and shifted perceptions as a form of practiced visual solidarity. These photographs of protests, I argue, negotiate solidarity as they position their spectators in relation to the scenes depicted. Solidarity is not just the declaration of a common view and profession of ongoing support but a constant effort to renegotiate relations, assumptions, and positions. The visual cultural project of the Black Lives Matter Movement, then, entails a consideration of the image and fabulations determining urban neighborhoods (Shelby), historical narratives (Autry; Stoler), or the criminal justice system (Alexander) which it seeks to change.[5]

2. Fixing Meaning in Images and Narratives

When Thurston describes the burden he feels as a common set of stories, he acknowledges the power of both narratives and images in relation to social constructs and political structures. Cameroonian philosopher Achille Mbembe describes this notion in *Critique of Black Reason* as a fabulation of sociality and identity, here, of Blackness and the meaning it holds in the Western world. The political and social significance of Blackness – the essential difference often ascribed to it – stems from a fictive and fabulated idea of Black life, which is suffused with colonial and white perspectives. It is constantly re/produced in actions, descriptions, and desires.[6] Persons who happen to be Black or come from Africa, Mbembe explains, were and continuously are described as different, exotic, and other in categories that depreciate their cultures and lives, that deny their status as human being, and that justify "exclusion, brutalization, and degradation".[7] This fabulated image of Black identity – invented, told, and repeated in variations of common formulas, texts, and rit-

5 On disadvantaged urban neighborhoods see Shelby, Dark Ghettos; on separate strands of history in American memorial culture see Autry, Desegregating the Past; on recurring and persistent structures of colonial thought and control in contemporary societies see Stoler Duress; on the racialized structure of the US-criminal justice system see Alexander, The New Jim Crow.

6 Cf. Mbembe, Achille: Critique of Black Reason. Translated by Laurent Dubois. Durham 2017, 18.25.

7 Ibid., 6.

uals[8] – was shaped by white interests.[9] The rationalization of slave trade, exploitation and extraction, surveillance, discrimination, and continuous policing are just some results of this fabulation. The very basis of thinking about Black lives in Western thought is entangled in fabulations and narrations that are not directly connected to actual Back people: "as soon as the subject of Blacks and Africa is raised, words do not necessarily represent things; the true and the false become inextricable; […] Word and image have little to say about the objective world"[10]. Writing, thinking, and talking about a Black person, unless in a personal relation, usually entails generalizations that create a racial subject that is arguably different and "set up for moral disqualification and practical instrumentalization"[11]. In this view, those rashly defined as Black become racialized 'Others.' Centrally, then, there is no Black person, but only a fabulated image of Blackness based on the essentialization of difference, the pathologization of grievances, and the justification of inequity.

This fabulated idea of Blackness reveals that racism is, in part, a form of blindness, of not being able to see one another behind fictional images. It is connected to the practices, scenes, and narrations told about Black people as well as to a missing connection and lacking interest in truly getting to know the other. Mbembe outlines a form of racism that "consists, most of all, in substituting what *is* with something else, with another reality," or as I would add, a fictional image of the other's ostensible lives, behaviors, and values[12]. "When the racist sees a Black person, he does not see that the Black person is not there, does not exist, and is just a sign of pathological fixation on the absence of a relationship"[13]. Even without roots in Black lived experiences, this other reality distorts perceptions and fixes affect, shapes conditions and relations, and influences people's lives. Moving beyond racism would, therefore, entail moving beyond these fixed images, fostering real and open-minded relationships, and questioning the depictions and stories presented, reading them against the racialized narrations and unfixing the meaning ascribed through these definitions.

As Thurston explains, the other realities and presumed identities affect Black people in fundamental ways. They shape not only how they are treated but also their behavior. People attempt to evade confrontations and the dangers implied therein. Being burdened with other people's fears involves a constant fear of being singled out, thought a criminal, and potentially killed in a confusion of fabulated images

8 Ibid., 28.

9 Cf. Kendi, Ibram X.: Stamped from the Beginning: the Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America. London 2016.

10 Mbembe: Critique of Black Reason, 13.

11 Ibid., 28.

12 Cf. ibid., 32.

13 Ibid.

with actual persons. It entails a form of policing one's actions that is both enforced from the outside and self-imposed as protection:

> We quiet ourselves, we walk on eggshells, we maybe pull over to the side of the road under the brightest light we can find so that our murder might be caught cleanly on camera, and we do this because we live in a system in which white people can too easily call on deadly force to ensure their comfort.[14]

The policing of the Black body, described here with clear hints at recent deaths of Black people at the hands of the police, is inherent in white comfort. It represents a weaponization of white privilege, in which existing hierarchies and racialized fabulations are played out and Black persons are reminded of their inferior positions and the dangers inherent in encounters with the police. Unquestioned assumptions about ostensible dangers, moral objection, or impaired humanity are used as pretexts to exercise force onto others. These structures are so engrained in everyday practices and ways of thought, they do not necessarily involve an awareness of their racist character.

In a rather humorous way, Thurston presents his critique of such fixating patterns in relation to headlines and narratives of newspaper reports. He traces a familiar sequence: "A subject takes an action against a target engaged in some activity." Generally, the subject in these stories is white, the target Black and the action any conceivable mundane activity: "White Woman Calls Police On Eight-Year-Old Black Girl Selling Water"; "White Man Calls Police On Black Woman Using Neighborhood Pool"; "Woman Calls Police On Black Family BBQing At Lake In Oakland."[15] These examples, as comical as they might seem in the comedian's buoyant presentation, all frame the Black persons involved in terms of suspicion. The only possible action, it seems, is to call the police while more ordinary responses somehow seem to be out of the question. Some kind of illegality is assumed, discursively deeming the Black person at fault, while refusing to consider possible reasons for their actions. The assumption forecloses overlooking minute infringements of the law, such as a child selling water bottles without license, and refuses to engage in friendly conversations and compromise, if necessary. "Our existence is being interpreted as crime," Thurston explains. Calling the police, however, is not a predetermined and rationale decision: Helping, supporting, or "Minding one's own damn business," could reduce the threat of police violence, reducing the risk of having to survive something "that should not require survival"[16].

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14 Thurston, How to Deconstruct Racism.

15 On woman calling police on girl, see Elizabeth; pool incident, see Ortiz/Guiterrez; incident, see Russo.

16 Thurston, How to Deconstruct Racism.

Such policing of Blackness is concomitant with an image of black and white spaces. Black spaces, sociologist Elijah Anderson argues, are seen through a lens of ostensible poverty, danger, and misconduct – as reputedly threatening and alien – and so are Black people. The white space is the norm in society; the black space, in turn, is connected to an image of danger, immorality, and poverty.[17] The imaginary of this black space informs an image of the "iconic ghetto" that follows Black people as they navigate white spaces. Disregarding both the systemic origins of disadvantage in poor urban neighborhoods and a growing Black middle class, the putative danger of the "iconic ghetto" – the image of the Black criminal – attaches itself to Blackness: anonymous Black persons are regularly stigmatized and associated "with the putative danger, crime, and poverty of the iconic [and fictional] ghetto, typically leaving [them] with much to prove before being able to establish trusting relations"[18]. Within white spaces, central for social and civic life, Black people are made to feel out of place, Anderson argues. They become intruders who need to prove themselves and their belonging, who perform to evade suspicion, and who can earn provisional access to the white workspace, civil institution, or neighborhood.[19] They are under constant scrutiny, which would be unacceptable for their white contemporaries[20]. Black people have to navigate white spaces, whereas white people commonly avoid areas seen as ostensibly threatening and predominantly black. Essentially, Anderson notes, these underlying assumptions of Black inferiority, lacking morality, and criminality are as dangerous as overt racism, if not more so:

> While racism continues to manifest in occasional overtly hateful or violent acts, racism is more commonly manifested in a pervasive attitude that all black people start from the inner-city ghetto, and before experiencing decent treatment or trusting relations with others, they must demonstrate that the ghetto stereotype does not apply to them.[21]

While it is possible to directly call-out and counter overtly hateful racism, the pervasive and latent attitudes and societal presumptions operate in unintentional ways that often do not register as racist and are arguably shaped by seemingly rational ideas. These images are mirrored in institutions and everyday actions as well as in the much praised colorblindness in the nation. Becoming aware of such processes can be a form of visualized solidarity.

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17 Anderson, Elijah: The White Space. In: Sociology of Race and Ethnicity 1 (2015), 1, 10–21, 11. The lower case Black in "black space," correlates to Anderson's use of the term.

18 Ibid., 13.

19 Cf. ibid., 14.

20 Cf. ibid.

21 Ibid.

This solidarity of sight recognizes a form of racism, which is post-intentional. This racism is linked to images and assumptions, as scholar of race, law, and literature Imani Perry argues in *More Beautiful and More Terrible.* As contemporary culture is suffused with racialized narratives and practices of inequality, the question is no longer whether these practices are intentionally racist or unconsciously so, whether persons who are acting in a racist manner believe in their superiority, or whether they believe in essential differences.[22] The concept of racism has to be uncoupled from blame and intention and ought to be understood as a mode of acting and thinking, doing and seeing, that is usually not directly recognized as being racist. There can, for instance, be a majority of Americans professedly not being racist and, at the same time, a majority of Americans believing in the "traditional racist stereotype that African Americans are lazy"[23]; there can be a celebration of diversity in culture, food, song, and attire, yet a constant perpetuation of inequality.[24] Racism is seen as a system of practices of inequality where, for example, the idea of colorblindness as basis for law and fairness can hide the systemic and racialized relations inherent in its implementation[25].

> Race and racism are lived by virtue of encounters, real or virtual, with 'raced' bodies. […] In moments of these encounters, individuals read, evaluate, and judge others. [T]here are myriad immeasurable ways in which race is experienced or given meaning in the midst of social life.[26]

Habits, attitudes and behaviors can be part of these practices, as can be entertainment or individual everyday choices.[27] Unconscious bias and conscious racial narratives work jointly, creating racialized structures through humor, entertainment, schools, news and government outlets, and workplaces, to name just a few.[28] Fighting racism then, for Perry, entails a move away from a culture of blame toward a perspective that understands its accumulation of practices that translate into "large-scale institutional, social, economic, and political inequalities"[29]. These practices can include, for example, racialized narratives of Black lives used in politics and elections, employed to rationalize discriminatory decisions, or told to rationalize

22 Perry, Imani: More Beautiful and More Terrible: The Embrace and Transcendence of Racial Inequality in the United States. New York 2011, 21.
23 Ibid., 6.
24 Cf. ibid., 8.
25 Cf. ibid., 1.
26 Ibid., 4.
27 Cf. ibid., 4.
28 Cf. ibid., 21.
29 Ibid., 42.

behavior. "The stories that are told about members of racial groups in daily conversations, in print, through the broadcast and new media, in literature, and in child rearing are a fundamental piece of how we acquire knowledge about those groups"[30]. These stories are, for example, related to family constellations[31], the value arguably ascribed to education and academic prospects in Black communities[32], or the ostensible reliance on welfare programs.[33] On the basis of such narratives, resources are denied, possibilities foreclosed, stereotypes fostered, and hasty occlusions drawn:[34] "we need to explicitly revisit [these racial narratives] as a part of the project of racial equality, both at the level of government and at the level of community-based activism and family life"[35]. Schools, for instance, need to move beyond the fixed idea that families are not interested in education and seek possibilities to incorporate people's lived realities in parent-teacher conferences, in being mindful of working schedules, lacking child care or the like, the fear of losing jobs or the lack of transportation. Here, too, mental images and narratives frame belonging and give perfunctory definitions of who people are.

These narratives and stereotypical depictions are connected to images. If we think, for instance, of common media representations, though slowly changing, we will find an overrepresentation of Black people "as criminals, jokesters, and social deviants"[36]. People of color are regularly represented as the nannies, nerds, criminals, or sidekicks, goofily supporting a white hero. These representations, too, govern what we see as normal and in their repetition forego the question of whether these structures portrayed might be fictional and fabulated. Black feminist and activist bell hooks and race, class, and gender scholar Patricia Hill Collins both speak of harmful[37] or controlling images[38] that are repeated in mainstream media, commonplace stereotypes, and diverse racial narratives. Stereotypical images of Black womanhood – the mammies, matriarchs, wellfare recipients, or hot mommas – according to Collins, work to objectify, dominate, and defer Black women, as they mask social relations and perpetuate power structures.[39] They give ideas

30 Ibid., 44.
31 Ibid., 52.
32 Cf. ibid., 61.
33 Cf. ibid., 49.
34 Cf. ibid., 58.
35 Ibid., 62.
36 Ibid., 36.
37 Cf. hooks, bell: Black Looks: Race and Representation, London 1992/2015, IX.
38 Cf. Collins, Patricia Hill: Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment. Oxon, 1990/2009, 76.
39 Cf. ibid., 77–79.

of Black women's ostensibly typical and idealized behavior, while controlling both outside beliefs and their behaviors, ambitions, and practices.[40]

Presenting the example of the mammy, Collins explains the concept of a controlling image. Mammies are idealized "faithful, obedient domestic servant[s]"[41], devotedly taking care of white families and their children. White middle-class women can define themselves against these Black women, as they take advantage of usually inexpensive labor, which is masked in the romantic mammy image.[42] In recognizing the Black household help as kin, then, Black children learn what seems to be their assigned position in white power structures, maintaining racial oppression and hierarchies.[43] But while mammy figure is idealized as caretaker of the white household, Black families are regularly represented as ostensibly dysfunctional.[44] "[C]ontrolling images are designed to make racism, sexism, poverty, and other forms of social injustice appear to be natural, normal, and inevitable parts of everyday life"[45]. They control as they have very real effects on the people described. And while the phrasing Collins chooses indicates an active, determined role on the part of those creating these images, these controlling images have become an essential and unrecognized part of our cultural knowledge and social relations. "The controlling images of Black women are not simply crafted onto existing social institutions but are so pervasive that even though the images themselves change in popular imagination, Black women's portrayal as the Other persists"[46]. They constitute an ideology of domination that plays out on various levels: visual, cultural, institutional and political.[47]

For bell hooks, harmful media images reinscribe white supremacy and internalized racism.[48] Noting the temporal dimension of these processes, she writes about the ongoing and persistent representation of Black people in media and culture. In the preface to the 2015-edition of *Black Looks* (23 years after its original publication) hooks laments that hardly anything has changed:

> I wish with my whole heart [that this book] was no longer relevant, for if it were not relevant now that would mean that a significant revolution of values had

40 Cf. ibid., 80.
41 Ibid., 80.
42 Cf. ibid., 80f.
43 Cf. ibid., 80.
44 Cf. ibid., 83.
45 Ibid., 76f.
46 Ibid., 97.
47 On shifting variations and patterns of domination see Alexander, The New Jim Crow.
48 Cf. hooks: Black Looks, 1.

> taken place in our society so that we are no longer bombarded by profoundly negative images of blackness, images that assault the psyches of everyone.[49]

Television, movies, photographs, magazine covers, books, or music videos, show Black people in ways that bolster white supremacy and racialized hierarchies. The repetition of these images creates an unremarkable and in/visible racist frame entwined in identities, relations, and beliefs, regardless skin colors or origins.[50] Oddly, hooks notes, a multicultural audience seems to find pleasure in seeing criminal black characters chasing or murdering each other in movies.[51] To "think critically about images" becomes a revolutionary attitude,[52] a revolution of social values,[53] that works toward decolonization and transformation of systems of racial domination. Thus, hooks suggests, her Black peers should "collectively change the way we look at ourselves and the world [to] change how we are seen [..., creating] a world where everyone can look at blackness, and black people, with new eyes"[54]. This revolution of sight critically examines and questions hurtful images of Blackness, creating representations that celebrate Black lives, show the value of being and the beauty of Blackness. For Black people to seize control over their mediated representations requires a constant awareness that "the real world of image-making is political"[55]. These politics of images, here the ascription of negative attributes onto real-life people, remains a constant factor in the policing of Black lives. The revolutionary act of looking can therefore become a practice of solidarity that entails a shift in values and perceptions.

Another example of such meaning-making in images moves the discussion from fabulated identities to controlling narratives, from generalized and mediated images to individual photographs. Images used, for example, by humanitarian organizations and NGOs to represent their work and raise funds can fix identities and stereotypes onto the people they describe. Images of famished children, suffering families, and desperate mothers are often used to invoke compassion and to affect involvement. Doing so, they play into the hierarchies of suffering and devaluation as they define the person portrayed as suffering person. A picture used to evoke empathy and create charity can thus fix misery in the frame and onto the subject

49 Cf. ibid., IX.

50 In In the Wake, Christina Sharpe writes of the "in/visible" domination of Black people (20–1). I have chosen to adopt this spelling. as racialized frames and practices operate in plain sight and unrecognized.

51 Cf. hooks: Black Looks, 6.

52 Ibid., 7.

53 Ibid., IX.

54 Ibid., 6.

55 Ibid., 5.

presented. They become the faces of hunger, quintessential poverty, or bare suffering. In "Imag(in)ing Human Rights," americanists and critical media scholars Greta Olson and Jana Wessels call such photographs and comparable images of refugees "Humanitarian and Victimizing Images"[56]. In contrast to images that deny individuality of its subjects by depicting them in "faceless and nameless groups"[57], these photographs show individuals as proxies for the misery they experience. They "reify the victimhood of the persons depicted [...] and commodify their suffering"[58]. The people used as vehicles for social and political change, as faces for fundraising campaigns, are seen as hardly more than a suffering victim.[59] They are reduced and commodified, turned into objects in order to create feelings of sympathy and outrage. Political scientist Denis Kennedy calls this conundrum "the humanitarian dilemma." While humanitarian organizations use imagery of suffering to bridge the distance between victims of humanitarian crises and donor publics, he argues, they do so at the expense of commodifying human misery and suffering:

> these images discard that which is most human about the victim: autonomy, dignity, and individual specificity. When images appropriate suffering, victimhood is abstracted to a level of universal anguishes and pure animal emotions and victims reduced to the most basic of rights. The victims become personless – without dignity. They are reduced to bare life.[60]

In the political economy of relief, representations craft a social order that hardens hierarchies and hegemonies. They "reflect both the perceived identity of the victim, and also the heroic and action-oriented self-conceptions of humanitarian organizations," celebrating the heroic aiding effort and ultimately resulting in a loss of dignity for those reduced to a need for help.[61]

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56 Olson, Greta/Wessels, Jana: Imag(in)ing Human Rights: Deindividualizing, Victimizing, and Universalizing Images of Refugees in the United States and Germany. In: Schmidt, Kerstin (Hg.): The State of Human Rights: Historical Genealogies, Political Controversies, and Cultural Imaginaries. Heidelberg 2020, 249–264, 257.

57 Ibid., 255.

58 Ibid., 257.

59 Cf. ibid., 258.

60 Kennedy, Dennis: Selling the Distant Other: Humanitarianism and Imagery—Ethical Dilemmas of Humanitarian Action. In: The Journal of Humanitarian Assistance, February 8, 2009, sites.tufts.edu/jha/archives/411. Accessed September 15, 2021.

61 Ibid.

3. Defying Fixation

The visual solidarity called for to encounter these negative fabulations enables spectators and images alike to defy fixations. Such practices of looking are connected to a different understanding that reads sight and visuality as political practices. In connection to photography, visual culture scholar Ariella Azoulay, in *Civil Imagination*, defines this political relation as "the event of photography"[62] and postulates a "civil imagination"[63] that sees beyond the scenes presented and considers the ethical entanglements therein. Photography, here, is not defined as the fixing of a momentary image but as a network of actors related to the photograph. Implicated in the event are not only the photographer and the photographed, but the camera itself, the spectator seeing an image, and various people and conditions that determine and are determined by the photograph's taking.[64] The "event of photography" understood as a web of negotiations exists in the constant redefinition of relationships in and of the image, a figurative place of discourse and interpretation.[65] When we see an image we can, in fact, choose to see more than a fixed message, look at the people presented without falling back on the theme fixed in the frame.

Positioned within this political constitution, photographs present political claims and articulate alliances beyond the frame. The distribution and interaction of practices and performances, presentations and readings in the event of photography is political, Azoulay notes.[66] Thus, she argues in *The Civil Contract of Photography*, looking at images entails a responsibility on the part of the spectator that is directed toward the scenes presented.[67] We have to see the persons presented as people, examine the conditions they live in (or flee from), and consider our own positions in relation to the image, the seen, and the social as well as political structures encompassed. While the resulting solidarity in seeing is by far not an all-encompassing solution, I believe it can serve as a first step in unfixing perceptions, stereotypes, narratives, and the hierarchies entailed.

In what follows, I will consider three press photographs of Black Lives Matter Protests and read them in relation to their refusal of fixation. Each, I would say, highlights a different practice of unsettling that instructs spectators to take a closer look at the racialized fabulations and types which we encounter daily and to read beyond a first impression, practicing seeing as a form of solidarity. Some images

62 Azoulay, Ariella: Civil Imagination: A Political Ontology of Photography. 2012. Translated by Louise Bethlehem, London/New York 2015, 26.

63 Ibid., 9.

64 Cf. ibid., 219.

65 Cf. ibid., 26.

66 Cf. ibid., 54.

67 Cf. Azoulay, Ariella: Civil Contract of Photography. Translated by Real Mazali and Ruvik Danieli, New York 2008, 128–130.

playfully unsettle ostensibly fixed denotations by shifting meaning and engaging with different often contradictory associations of a sign; they cannot be narrowed down to one single understanding and, here, manifest this indecision by offering cues that can be read in multiple ways at once. Other photographs underscore the humanity of the people presented in ways that neither fix them in precarity nor in victimhood. They articulate, for example, the grief and loss in peoples' situations but do so framing emotion and connection, not misery and suffering. Even different images abstractly visualize webs of support and care in recognizing the need for connection and public bedding, proposing renewed structures of abolition infrastructure and institutions, here, underlaying the demands inherent in the Black Lives Matter Movement.

3.1 Unsettling Definitions

Figure 1: Police Shooting Missouri, Aug. 7, 2014

picture alliance/Charlie Riedel

Charlie Riedel's photograph shows a protester wearing a stylized police cap during the Ferguson protests in 2014 after Michael Brown was shot by a police officer (fig. 1). Defiantly, the man is looking into the camera, his eyes obscured by the shadow of the cap's shield. A slight smirk flickers across his mouth, reflecting contempt or amusement, indignation or self-assertion in reaction to the camera taking a close-up image of his face and his hat. It is as if, through the camera, this man seeks eye contact with the spectators, demanding their attention and reflection. The

green background is blocked out in a blur, as are parts of his face's contours and the headband of the stylized cap. Clearly discernible, however, is the word written in white paint on the shield: "MURDERER." In the context of Michael Brown's death this exclamation presents both a designation of the event and a commentary on the narratives, images, and practices that continuously lead to similar altercations and lethal misunderstandings.

The photograph plays with the controlling images and the purported criminality of the "iconic ghetto." While it labels the officer who has shot the teenager eight days previously in the streets as a murderer, it visualizes the ascription so easily placed upon the Black man himself. It references both a mediated mainstream image and a narrative of pathologized Black criminality. The word, used by the protester to seemingly satirically label himself in protest, addresses the criminalization of Black lives and the fabulated Blackness seen as danger and difference. Tommie Shelby writes in this context of a fictional "culture of poverty"[68], which I see reflected in the image. The purported culture of poverty in disadvantaged and urban Black communities reads behavior and representations as essentially Black and urban, without considering continuous structural disadvantages or fictive portrayals of Blackness.[69]

As if visually summarizing Thurston's call to attend to racialized patterns and the feeling of constantly having to police oneself, Riedel's image places the word murderer over the Black man's face, anticipating that he is seen as a criminal despite having done nothing illegal. The sign and the image are anticipating both possible future encounters with the police and the continuous and disproportionate incarceration rates of Black people in the United States. It simultaneously comments on the hardship and discrimination linked to the status of felon or convict even after being released.[70] There are, thus, three possible readings of the word "MURDERER" in this photograph: This fictive and fabulated ascription of criminality written onto the Black body, the officer responsible for the death of a 18 year-old man (including the systems and practices of police violence that seem to back him), and – in recourse to the controlling image and the iconic ghetto – the criminal justice system and the processes of policing, the walking or existing while Black that affects Black everyday lives. These forms of institutionalized and quotidian surveillance place the Black man presented in the position of ostensible criminal, compelled to police his own actions and steps to perchance avoid the threat of being mistaken for a culprit, the threat of his mundane actions being interpreted as suspicious and encounters turning violent.

The culture of inequality inherent in such stigmatization, the ongoing and often unintentional racialized reactions, while not always openly discriminatory, argues

68 Shelby, Tommie: Dark Ghettos: Injustice, Dissent, and Reform. Cambridge 2016, 80.

69 Cf. ibid.

70 On repercussions for felons see Alexander, The New Jim Crow.

Imani Perry, are as persistent and inequitable as the legal Jim Crow signage of the past was: "The stigmas associated with 'colored places' are carried onto colored bodies and are recounted every time someone calls another 'ghetto,' gives a sideways glance that is motivated by racial suspicion, follows another at the mall or museum, or gives poor service at a restaurant"[71]. While these individual acts seem to be relatively minute, they add up to a system that formalizes racialized boundaries and thresholds. This treatment "is a symbol of a broader culture of inequality that does debilitate in many profound ways and is no less dramatic when it occurs than the 'colored' sign above a water fountain that was a symbol of a de jure structure of inequality"[72]. Like a segregating sign, the man's MURDERER-hat in the image reflects upon these organizations, visualizing the mundane discrimination that dominates many contemporary Black lives.

The image defies any such definition. With his smirking smile, his tipped hat, and direct, confident stare into the camera, this man refuses to be defined. The inscription adds to this refusal, as the visual connection between the cap and the word asks its spectators to change perspectives and consider the daily practices of inequality and the larger structures which these actions and assumptions form. Spectators are not asked to emphasize with this man smirking into the camera, whose hat confuses, and who seems to accuse people and systems of control as lethal. They are required to accept him as a human being whose life and perspectives matter, who offers valid political criticisms, and who cannot be reduced to either stereotypical definitions and racialized narratives or fundamental refusal and ostensible hostility. In this way, the photograph visualizes perspectives and (often biased) thought processes used to structure the world. In a similar vein, Perry asks to

> [t]hink about how we describe different racial groups, their histories, their present. Almost immediately, we are thrown into either stereotype or invisibility, or both, for many groups. The stories we tell and integrate into our knowledge impacts how we see ourselves, how we see others around us, how we treat them, what opportunities we provide, what expectations we have.[73]

In addressing the very notion of such controlling images the photograph asks its viewers to reconsider assumptions and positions, to become aware of and change the racialized narratives that define what seems to be general knowledge about unfamiliar people, cultures, and communities. The photograph, thus, asks for critical consideration of the mindset underlying contemporary societies. Labeling both police and Black man potential criminals, it refuses clarity and unsettles existing pre-

71 Perry, More Beautiful and More Terrible, 196.

72 Ibid.

73 Ibid., 187.

sumptions and definitions. The image troubles the frames according to which we believe to see and understand the world. Thus, this specific photograph refuses to become a controlling image, neither reducing the person presented to an object of empathy nor presenting him according to stereotypes and ostensible definitions of Black lives. By shifting contexts, perspectives, and playing with positions Riedel's photograph addresses so much more than Brown's death and yet directly refers to this event and the structures operating in the background.

The profound simplicity with which the photograph does so can be related to the visual language of popular culture and its simplified positions. Trying to make sense of practices of aestheticizing and narrativizing used in press photographs, Nigerian American author Teju Cole has described such images as "The Superhero Photographs of the Black Lives Matter Movement." People seeing these images, he argues, read them according to the stories they know of popular comic book figures; hero adventures distinguish between clear (moral) positions and use such representations as guideposts in making sense of what is seen. For their audiences, these comics "fill a psychological need in a world of drift and inchoate war,"[74] representing easily recognizable cultural staples. The images – portraying calm protesters and lines of militarized police officers, people throwing tear gas canisters or screaming at anonymous almost caricatured figures – provide a sense of orientation as the discriminatory practices addressed are not easily identified. The structures that Black Lives Matter fights against are hidden in plain sight, intricately intertwined in society and culture and practiced across all classes, ethnicities, and affiliations. For those looking for orientation who are familiar with superhero narratives, such images of clear heros and overpowering systems engage in intertextual dialogues with familiar visual narratives of violence, heroism, hope, and desperation; the fictional eternal fight between good and evil.

Riedel's photograph, however, complicates this notion of good and evil. While visually and aesthetically fitting into the category of superhero images – with the extreme close-up of the face – the conflation of the word, the symbolic hat, and the man's face articulate a depth within the image and concurrently the protests. There is no absolutely good and no absolutely evil at stake in these protests but the attempt at dismantling hierarchies, bias, and practices. Protesters seek to foster a livable life for everybody. A life that is not bound by in/visible racialized systems, that does not deny livelihood on the base of skin color or origin, or question ostensible uprightness. In fact, the image seems to argue, not a reducing of complexity is needed in the movement, but the ongoing and critical disentanglement of racialized narratives

74 Cole, Teju: The Superhero Photographs of the Black Lives Matter Movement. In: The New York Times Magazine, July 26, 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/31/magazine/the-superhero-photographs-of-the-black-lives-matter-movement.html. Accessed March 9, 2021.

and stereotypes, their enactment in social and political conditions, and the routines, perspectives and procedures that Perry calls "practice of racial inequality"[75].

3.2 Refusing to Fix Misery

Figure 2: Screaming Man Protesting. November 25, 2014, Ferguson, MO

Getty Images/Justin Sullivan

Similarly, the man's gesture in Justin Sullivan's photograph from November 25, 2014 demands attention and asks for a shift in perspective (fig. 2). It presents a man screaming in pain, yet refuses to define him as personified pain and misery, as suffering in person or bare life. The picture, showing a group of protesters in a nighttime scene, was taken in Ferguson, MO, after the grand jury decided not to indict the officer who shot Michael Brown. It was taken when demonstrations protested the decision and called for accountability. A group of men is shown protesting as they hold their hands up in the clenched fist as a symbol for resistance and Black emancipation. The four people stand in a group, almost as if surrounding the camera. The person on the right of the image, holding a fist up and lifting the head, is seen as a backlit silhouette, whose face is barely discernible. The man on the left, while also seemingly holding up his fist, looks to the ground as if refusing to be further involved in the scene. The protester in the background, wearing a grey hooded sweatshirt, is in part illuminated by the headlights. The face is obscured by what seems to be an old green full-face respirator. The rest of the head is covered in the hood of the sweat-

75 Perry, More Beautiful and More Terrible, 31.

shirt. Dreadlocks emerge beneath the face. The third man, who is in the focus of the photograph, looks away and screams in anger, pain, or grief.

In this portrayal, the image affirms these persons' humanity without falling prey to the humanitarian dilemma. The man in the center, averting his gaze, is a human being who cries in anger and pain, yet is not reduced to the same. The gathering of several Black people, all standing-in and protesting for the same objective, and the powerful gestures and visualized yelling keep each person from being reduced to a symbol. In *Precarious Lives*, philosopher Judith Butler indirectly points to the theoretical frames of being human that are inherent in contemporary cultures. She poses the question of ostensibly normative humanness in inquiring what makes life livable and death grievable;[76] or, more to the point, whose lives are livable and whose deaths are grievable: "certain lives will be highly protected, and the abrogation of their claims to sanctity will be sufficient to mobilize the forces of war. Other lives will not find such fast and furious support and will not even qualify as grievable"[77]. The ostensible status of being human can, thus, be determined by asking whose deaths would truly matter, whose lives are protected to which extent, and for whom we grieve and for how long. While continuously proclaimed, the value of human life in questions of vulnerability and practices of protection is differentially allocated. Certain groups of people are not fully registered as human, their vulnerability and injurability is unseen, and their injuries and deaths are not discursively noted[78]. These processes seemingly entail acquiescing other people's suffering or not seeing their precarious conditions. It entails an inability to see, that is not merely a refusal or ignorance but a fundamental inability to recognize the lives of some as human lives. Grieving, and being grieved for, becomes a sign of humanness.

To focus on the common state of vulnerability and inherent connection of lives, Butler notes, can change the structures and meanings of vulnerability itself.[79] Such an ethical and solidary focus changes not only what we see as legitimate suffering but also who we see as vulnerable and in need of protection; whose life fully matters as human life.

> A [shared] vulnerability must be perceived and recognized in order to come into play in an ethical encounter […]. [W]hen a vulnerability *is* recognized, that recognition has the power to change the meaning and structure of the vulnerability itself. In this sense, if vulnerability is one precondition for humanization, and humanization takes place differently through variable norms of recognition, then

76 Butler, Judith: Precarious Life: The Power of Mourning and Violence, London/New York, 2004/2006, XV.

77 Ibid., 32.

78 Ibid., 33.

79 Cf. ibid., 43.

> it follows that vulnerability is fundamentally dependent on existing norms of recognition.[80]

In linking vulnerability, humanization, and recognition, Butler articulates a sense of solidarity based, among other areas, in perception and acceptance that demands to see differently, to consider the ways of seeing and of politically and socially organizing what we see.

The screaming man in the image, surrounded by others, is vulnerable yet embedded in a community that supports and affirms him. Thus screaming into the night, he reflects the sense of vulnerability back onto the spectator, who does not see him as the vulnerable person but as a human being who, in the very constitution of his human life, is connected to others and fundamentally dependent on affiliations, as all humans are. The ability to grieve then, in turn, becomes a sign for solidarity and humanity, for if we grieve we are seized by loss and pain, we reveal our vulnerability as we become aware of the fundamental social and political ties that bind us to others.[81] Each of us is entangled in a web of social relations, some of which we do not even know exist, and constituted within social vulnerability.[82] Inherent with these realizations is a "fundamental dependency and ethical responsibility"[83] asking to pay attention to others, to their struggles and demands. Butler explains this connection by theorizing the affective reaction of losing a close connection. Such loss renders a person vulnerable. It reveals the intricate pattern of fundamental sociality in life. Losing persons entails a loss of connections to them and is therefore not only the loss of loved ones but involves losing a part of oneself.[84] Attending to this vulnerability, the human is, then, understood as social being who is fundamentally connected to others, vulnerable to outside address, and affected by intimate entanglements.[85]

The scream depicted in Sullivans photograph reveals such entanglements and vulnerabilities in the life of the man presented. His "passion and grief and rage" show, as he screams, visualizing a loss of the self and of the binds that undo and implicate "us in lives that are not are [sic] own, irreversibly, if not fatally"[86]. The outcry allows us to recognize him as fully human: feeling, grieving, and being in rage just like any of us would be. The scream in this image, whether seen as reflection of outrage or grief, is affective and contagious. We feel with the person who hast lost a connection and in many ways a central part of himself.

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80 Ibid.
81 Cf. ibid., 20.
82 Cf. ibid.
83 Ibid., 23.
84 Cf. ibid., 22.
85 Cf. ibid., 29.
86 Ibid., 25.

The scream, community of protesters, and entanglements in the image, keeps it from closing in on a fictive and all-defining object of suffering. The photograph discloses adversity as merely one part in the complexity of the person's life. It evades the "humanitarian dilemma" that Kennedy describes and, instead, links the painful scream to a complex understanding of the man's humanity which is entangled in manifold webs and relations. He is embedded in connections to other people – known and unknown to him –, (infra-)structural conditions, institutional networks, political arrangements, as well as fabulated narrations and images that determine lived realities. Becoming aware of these connections and refusing to reduce the sight to a single meaning, becomes a form of solidarity entrenched in seeing, in imagining differently and, following Azoulay's description, a solidarity that engages in "civil imagination," seeing beyond what is seen. Here, too, the photograph looks deeper at the structures of meaning making and knowledge and asks for a solidarity of looking.

3.3 Webs of Connection

Figure 3: A female protester, demanding justice for Eric Garner, sports a face mask in Brooklyn, New York, Dec. 5, 2014

picture alliance/Elisabeth Shafiroff/Reuters

The connections and entanglements inherent in human lives are similarly envisioned in Elizabeth Shafiroff's photograph of a woman wearing a breathing mask in protests in New York City on December 5, 2014 (fig. 3). The image was taken during a protest rally in response to the acquittal of the officer who strangled Eric Garner in July 2014. Garner died in a banned police chokehold after he was stopped for selling

loose cigarettes on the street.[87] Before the COVID-pandemic made wearing face-masks mandatory, the photograph shows a single protester sporting a breathing mask in front of a blurry background, a large building with its windows illuminated in neon light. This woman is confronting the camera and seems aware of being photographed. She looks attentively and shows her mask on which the question "CAN U BREATH[E?]" is written in felt marker script. The phrase references Eric Garner's repeated plea for breath, voiced before he died: "I Can't breathe." This expression was taken up by Black Lives Matter Protests to call attention to the surveillance and criminalization of Black lives and living conditions and disparities in disadvantaged (Black) communities.

By turning the exclamation into a question – paired with the urgent address of the woman's stare – the photograph demands spectators to take a position, to place themselves within the structures and practices of inequality and to reconsider their involvement. With its reference to breathing, the lack of air, and the plea to recognize the humanity of the person, the photograph places the viewer within a network of engagement and solidarity. The protest action and the image place me within the political arena of protests and the web of relations that connects back to the events happening in New York. They ask me to engage critically with what I see and to critically consider my position within these conflicts and how I, as spectator, can become involved in changing what I see. Like the scream in Sullivan's photograph, the symbolized mask and the woman's calm presence emphasize the complexity of life and the entanglements within which lives take place. By wearing the mask and highlighting the demand for 'air,' as leeway, respect, and acknowledgement, the woman visualizes the need to be held within relationships (known and unknown), structures, and infrastructures inherent in human life.[88] Being able to breathe then translates into being supported in all means, especially those that end differential treatment and discrimination. It entails being respected as a person, desisting racialized profiling and fighting biased suspicions.

This image, too, does not present a fixation on suffering and symbolic suffocating, but a portrayal of strength and a bid to consider connections beyond camera and photographed, image and spectator, police and Black communities. The webs and connections seen in the photograph are not only those addressed by Butler in relation to a primary sociability and "fundamental dependency"[89]. They are connected

87 Eric Garner was strangled to death in July 2014 during his arrest in Staten Island, New York. He was arrested for selling loose cigarettes. Southall, Ashley: Police Investigators Determined Officer Choked Eric Garner. In: The New York Times, May 13, 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/13/nyregion/eric-garner-death-daniel-pantaleo-trial-chokehold.html. Accessed March 9, 2021.

88 See also Honig, Public Things.

89 Butler, Precarious Life, 22.

to various networks of support and societal contracts that are not yet equitable and function under the assumption that colorblindness before the law brings about a socially and economically just society. A system of justice, however, that does not see the relevance of skin color in contemporary lives cannot account for the discriminations and impediments caused by assumptions of ethnicity and categories of ostensible poverty or criminality that stand in as purported substitutes for Blackness. Metaphorically not being able to breathe, then, points toward these very assumptions that impede on Black lives in mundane and seemingly ordinary ways, while referencing the ostensible excuses for discrimination seeing the responsibility for situations with the individual and not systems of control, uneven playing fields, or assumed irresponsibility.

When the movement calls for abolition, as similarly represented in the demand for air in Shafiroff's photograph, it calls for a society in which the police does not play as important a role as it does today, in which the room to breathe is provided in lifting the "invisible burden of other people's fears"[90] from Black people's shoulders. It abolishes the assumptions of respectability and rampant individuality – the idea that whatever happens to you is essentially based on your own doing –, and enacts a network of support and care that, at least to some extent, levels the playing field, creating equal opportunities for all. The woman's question, "CAN YOU BREATHE," metaphorically connects to the "abolitionist society" which Patrisse Khan-Cullors, one of the movement's founders, envisions: It is a society "rooted in the needs of the community first. It's rooted in providing for and supporting the self-determination of communities […,] a society based on interdependence and the connection of all living beings"[91]. That is, a society in which everyone would be able to breathe freely, without being defined by the fabulated images and narrations of Blackness or poverty, elusive responsibility or the purported "iconic ghetto." Such abolition is based on the concept by Angela Davis who writes in *Abolition Democracy* about dismantling the structures "in which racism continues to be embedded"[92]. While dismantling structures and the police does sound like a radical step, this process starts in less drastic measures. It entails creating the infrastructure and network of support necessary to "render prisons obsolete"[93]. A first step would be to consciously and institutionally unlink ostensible criminality from appearance, skin color, origins, or economic solvency. Then "an array of social institutions […] would begin to solve the

90 Thurston, How to Deconstruct Racism.

91 Heatherton, Christina: #BlackLivesMatter and Global Visions of Abolition: An Interview with Patrisse Cullors. In: Camp, Jordan T./Heatherton, Christina (Hg.): Policing the Planet: Why the Policing Crisis Led to Black Lives Matter. London/New York 2016, 35–40, 40.

92 Davis, Angela: Abolition Democracy: Beyond Empire, Prison, and Torture. New York 2005/2015, 26.

93 Ibid., 71.

social problems that set people on the track to prison"[94]. It would unhinge the connection between Blackness and ostensible criminality and create just ways of care and control that do not support the prison-industrial-complex.

Abolition democracy works with the recognition that directly addressing the circumstances and conditions that lead to crime would prove more efficient than the detention of so many people for minor and minute infractions. It would create opportunity structures for disadvantaged communities and schools, supply healthy and affordable food in urban food deserts, establish community centers that provide for assistance, room, and self-determination, and end the criminalization, surveillance, and sanctioning of poverty and homelessness. This network of support, would, for example, create chains of assistance that call for professionalized mental health care experts as first responders if someone suffers from a mental breakdown, without requiring armed police.[95] Thus, it would ideally restore the trust of Black communities into institutions and emergency responses. It would establish a system of social workers to provide support and care for homeless people or those disadvantaged, without the direct and immediate involvement of the police. It would attempt to change the systems of the criminal justice apparatus to avoid profit oriented penalty and prison structures, precincts making money with the sheer numbers of people arrested or traffic violation tickets written, or prisons becoming sources of revenue and profit. The question of being able to breathe, thus, reflects a larger system that weighs down Black communities, talks down their achievements and efforts, and diminishes life chances. The direct question on the mask visualizes this baggage in Black lives, making its addressees aware of the racialized structures and unconscious connections entangled in images and assumptions.

4. Conclusion: The Solidarity in/of Photographs

The photographs of protests call for a different kind of looking, a critical consideration of what is seen, and a general unsettling of seemingly fixed meanings. In a sense, this practice of looking and questioning can be understood as a solidarity of sight that is based in photography, or rather, that can be learned by attending to images and the structures laying underneath. This visual solidarity, the learning to look beyond the scenes portrayed or definitions given, is neither solidarity itself nor activism or protest. Yet, it can function as a supporting solidarity that begins to envision anti-racist structures and to discard biased and reductive assumptions. To question the images and narratives that govern people's lives is a first step toward

94 Ibid., 92.

95 See Andrew.

the social change envisioned in the Black Lives Matter Movement. It operates within the Movement's visual cultural project, unsettling the visual dimensions of political structures in society.

This 'visual solidarity' should not be confused with full blown activism. It can support action and shift perspectives but cannot create change on its own. In the first episode of the *Activists NYC* podcast by photographer and activist Cindy Trinh the founders of "Across Frontlines" – an organization specialized in supporting activists with trainings and resources – talk about umbrellas and water bottles as symbols of their shared efforts to support Civil Rights Protests. The first time they have met, Kalaya'an Mendoza explains, was in 2015 during the march commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of the Civil Rights Marches in Selma, AL. Seeing that his future founding partner Adam Cross carried umbrellas to shield protesters from the blazing sunshine, Mendoza realized their shared understanding of allyship, as Mendoza himself was carrying a backpack filled with water bottles. For Mendoza, their

> role as allies, as accomplices, as folks who care and work in solidarity with communities is not to centralize ourselves in the work but to do that necessary work to make sure those communities are safe and able to […] find their agency and their ability to change […] their world[96].

Giving water to those too caught up in protest to drink and shade to those who place their struggle over their need to cover from exposure is a form of supportive solidarity akin to the critical examination of positions, perceptions, and rationales; akin to the unsettling of images and fabulations. These actions understand that it is a Black struggle to fight, supported from the sidelines. This entails attending to the images and their discursive contexts and becoming aware of the assumptions origins as well as the forces hidden in photography. The images of Black Lives Matter Protests ask their spectators to be aware of the political forces underway in the image, even if their implications cannot fully be understood. While they are not directly part of the protests and activism, they can become tools of solidarity – like the water bottle and the umbrella – working to support without drawing attention away from the essential struggles for social, cultural, and political change.

Lifting the burden of other people's fears, then, considers where these fears come from and how they are perpetuated. It entails breaking through the fabulations of difference and ostensible inferiority, to recognize the persons behind biased images and racialized narratives. A solidarity of looking, like water bottle and umbrella, shields from exhaustion and thirst, creating room to breathe and exist without being burdened by other people's assumptions, fixations, and fears.

96 Trinh, Cindy: Across Frontlines. In: Activist NYC Podcast, 13 Nov 2018, transcript mine.

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