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Black Lives Matter: The Emotional and Racial Dynamics of the George Floyd Protest Graffiti

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Abstract

Political Protest Graffiti is an increasingly visible form of rhetoric that provides a democratizing space to enable its disenfranchised peoples to articulate their own narratives. As a form of visual activism, the George Floyd Protest Graffiti acts to historically document the tragic sentiment of the collective protest demonstration and testify to political and racial struggles in America. In this essay, I examine the George Floyd Protest Graffiti as a discursive site to analyze how emotions come into play in its production. With a rhetorical power to communicate ideas and influence public debate, I contend that the Floyd cultural graffiti production functions as a system of socio-cultural negotiations and a political call to arms to collapse structural racism in America.

1. Introduction (I Can't Breathe)

Protest Graffiti declaring "I can't Breathe," "Say Their Names" and "Defund the Police," "Save a life, kill a cop," as well as other visual rhetoric emerged across Los Angeles in defiance of the May 25, 2020 fatal death of 46-year-old African American George Floyd by four Minneapolis police officers. Floyd was detained after passing off a $20 counterfeit bill at Cup Foods convenience store. Police Officer Derek Chauvin held his knee on Floyd's neck for eight minutes and 15 seconds despite Floyd's repeated requests that "Please, I can't breathe." Visual images of pain, outrage, and distress spread across America's cities fueled by a historical trajectory of uneven police brutality towards blacks and a culture of impunity that reinforces it. Floyd's murder evoked the memory of other black

men and women who died at the hands of police—Eric Garner, Trayvon Martin, Philando Castile, Freddie Gray, Tamir Rice, Breonna Taylor Michael Brown—to name a few. Installations of "Say their names," and other visual rhetoric and images visually etched, bombed, tagged, and/or painted across the cityscapes demanded people to remember that Black lives matter. BLM activist Mallory (2020) points out in a protest speech that went viral:

> We cannot look at this as an isolated incident. The reason why buildings are burning are not just for our brother George Floyd. They are burning down because people here in Minnesota are saying to people in New York, in California, people in Memphis, to people all across this nation: enough is enough. (n.p)

Mallory's strong rhetoric offers an urgent call to justice of what it means to have had "enough" of structural systems that reinforce racial oppression and marginalization in America. The enraged protest voices produced polyphony of different media voices denouncing police brutality and systematic oppression. Protest graffiti is a fertile ground of visual activism for the collective fight against injustice. Graffiti has the visual power to challenge and advocate for the restructuring of political systems. As a site of witnessing discourse, graffiti can generate affective solidarity where emotions of anger and rage can bring about social justice. Graffiti is a cultural/historical discourse that informs its audience on how the world is viewed by marginalized peoples during a specific period of time and place. Graffiti testifies to the socio-cultural, political, racial, and economic conditions of our time. In this research, three important questions are examined:

1) What emotions dynamics come into play that triggers a tagger to sprawl "Fuck the Po Po" across the ATM of a Bank of America?

2) How does graffiti reflect the socio-political context in which it is produced?

3) How do anger, rage, and prosocial emotions shape rhetorical decisions to challenge racial injustice?

These questions interrogate the affective dimensions of protest graffiti, which reveal how marginalized Black Americans successfully challenge and transform conversations of institutional racism in America.

2. Methodology

Between May 28 and June 10, photos of both the protest and the graffiti before and after the protest were taken in the Los Angeles area. These images were then uploaded onto *AtlasTi* for coding purposes. Grounded in visual frame analysis and visual argumentation, this research hopes to contribute to the growing scholarship on the emotional dynamics and discursive power of protest graffiti to confront structural racism and advocate for political change.

3. History of Graffiti

Graffiti has existed since the ancient times of Herculaneum and Pompeii as a

form of visual discourse offering diverse opinions on the state of politics, socio-economic life, sexual practice and other aspects of Roman Society. Etched into the walls of antiquity, the inscriptions offer historians a testimony to the lived experience and cultural history of the time period (Ohlson, 2010; Stahl, 2016). A study conducted on the graffiti found on Pompeii's walls by Viitanen & Nissin (2017) reveals it was an early form of political campaigning and social networking, which in some cases were fashioned to mock and ridicule existing political structures (pp. 117-144).

The term graffiti itself derives from the Greek word *graphein* for writing. In Italian, graffito translates to a singular "little scratch," the plural is graffiti and is the term for etchings and inscriptions sketched into wall plastering. Graffiti has been described as rudimentary depictions, engravings, and "markings, which appear on billboards, fences, and walls and various other kinds of writing surfaces" (D'Angelo, 1974). Graffiti scholars have determined that it comprises a wide range of markings including scribbles, drawings, and messages. During contemporary times in which graffiti saturates urban spaces, the definition has expanded to include "any unsolicited marking on a private or public property that is usually considered to be vandalism" (Stowers, 1997, n.p.). Perhaps, Jean Baudrilard describes graffiti best as simulacra that defies explanation as it no longer denotes anyone or anything. Baudrillard (1993) writes:

> In this way, with neither connotation, nor denotation, they escape the principle of signification and, as *empty signifiers*, erupt into the sphere of the *full signs* of the city, dissolving on contact. (pp. 78-79)

Albeit, Baudrillard describes simulacra as an "empty signifier" we have witnessed how during periods of revolution, graffiti is deployed as a visual armament of resistance (Marche, 2012, p. 78). For example, during WWII in Spain, the letter "V" inscribed on a wall after the Royal Air Force strategic bombings signified the backing of allied powers (Marche, 2012, p. 78). The letter "P" was used during France's anti-Franco movement to rally protest as a messaging tool to circulate "censored information" (Marche, 2012, p. 78). Today, BLM, the acronym for Black Lives Matter, is a revolutionary signifier of revolt against racist institutions.

Modern graffiti in the United States got its start in a juvenile correction facility in 1960's Philadelphia when Darryl McCray tired of eating white bread at the facility tagged the word CORNBREAD across the cell wall. McCray's moniker established him as the "King of the Walls" (McCray, 2009). Cornbread's simple tagging technique exploded in New York City in the 1970s when a bored young delivery boy by the name of Demetrius from Washington Heights tagged his moniker TAKI 183 on the Midtown Manhattan subway station walls and the walls of the Upper East Side (n.p.). Baudrillard deemed New York's cultural explosion of graffiti as a radical commotion of signs, rooted in linguistic reasoning (Stahl, 2016, p. 230). During the 1960's Chicano movement in the United States, inspired by the *pulquería* tradition of artists David, Alfaro Siquieros, Diego Ri-

vera and José Clemente Orozco, graffiti artists created colorful murals of struggle, displacement, resistance, and empowerment (Reed, 2005; Chaffee, 1993). Graffiti became an increasingly visible form of rhetoric during the hip-hop movement as it reveals the relationship between power and powerlessness; more specifically, it testifies to how disenfranchised peoples move within the liminal spaces of power structures. Roland Bleiker (2000) proffers this proposition when he writes:

> The discursive dynamics through which transversal dissent operates are located in the spaces that lie between the strong and the weak, between dominant and marginalised discourses. The power that lingers in this void is best understood by shifting foci from epistemological to ontological issues. This is to say that one must observe how an individual may be able to escape the discursive order and influence its shifting boundaries. (p. 186)

In this way, protest graffiti acts as unauthorized visual rhetoric demonstrating how the voice of the marginalized speak back against dominant, non-inclusive, political structures. Representing the perspectives of its disenfranchised counterculture, graffiti provides a democratizing visual space, which enables its speakers to have a voice in society to articulate their own narratives.

Theoretical Framework

Visual rhetoric has substantial power to communicate ideas and influence public debate. To better understand the rhetorical power of graffiti, the theoretical framework is situated within the existing field of visual argumentation wherein graffiti acts as a multi-modal tool for the communication and dissemination of ideas (Birdsell & Groarke, 1996, 2008; Fleming, 1996; Blair, 2003; Roque, 2015; Shelley, 2003). According to W.J.T Mitchell, we are living in a world influenced by a "visual" or pictorial turn in which people are more inclined to perceive and remember key events more through images than through written exposition (Bleiker, 2018, p. 4). Because many graffiti artists generally employ more than one mode of artistic expression often combining the visual with the verbal in some shape or form, I will use multi-modal argumentation theory to examine graffiti's argumentative activity and communicative function (Blair, 2015; Roque, 2015). I also take into consideration Groarke's (2002) theory of argumentation that concedes that the visual is as effective as the verbal in establishing the foundational elements of an argument.

The rhetorical analysis of graffiti, itself, has grown significantly over the last two decades as young taggers have made their presence known throughout the globe, their visual messages providing what Sonja K. Foss (2005) recognizes as "access to a range of human experience not always available through the study of discourse (p. 143). In order to warrant a rhetorical study, the representational image must have three attributes: "The image must be symbolic, involve human intervention and be presented to an audience for the purpose of communicating with the audience" (Foss, 2005, p. 144). The representational object proffers an

idea, an opinion, or argument that elicits human interaction, either in the creative process or the interpretation process. Foss's definition falls within a broad definition of rhetoric as having a unique "human ability to use symbols to communicate with one another" (Foss et al., 1985). The rhetorical choices of visual devices, which Michael D. Murray (2016) refers to as "topics of invention and arrangement and tropes of style,"—aim to persuade the audience in the validity of the ideas presented (p. 197). The difference between verbal and visual argumentation is that we "read" images differently from words. Words can be connotative, denotative, abstract, or concrete and are enclosed within a syntactic structure offering myriad possible interpretations; images do not have the grammatical confinement in terms of constructing meaning. Free of grammatical signifiers, graffiti can lack punctuation and appear to run-on directing the reader to its cyclical nature. It can be composed of vernacular, obscenity, slang, and rhetorical fragmentation used to emphasis a specific emotion, thought or idea (Bleiker, 2000, p. 16).

On its own and without an audience graffiti is like any other image existing within the cityscape; it's there, but hidden within the shadows of its architecture. Hence, graffiti needs a viewer to make the image or text meaningful. The viewer examines the image in the context of its time, its place, and its surroundings. The viewer interacts with all that happens in the context of the graffiti including the message, the street, the people on the street (Lewisohn, 2008). In interpreting the graffiti, the viewer brings in his/her social position and world view and interprets the graffiti accordingly. Roland Barthes (1977) observes that there are two different facets of an image one of which is the "denoted message" and "connotative message" (pp. 17-19). The denotative image is a "message without a code"; this is the literal message of an image (p. 17). The connotative image carries with it the social, political racial, psychological associations of the viewer, sometimes referred to as "secondary image construction" (Hall, 1997: p. 86). Because society is constantly changing, so does how we interpret society as, "meaning floats. It cannot be finally fixed" (Hall, 1997: p. 228). Meaning changes as times change and change is constant. In the next chapter, when I engage the BLM graffiti, I examine Floyd's protest graffiti as visual communicative artifacts of political struggle, and as a visual communicative system of socio-cultural negotiation. The graffiti demonstrates an on-going political struggle that attempts to collapse the white/black, and privileged/non-privileged class binary in America (Hall, 1988; Holliday et al., 2004). Since images zigzag through many demographic, social, political and racial boundaries, our understanding of them is, indeed, difficult. Graffiti is visual rhetoric and when regarded as such must be examined as a discipline that attempts to proffer a position of "how things in the world ought to work" when these ideas are debated and contested (Murphy, 2016, p. 191). As Anthony Blair (2015) points out, an argument does not necessarily attempt to rework and transform someone's position on an issue. It is a communicative tool to make known that an alternative position, in fact, does exist (p. 222).

The study of graffiti requires the rhetorical attention we give to other discourses, mainly arguments. Darren Newbury (2011) argues that we be careful "about what images are and how they may be used to communicate ideas and make arguments" (p. 662). According to Newbury, scholars should examine illustrative visuality, analysis, and argumentative elements (p. 654). Newbury's recommendations are similar to Birdsell & Groarke's (1996) analytical framework in terms of analysis of visual images:

> Such images can be understood in principle; (ii) they should be interpreted in a manner that makes sense of the major (visual and verbal) elements they contain; and (iii) they should be interpreted in a manner that fits the context in which they are situated. (p. 9)

An examination of graffiti therefore needs attention to the arrangement of all aesthetic choices, paying careful consideration to what visuals are used to establish the occasion, the speaker, the proposition, the tone, the appeals, the evidence, and the line of reasoning used to establish a conclusion. In some cases, different evidentiary forms of non-verbal images, metaphors, symbols and textual messages are used to refute the validity of an existing socio-cultural truth claims (Groarke & Tindale, 2013, p. 145). The compositional elements of the graffiti, thus, can "advance implicit claims" or provide the audience with both an explicit and implicit reason to accept, reject, or quality the proffered claim (Grancea, 2016, p. 376). In such instances, graffiti has a powerful argumentative function that "by definition—transcends mere illustration or reiteration of an idea already expressed in verbal form" (Tseronis, 2013).

After establishing the arrangement of images and argumentative elements, it is necessary to take into account the historical context in which the discourse is produced. Context plays a key role whenever discussing graffiti and should never be taken out of the socio-political context in which it is produced. In other words, choices and context go hand in hand in the analysis of graffiti. Birdsell & Groarke (1996) confirms the significant role of context in visual analysis by pointing out the importance of analyzing the interrelationship between the verbal, visual, and cultural context of the discourse. Groarke (2002) clarifies the steps to visual analysis by incorporating Pragma-dialectics to develop three standards to conduct analysis:

> a) images designed for argument are communicative acts that are in principle understandable; b) argumentative images should be interpreted in a way that makes sense of the major (visual and verbal) elements they contain; c) argumentative images should be interpreted in a way that makes sense from an "external" point of view, that is, one that fits the social, critical, political and aesthetic discourse in which the image is located. (Qtd. in Tseronis, 2013, p. 145)

The discursive elements of the image are thus, taken apart, and analyzed within its respective social, racial, geographic and political context to see how

they interact to establish an argument (La Ware, p. 2). Also taken into consideration in this analysis is the symbolic power of graffiti and how the George Floyd symbols function as a deliberate visual discourse to inform and influence the public towards political action (Günther, 2016, p. 49). A frame analysis approach is laden with symbolic meanings and tropes that help to identify political objectives, structure discourse, and galvanize protest mobilization (Goffman, 1973; Benford & Snow, 2000; D'Angelo, 2002).

Racial struggle and its connection to power and powerlessness is key to understanding how emotions come into play in the cultural production of protest graffiti. Emotions can both reinforce and resist prevailing racial structures and social predispositions (Solomon, 2015). Protest graffiti offers a wealth of discursive counterculture sites to analyze how emotions come into play in its production. Tracing the affective dynamics can reveal what Ranciere (2004) terms the "distribution of the sensible" those "self-evident facts of sense perception that simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within it" (p. 11). In this sense, it is important to consider what is both visible and invisible in order to analyze the social emotional drivers and political dimensions of the discourse (Crawford, 2000; Mercer, 2010).

Graffiti unleashes a dynamic interplay of emotions and can provoke psychological and bodily reactions triggered by the emotions themselves (Mattern, 2014, p. 593). This is true for the artist and the audience. Hence, graffiti is a discursive response to the socio-emotional conditions that produce it. As a discourse, it offers a platform to vision and revision the world by shaping "how we think and act as individuals and collectives" (Hutchison & Bleiker, 2017, p. 22) In the next section, I identify the symbolic politics of emotion, information and rhetorical elements that trigger/ed graffiti artists and taggers to express their outrage against police brutality and institutional racism in present day America (Günther, 2016). Within the spirit of the Floyd Protest Graffiti, we witness how anger and optimism act as necessary mechanisms for the recognition and, in some instances, call to action that black lives matter (Rosenwein, 2006).

4. George Floyd Protest Graffiti

The George Floyd Protest graffiti functions as a powerful rhetorical intervention for discouraged and marginalized individuals to share their stories and emotions across the horizon of urban landscapes. The visual aesthetics of the graffiti include images, symbols, aphorisms, quotes, and aphorisms—intended for both communication and mobilization (Gomes & Goncalves, 2020, p. 4). As a form of visual activism, the protestors inevitably disperse, but the graffiti remains as a historical artifact testifying to the tragic sentiment of the collective demonstration. As a form of visual activism, social media also enabled spontaneous sharing across digital platforms.

The Floyd Graffiti suggests a racial and political tragedy which gives rise to an

emotional trilogy of aesthetic frames. Without emotions driving the creative response, there would be no graffiti and no social action (Jasper, 1998). As J. Anthony Blair points out, "[t]he narratives we formulate for ourselves from visual images can easily shape our attitudes" (43). In this case, the frames themselves represent the evolution of time, thought, and emotions in which the protests and riots took place.

The Anarchist Frame, as I call it, reflects the initial emotional reaction of the protestors. The graffiti is laden with pathos and calls for complete upheaval of existing social structures. The images from this category challenge socio-economic and political institutions and capitalist ideology connected to the Black Lives Matter movement (Robinson, 2000). As Foucault (1982) points out "Where there is power, there is resistance" (p. 221). Phrases such as "Defund the Police" "Kill a Cop," fall into this category. In Figure 1, graffiti artists connect the Covid Pandemic to the Riots inferring an Old Testament causative theory that God is punishing people for slavery and years of racial injustice.

The second category, the Pity and Fear Frame arouses just that—"pity and fear" stressing the systematic killing of fallen black Americans at the hands of the police. Images of George Floyd, Briana Taylor, as well as other fallen black people give rise to visual rhetoric that demands its audience to "Say their Names," and contemplate "Am I next?" In this phase, pity and fear walk side by side in the remembering of both past and recent killings of black Americans. As the protests took its toil on America, a new cathartic category emerged that offered a purgation of emotions. In this third category, the Cathartic Frame, we witness an evolution from anarchy to the prosocial behaviors, which are defined by feelings of empathy, positivism, solidarity and peaceful, non-violent protest. (Penner, Dovidio, Piliavin, & Schroeder, 2005). Graffiti images reveal representations of purgation, cleansing and healing—possibilities of social change. Images of hope and triumph prevail over oppression; good conquers evil in a world where "Love Prevails" and hearts and peace symbols offer a bridge for humanity to "Let Equality Bloom." In these frames we witness how emotions mediate the rhetorical messaging (Wlodarcyk et al., 2017).

Figure 1. Graffti in Santa Monica linking Covid to the Riots.

4.1. Rage and Anarchy

This section highlights how graffiti rhetoric demonstrates emotions of anger and rage at the structural systems that have contributed to black oppression. Anger rises from the perpetuation of the status quo and fuels the graffiti (Gamson, 1992a; van Zomeren et al., 2008). As a motivational driver, anger "puts fire in the belly and iron in the soul" (Gamson, 1992b, p. 32). The anger towards institutional racism is evidenced in the early stages of the graffiti revealing an aggressive and belligerent tone, which is often the case in social protests and movements (Sabucedo & Vilas, 2014). Rage and moral indignation are strong motivators to challenge racial inequality. Rage against injustice mobilizes graffiti taggers to share their moral indignation and aggressively strike back at those who they perceive are the perpetrators (Smith & Mackie, 2008; Fisher & Manstead, 2008). This is seen in the tagging "Fuck The Po Po Ho" (Figure 2), painted on the wall of the Bank of America in Santa Monica that condemns the police for George Floyd's death. What is important to note in this graffiti is the location of the tagging—an exterior of a bank building. Here, the tagger physically interlinks financial institutions and policing systems. In fact, BLM has charged financial institutions with inequality and unequal access to economic opportunities.

The Black Lives Matter movement recognizes racial capitalism as another form of structural oppression and "links the histories of slavery and colonialism with the contemporary economic-material predicament of Black populations" (Issar, 2020). In the early stages of the social upheaval at George Floyd's death, people from all walks of life demonstrated their rage by physically and visually contesting the very foundation of American society. The political graffiti is a site of counter-culture production questioning and critiquing the socio-economic and political status quo of black oppression. In Figure 3, a question scrawled across the wall of the Santa Monica Bank America asks: "Where is our justice?"

The question of justice and injustice strike at the heart of the BLM Movement and articulates a deeper call for structural change. Whether intentional or not,

Figure 2. Tagging on bank of America wall in Santa Monica.

Figure 3. Tagging on Bank of America in Santa Monica.

the graffiti establishes Cecric Robinson's interconnecting systems of race, violence, and capitalism best articulated in BLM's statement on structural racism:

> Structural racism—particularly against Black Americans—has shaped the rules of our economy since the founding of the U.S. The combination of slavery, America's deep-rooted system of racial capitalism, and long-lasting discriminatory institutions have for centuries denied Black people equal access to the wealth created through their labor. (The Movement for Black Lives, 2016)

Structural racism pervades American society obstructing social and economic mobility through its exclusionary laws and regulations and its racialized practices of police brutality and mass incarceration (Issar, 2020). Outraged taggers demonstrate the situational irony of our policing systems that are positioned to "Protect and Serve," and save lives instead of contributing to the deaths of black lives. Between 2013 and 2020, 2204 Black Americans fatally died at the hands of police (NPR, 2020).

In Figure 4, two exclamatory imperative sentences demand: "Save a Life! KiLL a cop! FUCK12." "FUCK12" is possibly a reference to Atlanta rap trio, Migos's song by the same name in which the lyrics state: *"Throw that sh*t, throw that sh*t, 12 outside."* The number 12 alludes to the Drug Enforcement and Narcotics Unit. The context of the song warns to dump the drugs because the DEA is outside. In other words, Fuck 12 signifies fuck the police (Edwards, 2020).

George Floyd's death inspired a flurry of FUCK12 graffiti as well as ACAB and 1312 among others. ACAB (Figure 5) is a symbolic acronym for "All Cops/ Capitalists are Bastards," and has also been used by some taggers to declare: "All Capitalists Are Bastards." "1312" relates to the numerical letters of the alphabet: 1 = A; 3 = C; 1 = A; 2 = B.

Anger activated a wide range of visual rhetoric and participation (van Stekelenburg, Klandermans, & van Dijk, 2011). The rage towards America's police

Figure 4. CVS, Santa Monica, CA.

Figure 5. Fence Alley, Los Angeles.

practices is demonstrated in protest graffiti's radical call for complete overhaul of the system by defunding the police. According to the BLM website, "Defund the Police," demands just that. Their website states:

> We know that police don't keep us safe—and as long as we continue to pump money into our corrupt criminal justice system at the expense of housing, health, and education investments—we will never be truly safe. (BLM, 2020)

BLM managing director, Kailee Scales (2020) argues that police reform has not worked as things "are out of control" and the only route is to "stop pouring resources into a system that does not make us feel safe." Scales points out what "Defund the Police" actually means reallocating resources to help communities build better "education, healthcare, and housing" opportunities, which will ultimately help people of color "thrive." Scales calls for a Divest/ Invest program in which a percentage of funds used for "over militarized police force and military weapons against citizens" will be redirected to teachers and counselors, mental health and restorative services and community led harm reduction (BLM, 2020).

The economic disparity prompts some graffiti taggers to proffer that the answer is to "Eat the Rich," an inflammatory proposition perhaps dating back to Jonathan Swift's (1729) *Modest Proposal"* In his satirical argument, Swift proposes to eat Irish babies in order to stem Ireland's famine and social strife by "relieving the poor, and giving some pleasures to the rich"(n.p.) Rather than eating poor Irish Infants, social theorist Jean-Jacques Rousseau's suggests: "Quand les pauvres n'auront plus rien à manger, ils mangeront les riches!" (When the people shall have nothing more to eat, they will eat the rich.) During the French Revolution, Adolphe Thiers used this quote to succinctly summarize the desperation of the peasants and the urban poor. More recently, Elizabeth Warren supporters chanted, "Eat the Rich!" during one of her presidential campaign rallies for economic equity. Floyd protestors likewise incorporated the slogan into their demonstration chants while marching through the upscale streets of Beverly Hills, California alerting its audience to the ongoing racial and class struggle.

Eat the Rich" (Figure 6) captures the revolutionary cry for economic justice by dismantling systems of inequality and discrimination that continues to perpetrate economic disparities between blacks and whites. Average white families earn ten times ($171,000) more than Black families ($17,150) reflecting a social structure that seldom provides equal opportunity to people of color (McIntosh et al., 2020). Here, again, we see how race divides those who possess the right to sell their labor and compete within markets (exploitation) and those that are "disposable, discriminated against, and ultimately either eliminated or super-exploited" (Dawson, 2016, p. 151).

Another popular graffiti image that emerged is the clenched raised fist extended upward, which is a symbol of defiance and black power that visually attempts to intervene in superordinate/subordinate structures. The iconic image of resistance has a compelling history dating back to the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s when Stokely Carmichael adopted the slogan at the Poor People's Campaign in Washington D.C. to bring attention to the systematic oppression of

Figure 6. Graffiti Eat the Rich in Beverly Hills, California.

Blacks. As a symbol of Black Liberation, BLM embraced the cultural symbol after Michael Brown's death in 2014. The clench fist (Figure 7) is a forceful synecdoche, which articulates black rage, resistance, and solidarity (Rhodes, 2017, p. Xvi). The symbol also arouses strong emotions that can produce "agency that resist and transform power" (see Solomon, 2015).

The fist demands political attention to the social mechanisms that restrict equal access as Graffiti artists "inform our actions and temper our beliefs" (Darts, 2004, p. 319). A simple visual symbol that carries so much emotion and history at its very core exposes "us to ourselves, to each other, and to the world we are attempting to cultivate together" (Darts, 2004, p. 319). It has the ability to force its viewers to stop, think, and feel something about the current practices that socially and legally sanctions the brutalization and "criminalization of black bodies" (Gilbert & Ray, 2016).

Anger and resentment circulates through urban spaces with the battle cry:

Figure 7. Fist on Boarded up wall in Santa Monica.

Figure 8. Store Window Santa Monica.

"No Justice, No Peace," (Figure 8) which demands attention to the police killing of unarmed Black Americans (Abt, 2019). The Anarchist graffiti explicitly conveys an inflammatory demand to topple an unjust world at its institutional foundations in order to start anew. In all of the graffiti, palpable visual rhetoric documents the myriad voices that channel their anger and determination to dismantle pervasive racialized hierarchies.

4.2. Pity and Fear

During the protests we witnessed how the death of Floyd and countless other Black Americans aroused collective pity and fear. The visual images of George Floyd and Brianna Taylor prompted an array of emotions in its viewers by prodding them to live and relive Floyd and Taylor's deaths and to manage their conflicting emotions on an affective level (Jarymowicz & Daniel Bar-Tal, 2006). I define pity as emotions of sorrow and compassion triggered by witnessing the pain and suffering of others. The graffiti images presented fallen men and women and served to provoke a sense of pity while at the same time playing into the politics of fear and politics of memory of the systematic suffocation of the black population.

Probably the most prominent image of the Floyd protest is the image of George Floyd himself—street artists painted his image all throughout America's landscape. In Figure 9, Floyd is painted with large wings in shades of gray that span across a bright azure backdrop. Above his head reads: "FOREVER BREATHING IN OUR HEARTS." Underneath Floyd's image are flowers, candles, and American flags that keep vigil to his memory. What is important here is that arousal of pity is discursive and is an affect that visually functions to awaken the audience to feel loss and unfathomable suffering. The audience in turn joins in the emotional solidarity with mourners across time and space.

Here, the affective dynamics of Floyd's representation stir pathos and reflection in a space in which art, emotions, and politics overlap (Massumi, 2002, pp. 27-28, 217). In this intersection, we witness how affective politics come into play that can influence societal thought and political institutions. While at the same
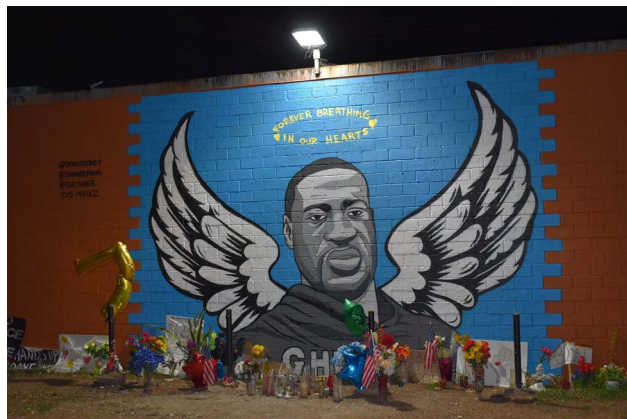

Figure 9. George Floyd created by DonkeeBoy.

time inciting pity, the visual representation also evokes an affective memory of the Floyd's death and stimulates spontaneous fear of the systematic suffocating of black men in many of its viewers. In another visual representation image, Figure 10, George Floyd lurks behind a corner, while a white couple leisurely strolls towards it. (The visual juxtaposition of the couple and the image is purposeful as it demonstrates the disparity of lived experiences between white and black Americans.)

The eerie image of Floyd showing half of his face and one dark sad eye is haunting. His drooping upper eyelid suggests the weariness of black lives toiling under a social structure that positions individuals as privileged or marginalized based on skin color. Floyd's face creates a sense of complete disembodiment and fragmentation. The observed visual effects of the photograph further suggest that affordances of social experiences are also affected by skin color. For many Black Americans navigating "white spaces" has been a shadow dance. I define "white spaces" as those spaces which "reinforce(s) a normative sensibility in settings in which black people are typically absent, not expected, or marginalized when present" (Anderson, 2015, p. 10). The fact that George Floyd's image is framed in this space, while a carefree white couple frolics under the palm trees captures America's ongoing racial disparity. The photo not only suggests elements of white supremacy and black oppression, but also visual evidence of a racialized urban space. In Elijah's Anderson's (2015) words:

> Whites and others often stigmatize anonymous black persons by associating them with the putative danger, crime, and poverty of the iconic ghetto, typically leaving blacks with much to prove before being able to establish trusting relations with them. Accordingly, the most easily tolerated black person in the white space is often one who is 'in his place'—that is, one who is working as a janitor or a service person or one who has been vouched for by white people in good standing. Such a person may be believed to be less likely to disturb the implicit racial order—whites as dominant and blacks as subordinate. (p. 13)

Figure 10. Los Angeles Street Corner.

The context of the image is key. Floyd's image is positioned on a corner building further marginalizing the black experience and highlighting the construction of racialized spaces in America. Here, the Floyd's image interacts with the couple and the upscale location—visually suggesting a structural and geographic divide (Bonam, Taylor, & Yantis, 2017).

In Figure 11, a painted rendering Breonna Taylor appears on a boarded wooden fence with the words "SAY HER NAME," calling attention to Breonna Taylor. Taylor was asleep in her home in Louisville, Kentucky when the police barged in and shot and killed her. "Say his name," became "Say her name," recalling her death and the death of many black women killed at the hands of police. #SAYHERNAME was coined in 2014 by The Center for Intersectionality and Social Policy Studies to direct attention to the many black women who have suffered violent confrontations with police. The frame is both diagnostic as it exposes the problem that women need to be included in the discussion of police brutality, and institutional racism and prognostic in that it offers a solution— saying and remembering the name of the fallen victim (Benford & Snow, 2000; Cress & Snow, 2000). Both interact to keep the memory alive.

Activist Brittany Packnett-Cunningham brought attention to Breonna's death in May with in the frame and context of the Floyd protests by posting on Facebook "Make#BreonnaTayor's name as important as fallen black men. Here, Cunningham alludes to the existing master frame of "Say His Name," to include Breonna and other fallen women. In this graffiti, we witness how master frames are adjusted and refashioned to reflect the social context of its usage.

In Figure 12, we witness the gendered equalization of black lives to include both Floyd and Breonna. The facial renderings of Floyd and Taylor side by side arouse pity and fear to now include both constructions of gender. While Taylor
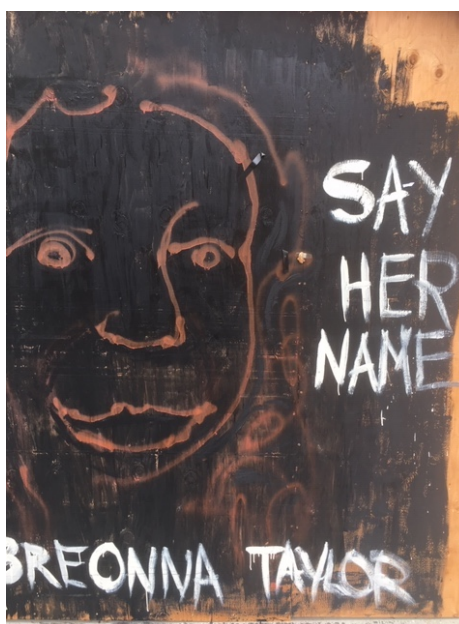

Figure 11. Boarded Wall Santa Monica.

is smiling, Floyd is stoic elucidating the conflicting aesthetics at play in the work. The emotional dynamics appear to be in conflict, while at the same time complementing each other. In examining the means of persuasion, the image certainly appeals to pathos. The representational images of both Taylor and Floyd also create an ethos-driven discourse—they are the voices, the speakers, addressing the audience of their tragic deaths.

4.3. Catharsis

In the final category, time has passed and the graffiti reflects the visual evolution from anarchy to prognostic, sometimes propaganda frames of hope and possibilities of racial justice. In these frames, graffiti messaging aims to inspire hope that the desired future will happen (Jarymowicz & Bartal, 2006). **Figure 13** testifies to a turn in emotions and a purgation of rage and anger to emotions of empathy, optimism and pride. In this visual rhetoric, Floyd has a halo of different

Figure 12. Floyd and Breonna Taylor on Wall in Santa Monica.

Figure 13. Los Angeles Street Corner.

blue shades and dons a red mask, which reads: "I CAN'T BREAHE." Floyd positioned in the center of several hashtags ranging from "Freedom," "#LOVE," "#JUSTICE," "# PEACE." What is important to note in the listing of what matters is the shift from "Black Lives Matter" to "All Lives Matters," which BLM members allege undermines racial brutality experienced by Black Americans.

The phrase "Black lives matter" was a response to the 2013 murder of teenager Trayvon Martin who was shot by George Zimmerman in 2012. The listing of "All Lives Matter," moreover, indicates the ethnicity of the graffiti artist who in the creation of the graffiti precludes meaningful dialogue about structural racism. "All Lives Matter," therefore, acts as a coded message and visually reinforces the racial status quo of a particular belief system in which "#FREEDOM#, LOVE# AND #UNITY" are meant for a privileged white population. "All Lives Matter," suggests a negation of a historical trajectory of slavery, Jim Crow Laws, and persistent institutional racism. Yet, on the other hand, it can be argued that the white community as well as the white graffiti artists considers the graffiti motivated by prosocial emotions of empathy towards Floyd himself, in which case a catharsis of emotions has transpired for the white community.

The next visual discourse, Figure 14 and Figure 15, offers declarations of hope, love, and solidarity for humanity functioning to arouse affective elements of healing and positive outcomes for the future. "TOGETHER WE RISE" written in primary colors inside a yellow sun offers hope of new beginnings and rebirth.

Figure 14. Graffiti on Boarded up Sign at REI Santa Monica).

Figure 15. Love Heals Graffiti Santa Monica.

"Love Heals" offers love as the antidote to rage and protest—both suggesting a fabricated purgation of emotions. While it is true that "hope, hope, optimism and pride, can facilitate political protest," as Sabucedo & Vilas (2014) contend, it is moreover true that optimism cannot be manufactured by protestors not suffering from the racial oppression that instigated the protests in the first place (p. 831).

The question arises: Catharsis for whom? For whom and by whom is this discourse written? For, it seems to gloss over a history of racial struggle. While the term, catharsis in contemporary society implies temporary closure to a pressing issue, cultural production of hopeful graffiti is hardly enough to move American society beyond its historical sins of slavery and black exclusion. This is especially true when the graffiti appears to be produced by those not directly affected by institutional racism.

So where does this leave us? It is true (for some) black protest awakened white society to the many social wrongdoings inflicted on Black Americans. It was raw visceral anger that motivated the protest to question: "Where is my justice?" White Americans joined in to support black efforts, but many easily resolved the injustice frames with clichéd frames of platitude. Perhaps, the next image best sums up the perspective from a white graffiti artist looking in. In Figure 16, the colorful quotation from American rapper Tupac Shakur's poem *The Rose that Grew from the Concrete* is painted in red against a white backdrop.

The graphic style has a childlike, innocent touch. The word "agape" painted in white transfigures the discourse alluding to images of love for humanity and love for God. Shakur's (1999) whole poem reads:

Did you hear about the rose that grew
from a crack in the concrete?
Proving nature's law is wrong it
learned to walk without having feet.
Funny it seems, but by keeping its dreams,
It learned to breathe fresh air.
Long live the rose that grew from concrete
when no one else ever cared. (p. 3)

Figure 16. Tupac Shakur's poem in Santa Monica.

Understanding the context of the poem is crucial. Tupac refers to his own life growing up in an urban concrete ghetto and proving nature wrong, and flourishing nonetheless. The irony of this graffiti comes within the context of the situation—numerous deaths of blacks unable to catch a breath. Tupac gasped his last breath at the age of 25 in Las Vegas, Nevada in a drive by shooting. Floyd died by a suffocating chokehold. The situational irony in the Tupac graffiti quotation at first glace provides catharsis: "Long Live the rose that grew from concrete when no one else ever cared." Sadly, Floyd and many blacks (male and female) have been systematically subjugated and unable to breathe in a system that continues to suffocate their humanity. Black lives live amidst a crushing system that tries to snuff them out. Yet, in spite of the continued subjugation, black lives triumph over these conditions and continue to reach for a piece of the American dream.

5. Conclusion

In this essay, I examined how symbolic meanings and tropes surrounding the death of George Floyd and other black lives helped to structure discourse on structural racism. The discursive elements of the graffiti were taken apart, and analyzed within their racial and political context to see how they interact to establish a position on racial injustice. I examined the interrelationship between the emotional responses and the incidents of racial injustice that produced the protest graffiti. I also argued that the interplay between political context and emotions are crucial to understanding the visual rhetoric of protest graffiti. The Floyd Protest Graffiti testifies to how anger, rage, and other emotions acted as necessary mechanisms for the social recognition and, in some instances, call to action that black lives matter. Moreover, it acted as a catalyst for racial justice, which has initiated substantial social change across the country. For one, after the mass protests, prosecutors upgraded charges against Derek Chauvin to in-

clude second-degree murder in Floyd's death. The other three officers were also charged with aiding and abetting second-degree murder. Pressure from public protest also persuaded the FBI to launch an investigation into the death of Breonna Taylor.

In addition, public pressure has forced policing institutions to redress policies of racial injustice and police brutality that have abridged the constitutional rights of people of color. Many cities including Denver, Dallas, and Minneapolis have reformed their use-of-force rules, many banning the use of chokeholds in detaining a suspect. Cries to "Defund the Police" have led cities to restructure police departments. In Los Angeles, the LAPD budget was slashed by $150,000 to order to channel money into services for poor communities of color (Chang, 2020). Many school boards across the country (Portland, Denver, Seattle) have also restructured their school policing systems by severing ties with their city police departments. These school districts intend on employing their own security measures (Andrew & Asmelash, 2020). The protest, moreover, sparked cultural changes across American landscapes with the removal of monuments that glorify slave owners or endorse the Confederacy. While these are just a few of the minor steps towards racial justice, it is movement in the right direction.

As a form of cultural production, the Floyd Protest Graffiti continues to testify to structural racism, to encourage political action and to implement public policy that is racially equitable and inclusive. It is my hope that this research contributes to the existing scholarship on how anger and prosocial emotions influence protest graffiti and advance arguments for social justice. Moreover, I hope to inspire more research on how the visual rhetoric and affective dynamics of protest graffiti mobilizes people to actively participate in social movements for racial justice.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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