Imaging Insurrection: Protest, Photography, and the Visual Framing of Black Resistance

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Imaging Insurrection: Protest, Photography, and the Visual Framing of Black Resistance

by

Zana Z. Sanders

Under the Direction of Lia T. Bascomb, PhD

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts in the College of Arts and Sciences Georgia State University 2021
ABSTRACT

This case study investigates visual representations of social unrest in Black Lives Matter protests in the United States from 2014 through 2020. Using visual content analysis and focus group discussion, this research provides insight on audience reception of protest photography as visual framing devices. This study addresses an existing gap in literature on the effects of photographic framing practices on public perceptions of protest and answers the following research questions: 1) How is Black resistance and political dissent visually represented in the framing of protest events? 2) How do social actors utilize protest photography as a mnemonic device to (counter)frame Black political struggle in the Black Lives Matter era? 3) How do Black spectator-audience(s) interpret and respond to visual representations of Black resistance performed in protest events? The study draws from critical race and standpoint theory to elucidate audience response to protest photography that mediates performances of witnessing.

INDEX WORDS: Protest photography, Visual representation, Framing, Social movements
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DEDICATION

To all those who helped guide my journey and support me along the way. I give eternal thanks to you in recognition of your generosity, kindness, and care. To my mother. Thank you for being my first teacher and most influential teacher. To the ancestors who preceded me. Thank you for paving my way. To the memories of all those lost, disappeared, and exiled. May this offering bear witness to the truth. To my loving spouse. I owe you the most for I could not have accomplished any of this without your unwavering support, sharp critiques, and extraordinary patience. We did it.
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1 INTRODUCTION

On August 9, 2014, Officer Darren Wilson killed, unarmed 18-year-old, Michael Brown. Brown’s bullet-riddled body lay on display for more than four hours in the middle of Canfield Drive in Ferguson, Missouri (Gonzales, 2015). The photographic images of Brown’s slain body, Black bodies under assault, and blackness in mourning and resistance proliferated through both traditional mass media and social media. Encapsulated within these images is a politics of disposability that moves through a political and visual economy that “renders certain people or populations less valuable, ungrievable, and even able to be killed without consequence” as evidenced through the ever-expanding visual body of American horror genre of Black death as snuff (Peters, 2017, p. 6).

Following the shooting, Michael Brown and the community of Ferguson became a part of the national discourse regarding the vulnerability of Black lives to state-sanctioned violence and the prevalence of racial injustice. Ferguson erupted in protests as community members and Black Lives Matter activists rallied in solidarity demanding justice. Protest demonstrations were met with a militarized response from the U.S. government and were often mischaracterized and delegitimized in news media reports. While a global audience turned their attention toward the scenes of social unrest in America’s heartland, many were left in dismay, disbelief, and confusion. I, too, watched in dismay but not disbelief or confusion because I understood all too well exactly what had happened here. I had witnessed it before. When I encountered the scenes of social unrest during Ferguson in 2014, I remembered the rebellions in Los Angeles in 1992; Miami in 1980; Watts in 1968; Detroit, Newark, and the more than 159 so-called “riots” that swept the United States during the now infamous “Long Hot Summer” of 1967.
I encounter these historical flashpoints via photographic images of Black resistance and rebellion, which crystallize scenes of social unrest and performances of protest within social memory. Protest photography mediates this encounter and produces a visual language that is used to articulate contested narratives of Black political struggle. Protest photography captures Black suffering and resistance within the public sphere and makes it material. The photographic images of protest and urban rebellion visually suture the historical continuity of Black suffering and resistance across space and time to produce visual narratives of a long Black freedom struggle. As performative documents of historical evidence and objects of material culture, protest photography carries social histories and cultural memories that mediate the ways Black protests are studied as events within the historical timelines of Black political struggle and further analyzed as sociopolitical phenomenon, performative acts, and public rituals. The communicative and cultural affordances of photography shapes how protest is represented, remembered, and understood by audiences.

The photographic (re)presentation of Black protest is always already operating within a semiotic discourse of racialized visual grammar that is, subsequently, broadcast through news media, circulated through popular culture, institutionalized in archives, and logged into our collective memories. Following the immediate aftermath of the Ferguson uprising, I was troubled by the images of a militarized occupation of a suburban town a mere 10 miles outside of St. Louis. However, my encounters with protest images depicting visual representations of performances of resistance and enactments of political dissent in response to said occupation hailed me as a witness and motivated this research inquiry. The protest photography that emerged from the events in Ferguson interpolated viewers into scenes of social unrest and performances of resistance encapsulated with protest as political theater. The insurgent visuality
of Black resistance in the public sphere and the saliency of the photographic image ruptured the fourth wall separating audiences from performer and performances of political dramaturgy. In thinking of the ways visuality and visibility mediate encounters with Black protest, in particular, this study engages with the material and visual cultures of protest photography as an important site of convergence through which social, cultural, and political meanings of protest are constructed and communicated.

The protests in Ferguson garnered intense scrutiny within media, popular culture, and public discourses. Due in part to the advancements in digital technology and media, professional and amateur photographers as well as civilian bystanders armed with cell phone cameras have amassed an expansive catalogue of visual documentation of protest events, spontaneous rebellions, and the Black Lives Matter movement that have proliferated throughout traditional media and social media. For the purpose of this study, these images are categorized within the genre of social documentary, a documentary photography practice that captures social life and has been vital tool in representing social issues and moments of crisis. This study primarily examines protest photography through the lens of professional photojournalists. An investigation of photojournalist’s representation of protest and race is warranted in light of reports that the most prominent photographs of social unrest imaged in news media are produced by photographers and selected by editors who work in newsrooms that are overwhelmingly white and male (Pixley, 2017). In a recent Nieman Report, Tara Pixley argues that the ways “visual journalist represent and reproduce race” has not received “extensive analysis or critique within the field of journalism” (Pixley, 2017, p. 29).
The photographic practices of recording violence, mourning, and protest promoted a hypervisual spectacle capable of rendering Black bodies and spaces as vulnerable sites of commoditization and consumption. The hypervisualization of Black protests and urban uprisings within news media raises questions on the influence of visual framing practices, a process by which photojournalists, news editors, and reporters gather and (re)present elements of protest as newsworthy events into narratives for dissemination, on audience’s perceptions and opinions of Black social movements and the social actors engaged in protest performances. The well-documented presence of news media bias in reporting on Black protest warrants an interrogation of the ways power shapes the construction of dominant narratives of Black resistance within these discourses. These questions and concerns substantiate the need for further critical examination of the visual practices employed in the representation of social protest and their potential to influence our collective understanding of this sociopolitical phenomenon.

This study solicits the voices and experiences of Black focus group participants to consider the impact of protest imagery on their perceptions, memories and interpretations of Black political struggles and social movements. A study of Black audience reception to the visual framing of Black Lives Matter protests offers critical insight into the ability and agency of audiences, as social actors, to create and contest meanings of protest performances during events of social unrest and further interrogate the role visuality plays within the processes of (counter)framing Black protest and political dissent.

1.1 Background

Protest is considered as a strategic form of political action (McAdam, Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency, 1930-1970, 2010) that seeks to influence the course
of social and political change from outside traditional institutions. Social protest offers a viable option to address grievances for marginalized individuals who have restricted access to political power and are rendered invisible through multiple forms of oppression. Protest demonstrations are operationalized as a tool of social movements to attract attention, appeal, threat, and to make claims heard and visible, which social actors leverage in order to have an impact on politics and society (Hameed & Zubair, 2011). Representation of social protest has far reaching implications and high political stakes affecting public perception and policy. Research has shown that public perception is a vital component in determining whether protests and social movements are able to achieve their desired goals.

Historically, the photographic image has played a prominent role in Black political struggles. The archives of protest photography from the Civil Rights movement, as artifact and evidence, are attributed with changing public perception on Jim Crow segregation laws, increasing public support for Civil Rights legislation, and crystallizing civil rights struggles into public and collective memory. The Black Lives Matter movement has reenergized the call for human rights and an end to police brutality through social protest mobilization both online and in the streets. Following the recent spate of highly visible acts of police brutality resulting in numerous murders and assaults of unarmed Black men and women in the United States, images of Black death, collective mourning, and resistance have become powerful tools of pictorial evidence documenting Black suffering and the continuous struggle for self-determination.

A study published in *The Guardian* (2015), an independent newspaper based in the United Kingdom, cited 1,134 deaths occurred at the hands of police with “African American males between the ages of 15 and 34” comprising more than 15% of deaths and further stated that Black people were killed at “twice the rate of white people in 2015” (The Guardian, 2015).
This horrendous scene, rooted in a history of racist terror, violence, and systemic manifestations of anti-blackness, is a gruesome, often mediated and increasingly mediatized, reoccurrence in the lives of Black people in the United States. In many cases, these deaths are not reported in national or local news media at all.

In some cases, however, Black death triggers mass outrage, mass protest, and mass media spectacles. Such was the catalyst for a wave of Black rebellion ignited in 2014 as response to the unyielding horror of antiblack violence perpetrated by the state and rendered visible through a torrent of highly publicized extrajudicial killings of Black men and women. Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri; Eric Garner in Long Island, New York; Freddie Gray in Baltimore, Maryland; Tamir Rice in Cleveland, Ohio; Sandra Bland in a jail in Waller County, Texas; Walter Scott in Charleston, South Carolina; Philando Castille in his car in St. Paul, Minnesota; Alton Sterling outside of a corner store in Baton Rouge, Louisiana; and many more who are unnamed and others whose names go unsaid publicly but are nonetheless spoken by loved ones and (re)membered in the litany of Black lives consumed by the voracious demands of an antiblack racist capitalistic society.

The urban uprisings that occurred in 2014 in Ferguson and 2015 in Baltimore were accompanied with an upsurge in Black resistance that spans through 2020 as sociopolitical manifestations of Black rage that ascend into the public sphere under the vociferous demand for Black lives to matter. The cry for Black lives to matter, initially voiced as a social media hashtag in response to the vigilante murder of Trayvon Martin in 2012 and in the wake of the state sanctioned murder of Michael Brown in 2014, was mobilized into the Black Lives Matter protest movement and the broader decentralized Movement for Black Lives (M4BL) which has reverberated globally (Ransby, 2018). Black Lives Matter was created by three queer-identifying
Black women, Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi who envision Black liberation in the twenty-first century through a Black feminist intersectional praxis that centers the “leadership of women and queer and trans people” in a “Black-led mass struggle” (Ransby, 2018, p. 3). Black Lives Matter is an “ideological and political intervention” (Garza, 2014) with an inclusive and intersectional vision organized against oppression, exploitation, and liberation that posits “when Black people get free, everybody gets free” (Garza, 2014).

Protest photography captures the visuality of Black resistance that emerges in response to antiblack violence and connects the contemporary political struggle for Black lives to the continuity of antiblackness. These visual documents shape social memories of Black-led movements and the histories of Black political struggle. These visual documents also carry the collective memories of the lives lost and transfers them into visual symbols that are used to articulate political demands for repair. In some cases, these images can and often are used by the state to delegitimize Black political demands or to justify the suppression of Black protest as a form of political claims-making. Images, like words, “do” things (Austin, 1962). I am interested in what the photographic image of Black resistance and political dissent, in this case, does or can be made to do as a type of performative document that speaks through visual utterances.

1.2 Purpose Statement

In a media-saturated society, the politics of visibility and hypervisibility work to construct Black protests into international media spectacles ripe for mass consumption and dissemination as an axial media events (Dayan & Katz, 1992; Manning, 1996). The purpose of this qualitative inquiry is to gain understanding of how audiences engage, interpret, and respond to representations of social unrest and explore how protest, as a political and performative act of resistance, is imaged and imagined through photographic framing practices of news media and
movement actors. In seeking to understand how the participant-spectator audience responded to performances of protest within the visual scenes of social unrest, this case study is guided by the following research questions. 1) How is Black resistance and political dissent visually represented in the framing of protest events? 2) How do social actors utilize protest photography as a mnemonic device to (counter)frame Black political struggle in the Black Lives Matter era? 3) How do Black spectator-audience(s) interpret and respond to visual representations of Black resistance performed in protest events? In answering these questions, this study provides insight into how protest events and scenes of social unrest are visually represented and mediated to diffused audiences. This inquiry examines the social actors and modes of resistance made visible to the public through performances of social protest and political dissent and analyzes how they are visually (re)presented in protest photography. The study seeks to understand how the framing practices of media actors and social movements actors (re)present and (re)mediate social unrest during the Ferguson, Baltimore, and Minneapolis protest events. The study provides insight into the visual modes of communication and expressivity of Black resistance featured in the performative documentation of protest photography as cultural artifact, mnemonic device, and indigenous resource within the visual repertoires of Black protest tradition(s) performed in the Black Lives Matter era.

The study explores the emergent digital archives of protest photography from events in Ferguson, Baltimore, and Minneapolis found in news media reports and social media posts that mediated the protest events to spatially and ideologically diffuse audiences. Excavating the performative and affective functions of photography, the study is aided by visual methodology through the use of photo-elicitation in a series of semi-structured focus group discussions with a theoretical sample population of twenty spectator-participants, members of an intergenerational
Black “Gen X,” “Gen Y” also referred to as “millennials,” and “Gen Z,” audience who witnessed the protests through media. This approach to audience reception investigates how Black spectator audiences read, interpret, and make meanings of acts of resistance performed within Black protest tradition(s) and subsequently remediated and visually represented as photographic image/text.

This inquiry interrupts the dominant (re)presentation and (re)mediation of social protest and interrogates the hegemonic narratives inscribed within scopic regimes that constrict the visuality of Black resistance (Mirzoeff, 2006). This research highlights the role of power in the construction of hegemonic narratives that produce absences, silences, and excesses found in the visual archive. The study operationalizes a critical Black gaze and collective memory as methods that promote the articulation of Black experiential knowledge that disrupts dominant narrativization of Black freedom struggles. Such disruption draws from standpoint theory to center Black voices and experiences with mediated visual encounters of Black resistance in service of gaining valuable research knowledge and critical understandings of how audiences respond to these photographic (re)presentations and why. The study aims to elucidate the influence of photographic framing on perceptions of collective identity, movement efficacy, and anger in the cross-generational sample audience of Black witness-spectators, which contributes to the audience’s reception of the uprisings as mediated protest events. The study is guided by an understanding of the role of the audience as active participants in the construction of meanings of social protests and performances of resistance mediated through photography. The voices of the audience are central to the research findings on the effects of framing practices on interpretations of the visual representation of social unrest during the Ferguson, Baltimore, and Minneapolis protest events. This research provides an in-depth analysis of both media and
movement framing practices employed in the visual representation of urban uprisings drawn through data collected and compiled from focus group discussion, digital documentary photography archives, news reports, and digital and social media sites featuring representations of social unrest during the 2014 Ferguson uprising, 2015 Baltimore uprising, and 2020 Minneapolis uprising. The study offers critical insight on how photography materializes the social and political conditions of unrest and considers how these factors influence audience perception.

1.3 Problem Statement

Media representation plays a major role in the construction of perceptions of the meaning and efficacy of protest. The news media employs various discourse frames, which exert significant influence on audience perceptions and how we make sense of the world. Critical media studies document the role media plays in perpetuating bias, prejudice, stereotyping, stigma, and colorblind racism against members in such as Black, Latinx, Indigenous, LGBTQIA, Muslim and other marginalized social outgroups (Bowser, 2017; Dovidio et al., 2010). Critical race theory (CRT) provides a theoretical lens through which scholars may analyze how mainstream news media, as an apparatus of the state, disseminates hegemonic ideology, circulates cultural capital, and perpetuates institutional racism (Yasso, 2005).

Considering the dominant role of media in framing public understanding of events, the practices of framing have reverberating effects and the ability to legitimize or delegitimize protest. Dominant news media reporting often portrays protesters as violent, destructive criminals who behave illogically, which ultimately serves to undermine public perceptions of the legitimacy of the protests while subsequently ignoring the structural causes of the
events. Research has shown that the use of protest paradigm over time may result in more negative evaluations of protesters and protests in general (McLeod & Detenber, 1999; Detenber, Gotlieb, McLeod, & Malinkina, 2007) and has been employed to delegitimize Black dissent (Campbell, Chidester, Bell, & Royer, 2004). When racial stereotyping, media bias and protest paradigm converge, the results can perpetuate both racialized and racist constructions of Black protestors engaging in legitimate dissent. Studies have revealed that both Michael Brown and the protestors were constructed as thugs and were blamed for violence (Adamson, 2016; Leopold, J. & Bell, M.P., 2017). Indeed, a protest paradigm is thought to undergird most news coverage of protests, which ultimately frames these events as police versus protesters rather than focusing on the social issues or events being protested, which has especially been the case regarding protests related to issues of police brutality (Baylor, 1996; Chan & Lee, 1984).

Due to the salient nature of the photographic image, research has shown that visual framing impacts perceptions of the social issues and the social and political movements spurred in response (Zillmann, Gibson, & Sargent, 1999). This study aims to address an existing gap in literature on the effects of photographic framing practices on public perceptions of protest. Previous research has provided content analysis of media narrative themes and some have incorporated visual methodology in qualitative analysis, but few include empirical data of Black audiences’ perception of media coverage of protest. Detenber, Gotlieb, McLeod, & Malinkina (2007) demonstrated the value of instituting an experimental design in the examination of social protest frames on television audiences’ perceptions of protest but there have been few studies that examine how race impacts these perceptions and even fewer insights have been drawn regarding the intra-group perceptions of Black audiences to race-related protest.
Through the lens of critical race theory and standpoint theory, this study seeks to examine how members of marginalized communities both read and respond to mainstream media’s pro-establishment bias versus movement and/or collective action framing practices in an effort to identify strategies and tactics that produce effective counter-storytelling modes of communication. This research fills a lacuna in existing literature on the role of photographic imaging and framing of Black resistance on public perceptions of Black-led movements in the post-civil rights and Black power eras.

The documentation of bias in news media representation and reporting of Black protest demonstrations, uprisings, and social movements prompts a sense of urgency among critical media and social movement studies scholars to renew research on the relationship between the media and photography in representing social movements. Previous studies have performed critical discourse analysis of media reports but there remains a need for in-depth analysis of the visual representation of protest imaged in media and movement framing and their effect on public perceptions of protest activities and the social actors who participate in democratic performances of political dissent. There remains much to learn regarding the impact of mediated representation, politics of visuality, and framing practices in shaping public attitudes toward social issues and social actors, which is underscored by a need for increased attention focused on the role visual framing plays in influencing audience perception.

1.4 Significance of Study

This research provides crucial understanding of how photography and framing practices facilitate the mediation of individual, collective, social, and public memories of Black political struggles, highlighting the relationship between media, memory, and performance and addresses a gap in existing literature on movement studies and critical media studies. The
study highlights the cultural and political role of protest photography as a form of social documentary that operates as a material artifact and mnemonic device. In this sense, protest photography provides historical evidence of Black political struggle and serves as a conduit of cultural and social memory. Protest photography supports memory flow from one generation to the next that enables Black spectator-witnesses' retrieval, interrogation, and utilization of cultural memory to collectively recall and commemorate Black freedom struggles.

The study contributes to sociological research on the relationships between visual media, framing, and memory, and their influence on public perceptions of social issues, social actors, and performances of political dissent. This research contributes to the development of new paradigms and modes of visual inquiry in the study of African American social movements and diasporic Black liberation struggles in the twenty-first century.

I acknowledge the social location from which I stand and theorize as a Black queer woman within the “Gen X” demographic as guiding this inquiry. My socioeconomic status falls within the so-called “Black middle-class.” This location provides certain access and proximities to institutional power and resources, at times, but is certainly not a fixed position as the boundaries and meanings of a “middle-class” identity fluctuate based on the demands, needs, and prerogatives of the elite to maintain a bifurcated labor force in which the “middle-class” operates as an economic buffer zone between the ruling class and the working-class. As the United States declines as an economic power, income inequality has increased and widened the chasm between classes. Thus, the so-called middle and working classes are increasingly eroding into the working poor. While those living near or below poverty, a disproportionate number of whom are Black, compose the growing underclass. These class dynamics influence, to varying degrees, the ways Black Americans experience antiblackness and systemic inequality as racialized “others.” In
conjunction with class difference, Black Americans hold various political ideologies and orientations that also influence the ways Black communities organize and mobilize in resistance against structural oppression and systemic inequality.

I bring my intersectional identity and lived experience with antiblackness through interpersonal encounters and media encounters to bear in my analysis of visual mediums that codify race as a social construct through ways of seeing. My approach to audience reception is influenced by a social constructivist world view, experiential knowledge, and cultural competency as a scholar and cultural producer who has learned through interrogation of the relationship between media and power that my own survival requires that I live and study mediated encounters of dominant representations of blackness through a critical gaze, which bell hooks describes as “one that looks to document and one that is oppositional” (2003, p. 95). This critical gaze is operationalized in my own readings of protest imagery and those of the study’s participants as a means of contextualizing the condition of Black life that produces the modes and methods by which Black people struggle for liberation and self-determination.

This research addresses multiple audiences but is primarily written for an academic audience that traditionally privileges institutional knowledge and written text over other forms of knowing. By working with focus group participants, I have chosen to hold my own analysis of image/texts in a space of suspension in order to think collectively around other ways of knowing and traditions of learning such as Black oral traditions that are often understudied within academe. Building from Black feminist praxis, I intentionally center this inquiry through the experiential knowledge of Black audience members based on cultural competency and an ethical belief that Black people’s interpretations of reality are influenced and mediated by shared
collective experiences and encounters with racial terrorism in which the meanings of these experiences are best defined through Black voices.

1.5 Theoretical Framework

The study is guided by the interpretive lens of critical race theory and dramaturgy, a dialect of symbolic interactionism, as theoretical frameworks. The study employs standpoint theory, which considers social location as integral to understanding “how we are materially affected, individually and collectively, by multiple aspects of our identity” (Meyers & Gayle, 2015, p. 298). I draw from standpoint theory to emphasize that the experiential knowledge of Black audiences is entangled with the historical and cultural conditions, as well as relations to power and subordination that shape Black peoples’ lived experience with race, gender, sexuality, and disability.

1.5.1 Critical Race Theory

Critical race theory (CRT) provides the conceptual and theoretical framework for this study. CRT, developed out of critical legal studies during the 1970s, asserts that racism is (1) normal and structurally embedded into the society of the United States, (2) benefits white elites and working class people, (3) race and racism are socially constructed, (4) minority groups are racialized different in response to shifting needs of the dominant group, (5) everyone has overlapping intersectional identities, minority status enables “voices of color” to communicate about race and racism through counter-storytelling (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). The application of CRT to this study allows the researcher to consider how the power dynamics shared between the media and the state reinforce the status quo of dominant society. This study also draws from CRT due to its commitment to counter-storytelling, which the researcher identifies as a vital part
of movement framing and necessary for the expression of collective identity and agency as it relates to expressions of Black dissent and political resistance.

1.5.2 Standpoint Theory

Through a commitment to centering Black voices, memory, and experiential knowledge as a form of counter-storytelling, this study incorporates standpoint theory which contextualizes the social location(s) of Black audience members. I draw from standpoint theory to emphasize that the experiential knowledge of Black audiences is entangled with the historical and cultural conditions, as well as relations to power and subordination that shape Black peoples’ lived experience with race, gender, sexuality, and disability. The situated knowledge gleaned from the social location of the study’s Black audience participants provides crucial insight on the role of visual imagery in the construction of race and the effects of visual representations of blackness on perceptions of self-efficacy and movement efficacy. Building from standpoint theory, I find it necessary to situate the social location of the research participants within the analysis of audience reception in order to develop a fuller understanding of how experiences with race, gender, sexuality, and ability are filtered through subordinate positioning, which influences audience members’ interpretation of representations of resistance, efficacy of movement, and perception of protest events.

1.5.3 Social Movement Framing

The study incorporates a dramaturgical approach (Goffman, 1974), a dialect of symbolic interactionism, combined with Entman’s (1993) media framing theory to the analysis of framing practices in the visual representation of social unrest during the Ferguson, Baltimore, and Minneapolis cases. This research utilizes the theoretical concepts of media framing and
collective action/movement framing to examine the effects of framing practices on public perceptions of protest activity, protesters, and social movements.
2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Since the political turbulence of the 1960s, episodes of social unrest have been photographed, televised, remediated throughout popular culture, and embedded in public memory. This study is invested in an exploration of the relationship between protest and photography as generative and performative sites of visuality that mediate a visual discourse of Black protest culture featuring expressive articulations and embodied enactments of resistance performed in the public sphere and which work collaboratively to render Black political subjectivities visible in public discourse. The influence of visual representation and mediation of protest images on public perception of contentious protest performances and the social actors who participate in these social dramas is understudied within movement studies and communication studies literature. Scholars of movement studies, critical media and communication studies have researched the role of framing practices and cultural processes, as interpretive meaning-making and performative work, in textual discourses of social activism. However, social scientists have paid less attention to the role of photographic image texts, or the social practices of image-making and image use in meaning construction of social and protest movements and thus missed crucial insight obtained from in-depth analysis of the cultural processes of meaning making performed within the visual field, as a site of contention and power negotiation between social actors including the diverse audiences who encounter these images and their participation in the interpretive process, leaving a gap in the existing literature. An examination of the production, appropriation, and circulation of photographic texts that moves beyond treatment of protest images as purely illustrative visuals remains necessary in order to understand how power influences the way performances of dissent are (re)presented, (re)mediated, and (re)membered in public discourse.
Such an investigation calls into question the role of power in shaping the cultural meanings associated with enactments of resistance and repertoires of contentious politics—otherwise considered as “non-institutional collective action that arises when politicians are unresponsive to citizen demands”—performed within the public sphere (Johnston, 2019, p. 1). This inquiry is especially urgent considering ongoing debates on the efficacy and legitimacy of various protest tactics such as the use of violence or non-violent strategies in articulations of collective action. The audience, as witnesses and participants in public rituals of mourning, memorialization, and contentious performances of collective action, shares an agential position in protest performances and their response to visual (re)presentations of mediated protest events, enactments of embodied resistance, and the protest performances of movement, media, government, and political social actors also remains an understudied area in social movement and media studies. In order to address these gaps, the following chapter discusses the literature surrounding the study.

2.1 Protest and the Long Black Freedom Struggle

During the mid-twentieth century, a robust period of Black insurgency generated multiple acts of protest, spontaneous rebellion, and various forms of organized political mobilizations in response to entrenched white supremacist racist ideologies, state-sanctioned violence, and systemic oppression. I use the term “Black insurgency” in reference to the strategies of resistance and self-determination within organized movements and spontaneous forms of political action that members of Black communities, who in opposition to marginalization, social stratification, and the structural violence(s) of systemic racism (Feagin, 2001), employ and by necessity adapt in their aim to challenge the status quo and achieve social change. Historian Joe Feagin (2006) states that systemic racism is a “material, social, and ideological reality” that has manifested
through all institutions of our society (Feagin, 2006, p. 2). Drawing on extant literature on the sociology of protest in social movements, this research study defines social protest as a resource of marginalized groups enacted in a legitimate mode of political action oriented toward objection to policies or conditions (Lipskey, 1968; McAdam, 1982). This definition is in alignment with political process model, which characterizes protest as a political phenomenon that functions as an often-necessary political process within a society where power is unequally distributed amongst social groups.

This study operationalizes social protest as a strategy of Black insurgent movements. For the purpose of this study, social protest is considered as vital tactical responses to the multitudinous and intersecting forms of systemic racism that materializes the political, economic, physical and structural violence(s) that haunt Black lives and produce what Sadiya Hartman defines as “skewed life chances” manifested as the residual effects of the “afterlives of slavery” (Hartman, 2007, p. 6). As much as systemic racism is a constant and evolving force in the oppression and subjugation of Black life, Black resistance, then, is a co-constitutive force of a dialectical experience with modernity shared among African descendant peoples throughout the diaspora, albeit an experience shaped and filtered through the variegated sites and particularities of nation-state regimes.

While the focus of this study is situated within protest movements in the United States from the 1960s era into the twenty-first century, I acknowledge this history and its material culture as emanating from Black liberation struggles that predate and extend beyond the chronology of political activity within the historical eras that bound this study. The aforementioned protest movements are shaped by particular political, cultural, and social contexts that are connected to and influenced by Black internationalism and currents of
transcultural and transnational exchange through which solidarity with global liberation struggles flows from the continent of Africa, throughout its diaspora, the Third World, and global south. As such, these movements have produced a material and visual culture which has diffused beyond the geographical localities and time period of their origins. Therefore, I analyze the varied articulations of Black resistance through the lens of a Middle Passage epistemology that charts the production of cultural identities and expressivity found within protest movements to and through origins of Black liberation struggles that extend beyond the time, space, and localities which bound the scope of this study. I aim to consider how the relationality between oppression and resistance forges the aesthetic, political, social, and cultural materiality of Black protest tradition(s). Here in thinking with the likes of Paul Gilroy (1993) and other diasporic theorists such as VèVè Clark (2009), Brent Hayes Edwards (2001; 2003), and SA Smythe (2018), I evoke tradition(s) as plurality to engage with the multiplicity of experiences in relation to the historical continuities and intertextualities of Black liberation struggles that are transnational and transcultural with roots, routes, and migrations across the variegated sites of the Black diaspora

2.1.1 Visualizing a Black Protest Tradition within Historical Narratives of Political Struggle

Civil rights struggles of the mid-twentieth century pushed new modes of Black resistance into public view, which shaped the characteristics of 1960s Black protest tradition(s) and precipitated the diffusion of a material and visual protest culture through popular culture, public memory, and public discourse into mainstream society. According to Jacquelyn Dowd Hall (2005), the so-called “classical phase of struggle” is the dominant historical narrative of the Civil Rights movement, which defines the movement through a linear progress storyline that begins
with the 1954 Supreme Court ruling in *Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka* that establishes racial segregation in schools as unconstitutional continuing to the 1955 Montgomery bus boycott sparked by Rosa Parks and subsequently concluding with the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and 1965 Voting Rights Act. These historical events produced insurgent images of Black citizens defying the Jim Crow racial codes of southern apartheid and engaging in embodied performances of resistance in the public sphere as a form of claims-making. These images are a part of the dominant narrative and as such they circulate throughout public memory. Yet, Hall cautions scholars about the politics of memory stating “remembrance is always a form of forgetting, and the dominant narrative of the civil rights movement—distilled from history and memory, twisted by ideology and political contestation, and embedded in heritage tours, museums, public rituals, textbooks, and various artifacts of mass culture—distorts and suppresses as much as it reveals” (Hall J. D., 2005, p. 1233). This narrative focuses on the top-down charismatic leadership of Martin Luther King, Jr., in doing so erasing or severely marginalizing the vital leadership contributions of women and the important role of the mass base, characterizes the movement’s espousal of non-violence coupled with practices of proper moral comportment, what Evelyn Brooks Higgenbotham (1993) articulates as a “politics of respectability,” as examples of righteous “good activism” in contrast to the negative characterizations of dangerous, ill-conceived, militant, and misguided use of violence advocated in the “bad activism” of the Black Power movement.

Within this narrative, as Hall further states, the emergence of Black revolt and rebellion across urban cities and the subsequent formation of the Black Power Movement are conceived as emblematic of post-1965 period of decline in the Black Freedom Struggle, an argument which is sustained by Doug McAdam (1982) in his analysis of the political opportunities that structured
the generation, mobilization, and decline of the Civil Rights Movement. How does one understand the notion that the emergence of the Black Power Movement, one of the most influential political, social, and cultural movements in the histories of Black resistance, delineates a period of decline in Black political struggle during the 1960s? In *Black Awakening in Capitalist America* (1990), Robert Allen contends by 1966 “the civil rights phase of the black liberation struggle was drawing to a stalemated conclusion, and, in its wake, followed the urban revolts, sparked by stagnating condition in the urban ghettos” (Allen, 1990, p. 23). Studies examining the structural causes of the 1960s urban rebellions (Gilje, 1996; Horne, 1995; McLaughlin, 2014; Sugrue, 1996) highlight economic deprivation, wage stagnation, and racial inequality as the smoldering embers of urban unrest that are inflamed by acts of police brutality. Malcolm McLaughlin (2014) writes that Stokely Carmichael (Kwame Ture) and H. Rap Brown (Jamil Abdullah Al-Amin) insisted that urban riots should be understood as rebellions by Black people struggling against forms of racial inequality. According to Charles E. Jones (1998), the Black Power Movement, which draws energy and inspiration from the spectacular urban rebellions, emerges out of the context of the failure of the Civil Rights Movement to improve the living conditions and life chances of poor Blacks. Umoja, Stanford, & Young (2018) situates spontaneous rebellions such as the spectacular uprisings in Watts, Newark, Detroit and other urban cities during the cycle of mass revolt and uprisings of the 1960s, as a “protest tactic of Black working class” within “an African American repertoire of resistance” and further cites Black rebellions as “natural symbols of resistance” that are a “cry for relief and a call for more robust resistance” (Umoja, et. al, 2018, p. 9).

The rise of the Black Power Movement is analogous with the response to the this “cry for relief and call for resistance” emanating from the Black working-class communities across urban
America. The cacophonous call-and-response of “Black Power” was first verbally initiated in public by Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) staffer Willie Ricks and further articulated by Stokely Carmichael (Kwame Ture) who had grown disillusioned with civil rights reform during his tenure at SNCC and issued the demand for Black political and economic power at a rally in Greenwood, MS in 1966 (Allen, 1990; Umoja et. al, 2018). Black studies scholars trace the call for “Black Power” as emanating from the ideological roots of Black nationalism with its emphasis on self-determination as such the call for “Black Power” resonated with Black people in the rural and urban areas of the south and north, respectively. The Black Panther Party for Self-Defense (BPP) formed by Bobby Seale and Huey P. Newton in 1966, was a preeminent organization within the Black Power Movement. The BPP rose to national attention when armed members of the party seized the public sphere of the California State Capital to contest the 1967 Mulford Act, which had been crafted in an effort to disarm the BPP and its members engaged in lawful armed patrols of Oakland neighborhoods. The BPP infused revolutionary nationalism and anticolonial rhetoric into the organization’s principles and articulations of Black Power ethos which catapulted the BPP into national and global ascendency. Nikhil Pal Singh (1998) argues the local and global appeal of the BPP should be considered through the lens of “translocal and transnational intercultural transfer and exchange” (p. 64) through which the image and ideology of the organization should be viewed through, what Singh citing Arjun Appadurai’s (1990) meta theory of disjuncture defines as, the “mediascapes, ethnoscapes, and ideoscapes of a properly postcolonial global cultural economy” (p. 300).

The visibility and visuality of the BPP’s performance of Black Power was vital to the social, political, and cultural influence of the revolutionary organization as the vanguard of the
radical movement. The theatricality of BPP’s use of armed self-defense and subsequent confrontations with police made the organization and its members highly visible and subject to being maligned and mischaracterized by the media as well as acts of repression and calculated assaults by the state (Jones, 1998; Reed, 2019; Umoja et. al, 2018). The Black Power Movement and the BPP as the vanguard of the movement were deemed national threats to the social structure as such the movement, party, and their respective histories have been subject to repression. The histories BPP activism have been reduced to narrow conceptualizations and mischaracterization in what Jones (1998) refers to as “Black Panther mythology” (p. 26). Michelle Wallace (1978) offers an additional Black feminist critique of sexist and misogynistic performances of Black masculinity that were proliferating throughout the BPP and sectors of the Black community during the Black Power era. In reading visual representations of the BPP and their members alongside Wallace’s “Black Macho” (1978) critique, I am reminded of the ways the visual image is always already implicated in the construction of racialized gendered identities, that further construct and otherwise constrain the expressions of Black masculinity and Black femininity embedded into BPP mythology and iconicity. Dominant media portrayals seized the imaging of the BPP’s form of radical resistance and relegated it to aestheticizations of violence and “radical chic,” a derisive phrase coined by Tom Wolfe (1970) and employed in various co-optations and appropriations of the insurgent image of Black Power activist in an effort to reduce its rhetorical power and symbolic efficacy in consciousness raising within Black communities and challenging the dominant social relations maintained through elite power structures (Allen, 1990).

Debate over the uses of non-violence, symbolic violence, and armed self-defense are reoccurring in public discourse on the efficacy of various protest tactics in collective action, in
which case the use of violence is highlighted as a cause of white backlash that is associated with
movement decline (McAdam, 1982). This argument aligns with the classical phase periodization
and the dominant narrative of the period of Black insurgency during the 1960s era. However,
these notions of decline fail to consider the way(s) movements shape and continue to (re)shape
culture as cultural meanings change and fluctuate throughout time and thereby influence public
attitudes toward modes of protest. Research suggests that public acceptance of protest tactics
changes over time as tactics are employed more often. Yet, preexisting attitudes around the
legitimacy of Black protest remain historically consistent in considering all acts of Black protest,
whether peaceful, non-violent, or employing strategic use of violence, as radical. Here, the
racialization of Black bodies contributes to what Gordon (2018) posits as the legitimation of the
erasure or absence of Black being as an independent agent in the public sphere of claims-making
where said denial of legitimacy is mandated in anti-black racist societies. In this view, the
aesthetic value of Black resistance embedded within the insurgent image of Black protest is
threatening to the legitimacy of the social order as defined by the status quo and thus subject to
censure.

Hall (2005) and Theoharis and Woodard (2003) posit a “long civil rights movement”
theory that attempts to alter the classical phase periodization while offering challenges to the
dominant narrative characterizations of the Civil Rights Movement. While there are clear
distinctions in regard to tactics, ideologies, and goals of distinct social movements, some
historians and movement scholars embrace a “long movement” theory that examines Black
resistance through the lens of a single Black Freedom movement (Carson, 1986; Hall, 2005;
Self, 2005; Theoharris & Woodard, 2003), which expands the spatial geography and chronology
of Civil Rights and Black Power subsequently collapsing the movements into a longer history of
struggle. Other scholars such as Sundiata Cha-Jua and Clarence Lang (2007) critique the “long movement” thesis stating that it flattens the distinctive character of both movements, erases the conceptual differences between waves of protest movements, disregards the role of space and political economy in shaping movements, and ultimately misinterprets what they characterize as “the modern Black Liberation Movement” through a “long movement thesis” as a “rootless, undead, without place” vampire (Cha-Jua & Lang, 2007, p. 265). In regard to Cha-Jua and Lang’s criticism, this study treats the Civil Rights and Black Power movements as distinct but related periods of Black insurgent social movements within a historic Black Freedom Struggle as historian Akinyele Umoja expresses in *We Will Shoot Back* (2013). However, literature emerging from Black Power studies scholars such as Peniel Joseph (2009, 2010), Charles Jones (1998), Akinyele Umoja (2013), Rhonda Williams (2015) and others provides necessary nuance to the historiography of Black freedom struggles in the U.S. by challenging the dominant narrative characterizations and historical periodization of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements.

This dominant narrative subsequently has led to the myth of Black southern passivity associated with the Civil Rights movement. In *We Will Shoot Back* (Umoja, 2013), Akinyele Umoja disrupts this narrative through highlighting the active role of armed self-defense in the southern freedom movement. Similarly, Simon Wendt’s (2010) study on the Deacons of Defense outlines the role of armed resistance in protecting Civil Rights movement marches as a tactical response to increased white supremacist terrorism. Umoja defines armed resistance as “individual and collective use of force for protection, protest, or other insurgent political action and in defense of human rights” (Umoja, 2013, p. 14). Umoja et. al (2018) further states that armed resistance was a controversial practice debated during the Civil Rights movement but nearly universally accepted in multiple forms including “self-defense, retaliatory violence,
spontaneous uprisings, and guerilla warfare” (Umoja et al., 2018, p. 45) during the Black Power movement. While the debate around the efficacy of the strategic use of non-violent direct action or armed self-defense was partially an ideological difference between the movements, Umoja (2013), Hill (2006), and Cobb (2015) highlight the presence of armed self-defense in the southern struggle and in doing so reveal a concealment within the dominant narrative and its corresponding photographic archive. The imaging of resistance during the 1960s historical epoch of the Black Freedom Struggle provide insight into the histories, legacies, and reverberations of protest movements. The Black protest tradition(s) made visible within a material and visual culture and the meanings attached to them are important sites of investigation which have been neglected within social movement historiography.

2.1.2 Analyzing Black Movements and the Repertoires of a Black Protest Tradition

Similarly, sociologists who study social movements through structural inquiries also exhibit a tendency to avoid photography within their analysis in favor of more positivist approaches, which neglects the symbolic production of protest performances and their photographic renderings within social movement studies. The study of social movements as extensively documented within the discipline of sociology gives much scholarly attention to address concerns with the “mobilization of groups via formal and/or informal means around a social cause” (Daellenbach & Parkinson, 2017, p. 189), the “rise and decline of movements, the waxing and waning of participation, and movement success and failure” (Johnston & Klandermans, 1995, p. 21). The emergence of the Civil Rights Movement and Black Power Movement ushered in a new paradigm of movement studies, such as the political process model (McAdam, 1982), which diverges from the resource mobilization and the classical model of
collective behavior that characterized protest as irrational, spontaneous, and pathological. Social scientists studying the cycle of protest occurrences during the 1960s - 1970s period of Black insurgency rejected the limited utility of previous theories of collective behavior and alternatively developed social movement theory models such as resource mobilization (McCarthy & Zald, 1977; Gamson, 1975; Jenkins & Perrow, 1977; Piven & Cloward, 1977; Tilly, 1977), and political process (Eisinger, 1973; Jenkins 1982; McAdam 1982; McAdam et al, 2001; Myer & Minkoff, 2004; Tarrow, 1988; Tilly, 1995) to examine these forms of collective action, repertoires of contention, episodes and waves of protest activity and further analyze the development, mobilization, decline, and outcomes of new social and protest movements. In alignment with the political process model (McAdam, 1982; Tilly, 1995), this study defines social protest as a legitimate mode of political action performed by rational actors in strategic response to systemic racism, structural violence, subjugation, marginalization, and oppression. Proponents of the political process model consider the structure of political opportunities as the primary impetus or barrier for the generation of insurgent movements. Utilizing the political process model paradigm, social movement theorists have developed an extensive body of research knowledge detailing how the structure of political opportunities affects movement development, mobilization, and outcomes. Research studies that examine how movements develop, utilize, and transform tactical strategies of resistance within protest actions as a mode of contentious politics offer valuable empirical contributions toward answering the proposed research questions of this study.

Political process theorists Doug McAdam and Charles Tilly offer substantial contributions to this study through structural analysis of protest cycles in the United States and Great Britain, respectively. In an empirical analysis of the origins and development of the Civil
Rights Movement, McAdam (1982) examines the structure of political opportunities that produce the period(s) of generation, mobilization, and decline of Black insurgency from 1930-1970 which give rise to and shape the movement. McAdam’s (1982) political process model extends the previous resource mobilization model, which contributes the rise of insurgency to elites who support and provide much needed resource to otherwise powerless challenger groups. McAdam does not disavow the presence of elites in shaping political opportunities within the Civil Rights Movement but instead shifts agency and power as exclusively held by elite groups to movement actors as members of the challenging group who cultivate and contribute indigenous resources and organizational strength toward the development of insurgency. Within the political process model, the generation of social movements is attributed to “the confluence of three factors: expanding political opportunities; the mobilization of indigenous organizational resources; and the presence of certain shared cognitions within the minority community” (McAdam, 1982, p. 61). The notion of “shared cognitions” is of particular importance to this study as McAdam states that “mediating between opportunity and action are people and the subjective meanings they attach to their situations” (McAdam, 1982, p. 48). The impetus to cognitive liberation, as theorized by McAdam, is initiated through “forcing a change in the symbolic content of member/challenger relations” whereby insurgent challengers experience a change in consciousness and behavior (Piven and Cloward, 1977) which is made available from cultural cues “among groups of people who jointly create the meanings they will read into current and anticipated events” (Eldeman, 1971, p. 32).

Sociologist Charles Tilly, a proponent of political process theory, provides a fundamental contribution as the first theorist to seriously “document and seek to explain the changes in the ways people act together in pursuit of shared interest” (Tilly, 1993, p. 253) through the concept
of repertoires, which provides an analytical approach to examine repetitive forms of collective action. Tilly (1977) first introduces the notion of repertoires to the study of collective action in his analysis of the changing tactics and repetitive forms of claims-making selected and performed within a particular spatial and geopolitical configuration of contentious politics occurring from the mid-eighteenth through the early-nineteenth century in Great Britain. Tilly’s conceptualization of repertoires of contention evolved from an observation of the repetitive character of forms and transformation of tactics of claims-making and expanded throughout his career to include an aggregate category of contentious performances, which Tilly describes as an “expression of protest, often linked to demands,” but further maintains that performances are “learned and historically grounded ways of making claims on other people, which in the short run strongly limit the choices available to would-be makers of claims” (Tilly, 2008, p. 5).

The histories of Black resistance in the United States exhibit a repetitive character in relation to the content and form of claims-making performed in the public sphere. A review of this history reveals how social actors have used the visual field of the public sphere to enact various forms of claims-making through varying degrees of tactical transformation in response to particular challenges and acts of repression occurring across distinct spatial temporalities. Within the canon of literature on Civil Rights and Black Power studies, a considerable amount of scholarly attention has been placed on mapping the origins and genealogies of the movements to political and ideological antecedents, establishing periodization schemas, and providing research analysis of movement outcomes. This literature documents the histories of Black resistance during the mid-twentieth century epoch and examines the formulations, mobilizations, representations and diffusion of protest movements as well as the influences and legacies of the 1960s urban rebellions and uprisings (Button, 1978; Fogelson, 1971; Gilje, 1996; Horn, 1997;
Jones, 1998; Johnston, 2019; Joseph, 2009; McAdam, 1982; McLaughlin, 2014; Sugrue, 1996 Umoja, 2013; Upton, 1984). These studies provide empirical insight regarding how insurgent challengers and their quotidian co-conspirators adopt and continuously modify various strategies and tactics of resistance throughout the histories of Black liberation struggles as evidenced in the evolution of tactics made available within the repertoires of a Black protest tradition emerging from abolitionist efforts during the period of enslavement, anti-lynching campaigns during the Jim Crow era, and through grassroots mobilization for desegregation, voting rights, and Black self-determination during the Civil Rights and Black Power eras most notably (Blackmon, 2019; Kelley, 1996; Kelley 2010; Raiford, 2006; Robinson, 2000; Robinson, 2013; Umoja, 2013; Williams, 2015; Wells, 1997; Wood, 2011).

In the sense that repertoires shape and constrict the content and form of claims-making performed in the public sphere, an understanding of how hegemonic power influences what forms of Black resistance are rendered (in)visible and legible within the visual field, how they are framed in public discourse, and how they are remembered and historicized is central to this study. The non-violent direct actions of lunch counter sit-ins, Freedom Rides, jail-ins, boycotts, voter registration drives, marches and demonstrations associated with the Civil Rights Movement, the more militant driven and sometimes violent confrontations with the state and demonstrations associated with the Black Power Movement, and the quotidian expressions of rage and refusal made visible in the form of rebellions and uprisings represent the diversity of protest tactics found within the repertoires of a Black protest tradition that characterizes the dynamics of Black insurgency during the mid-twentieth century (Jasper, 1997; Kelley, 2010; McAdam, 1988; McAdam, Tarrow, & Tilly, 2001; Reed, 2019; Tilly, 2008). According to Tilly, people in a particular place and time learned a limited number of ways to perform contention or
make claims on others and essentially adhered to those scripts. However, Tilly acknowledges that contentious performances change incrementally as a “result of accumulating experience and external constraints” (Tilly, 2008, p.5).

A growing body of literature on the emergent Black Lives Matter (BLM) protest movement and the network of organizations affiliated with the broader decentralized Movement for Black Lives/ (M4BL) have examined the movement’s origins, generation, mobilization, and tactics of contentious politics (Biesecker, 2017; Clayton, 2018; Ransby, 2018; Rickford, 2015; Szetela, 2019; Taylor, 2016). The initial wave of research documents the antecedents of the movement’s politics and ideologies with a great deal of scholarly attention addressing the similarities and differences between the BLM movement and the Civil Rights and Black Power movements of the 1960s. Within this body of research, scholars address critiques of BLM’s decentralized structure and the movements strategic use of disruptive tactics as being too confrontational and divisive. Appearing on Time Magazine’s short list for “Person of the Year” in 2015, Black Lives Matter “blossomed from a protest cry into a genuine political force” that has garnered international media attention (Atlman, 2015). Media and communication studies have also developed a body of literature which investigates how news reports have covered Black Lives Matter protests (Banks, 2018; Harlow, 2019; Haynes, 2016; Kilgo & Mourão, 2019, 2021; Mourão, Kilgo, & Sylvie, 2018; Leopold & Bell, 2017; Root, 2018; Thomson, 2016) as well as how activists have utilized social media in mobilization (Ince, Rojas, & Davis, 2017; Hoyt, 2016; Lee, 2017).

Emerging initially as a hashtag, a digital affirmation of Black humanity, #BlackLivesMatter can be read as a symbolic call for justice, a discursive appeal for equality, and a demand to end antiblack racism and structural violence(s) that haunt Black lives and
relentlessly push Black bodies into a perilous state (Harold and Deluca, 2005; Hoyt, 2016). This call was originally initiated in the form of social media activism as a political response to the acquittal of George Zimmerman for the 2012 murder of unarmed Black teenager, Trayvon Martin, and subsequently mobilized into street action in 2014 in response to police officer Darren Wilson’s murder of unarmed Black teenager, Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri. The call was deployed, thereafter, in a wave of protest and urban uprisings from Baltimore, Maryland in 2015 to Baton Rouge, Louisiana and St. Paul, Minnesota in 2016. The chilling image of police officer Derrick Chauvin’s knee forcibly pressed against the neck of George Floyd constricting the flow of oxygen until Floyd slowly asphyxiated for nine excruciating minutes reignited the call in Minneapolis, Minnesota in 2020 which subsequently proliferated throughout the nation and across the globe via protest in solidarity with the movement against antiblack racism, police brutality, and systemic oppression. The mass street mobilizations and online activist campaigns have drawn intellectual debates and public deliberations on the role of protest and the efficacy of movement tactics within the repertoires of Black protest in the twenty-first century.

2.2 Protest, Performativity, and the Role of Photography within Visual Protest

Repertoires

This study aims to contribute to the growing body of literature that is increasingly more interested in the cultural aspects of movements as well as the influence of movement culture within popular culture and public memory. Civil Rights and Black Power movement studies generously contribute to a vast body of literature attuned to cultural movements, how movements influence culture, and how movement culture moves across spatiotemporalities of Black political struggle. These studies expand our knowledge of history of Black insurgency in the United
States and provide nuanced examination of the various repertoires of contention, strategies, political ideologies, and modes of Black resistance initiated in response to the material realities of American political, economic, environmental, and social genres of horror.

Missing from the political process model and McAdam’s analysis of structural opportunities is serious engagement with culture as a force and resource in social movements. Cultural artifacts and markers are sources of information and communicative resources which carry cultural meanings and knowledge that are important to social movement organization and mobilization. To ignore the material culture of protest movements as an indigenous resource is to ignore the cultural meanings and the processes of meaning-making that are entangled within the production and circulation of symbolic content. This study embraces the empirical contributions of the political process model while also acknowledging the limitations of positivist focused structural analysis. This limitation is noted by critics of the political process paradigm who argue that the model’s positivist orientation focuses too much attention on structural analysis at the expense of investigation of the complexities of meaning-making within social movements and their expressive forms of communication.

Critics of political process theory highlight the model’s limited viability in addressing the role of culture as an influence on social movement’s protest tactics or providing adequate understanding of how movements generate and diffuse new meanings and modes of political subjectivity, political consciousness and discourse as expressive forms of protest culture that alter existing social relations. These scholars challenge the primacy of political processes and contend that its focus on structures and processes is a limitation that fails to account for the role of culture in shaping social movements and the political actors who engage in performances of resistance through acts of protest as political dissent. Political scientist William W. Sales, Jr.
(1994) claims that the limitations of resource mobilization and political process theories to adequately address the role of ideology as a resource undermines their utility in analysis of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements. Sales (1994) argues that Black nationalist ideology was “an important ideological intervention in the Civil Rights movement” that reintroduced the “intellectual tradition of Black nationalism” to poor and working-class Black Americans particularly in the urban cities in the north who faced a different reality than their counterparts in southern, rural areas (Sales, 1994, pp. 41-43). Sales’ argument highlights the role that Black nationalist ideology plays as a cultural and organizational resource for Black-led social movements. As a counterhegemonic ideology that disrupts assimilationist and integrationist agendas that maintain the status quo, Black nationalism was an important source of cognitive liberation that can be seen as transforming Black political consciousness and by necessity Black political demands. Sociologist Glenn Bracey (2016) argues that the political process model is flawed due to its implicit whiteness which sees assimilation into dominant white society as the primary goal of civil rights movements. Bracey further argues that Black protest movements are in need of “Black theorizing” in order to fully understand the complexities of the structural and cultural nature of Black activism.

This study’s approach to “Black theorizing” acknowledges how class dynamics and political ideologies have shaped Black liberation struggles and aims to situate the contemporary political struggle in the era of Black Lives Matter in relation to the cultural, historical, and sociopolitical dimensions of Black-led social movements. This theorizing addresses the cultural and ideological influences that characterize Black protest traditions as vital resources and interventions of Black social movements. Such theorizing necessarily builds from the “cultural turn” in movement studies, which has produced a growing body of research studies such as
Alexander, (2004), Isaacs (2008), Juris (2008), Johnston and Klanderman (1995), Klanderman (1992), Reed (2005) that seek to expand scholarly knowledge of the role that culture plays in protest movements. These studies engage the processes of meaning construction in social movements (Johnston and Klanderman, 1995; Klanderman, 1992). Building on Alexander’s (2004) theorizations on the cultural pragmatics of social protest, this study seeks to understand the “cultural texts” that are performed within protest events and imaged within protest photography in order to further elucidate the meanings audiences inscribe to them as well as the meanings these texts and their associated image events convey specifically to members of Black communities, who share a sense of linked fate (Dawson, 1994; Tate, 1994) through lived experience with structural inequality, systemic oppression, state violence under occupation, and marginalization.

Alexander (2004) and Juris (2008) explore the performative and affective dimensions of protest and facilitate scholarly appreciation for the dynamics of expressivity in movement cultural production and communication. These scholars highlight the role of cultural pragmatics in the production of protest as social drama following Turner (1974, 1982) and Goffman’s theoretical concept of dramaturgy (1975) which precipitates a shift away from movement-centric analysis of protest events and political action towards the interpretation of these events by audiences and their reactions to the events and their material culture. Alexander and Mast (2006), Eyerman (2006), Alexander (2011), and Johnston (2011) critique the movement-centric character of previous research and turn toward the performative sphere as a nexus of socio-cultural analysis that reincorporates the audience as social actors within the cast of performance, an area which remains understudied within social movement research. This study investigates social protest from the performative nexus and positions photography as a material base of protest
performance. From this nexus, the study examines how social actors use photographic images as polysemic texts that transmit meanings within a visual grammar of symbolic communication to various audiences.

By situating practices of resistance, social practices of imaging and image use, and the social practice of protest as a political act within the context of the performative, I aim to further explicate how the relationship between photography and protest produces what I refer to as images of “Black visual insurgency,” which operate as affective modalities that rupture the frame and bear witness to Black struggle, cultures of resistance, ritual and resilience. As strategic rhetorical devices, mnemonic technology, and material culture objects, these photographic images work render the visuality of Black protest culture as a form of cultural expressivity within Black insurgent movements. Scholarly debates in performance studies regarding what can be considered “performance” address the consideration of ephemerality as a defining characteristic. Peggy Phelan limits the life of performance to the present suggesting “it cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations of representation” (Phelan, 1993, p. 146). Phelan’s definition denies the afterlife of acts of protest as performance to exist beyond the moment and place of occurrence. In contrast, Joseph Roach stretches performance across temporalities and identifies “genealogies of performance” attending to “counter-memories” as a function of “mnemonic reserves” (Roach, 1996, p. 26) of expressive movements that participate in the transfer of knowledge and continuity, which aligns with theorizations of protest as a cultural performance and social process, that is learned and passed on through cultural texts such as photography in social movements (Alexander, 2004; Tilly, 2008.)
Invoking the notion of performativity, I am thinking with Judith Butler’s (2015) definition of the performative as a process of socialization that produces identities and extending the use of the term to include protest as a process of political and cultural socialization and by which individuals acquire values, beliefs, ideologies and consciousness. Subsequently, protest photography as a cultural text and archival document with mnemonic properties is imbued with its own performative properties as “performance documentation,” which Philip Auslander (2006) describes as providing a record of the performative event “through which it can be reconstructed” and “evidence that it occurred” (Auslander, 2006, p. 1).

This study conceptualizes protest as a performative and generative site of cultural production (Isaac, 2008; Reed, 2005). Within this site, social actors ascend into the public sphere as a political theater (Goffman, 1959) to stage insurgent acts of political dissent, collective claims-making, ritual and social drama (Turner, 1969). Sites of protest are also sites of memory which transmit the affective expressivity of enactments of resistance as performed and articulated through Black embodiments from one generation to the next (Butler, 2015; Juris, 2008; Taylor, 2003). Flowing from this site are the visual modes of expressivity found within the repertoires of Black protest tradition(s) that disrupt and challenge hegemonic cultural meanings of normative social relations, citizenship, identity, and political rights (Alexander, 2011; Juris, 2008; Polletta, 2006) Protest as a performative act serves a social, cultural, and political function which Diana Taylor (2003) describes as “vital acts of transfer, transmitting social knowledge, memory, and a sense of identity” (Taylor, 2003, p. 3). According to Taylor (2003), performance is constitutive of both the object of study and the process of analysis within performance studies. In the study of social movements, protest performance is descriptive of protest events such as political demonstrations, marches, sit-ins, public rituals of mourning and commemoration, and
urban uprisings as well as the methodological lens through which scholars analyze the embodied practices of resistance, as theorized by Judith Butler (2015), the quotidian acts of refusal (Campt, 2017), civil disobedience, identity, citizenship, gender, sexuality, ethnicity and more that are rehearsed and performed in the public sphere.

The study of protest through a performative lens shifts movement studies from the singular domain of structural analysis and opens theoretical space to consider the social, cultural, and political work of protest that “perform,” as a political theater and multivariant site for the articulation of embodied resistance via enactments of contentious politics, public ritual and social drama as well as a generative site of political subjectivity, collective identity, cultural expressivity, materiality and memory. According to Marcela Fuentes (2019), who draws from theories of performance and media studies in an analysis of the “networked” spaces of street and online activism in Latin America, performance elucidates the relationship between aesthetics and politics whereby symbolic elements and uses of the body communicate claims and construct new subjectivities (the performative lens also opens space to shift from a movement-centric perspective in order to incorporate the understandings and meanings of resistance that audiences incorporate/negotiate in relation to visual representations of social unrest and black resistance).

The ambiguousness of definitions of Black resistance contribute to debates over the appropriateness, efficacy, and utility of its various enactments of embodied performance, expressive articulations, and multiplicity of protest tactics within social activism. The meaning of Black resistance in the context of social movements is constructed through the processes of public discourse, persuasive communication, and consciousness raising (Johnston & Klanderman, 1992; Klanderman, 1992). This study’s interests are found at the intersection of the symbolic and material structures of political opportunities and limitations associated with acts of
protest performed within the visual field of the public sphere, as a site of struggle, and the modes of representation that mediate the performativity of embodied resistance and enactments of political dissent to audiences.

The insurgent actions and images of Black protest movements investigated through the lens of protest photography as undertaken in this study is explicitly concerned with the how photography is used to image and construct meanings of the varied enactments of resistance and embodied performances of political dissent. Protest photography mediates and circulates the imaging of these enactments and embodied performances throughout the public sphere and public discourse where audiences encounter the (re)presentations of social protest. Therefore, this study calls for a closer examination of the imaging of Black resistance as captured in a multiplicity of tactical forms with a variety of visual, symbolic, rhetorical and aesthetic properties via the medium of protest photography, as a logical and necessary point of inquiry toward understanding audience reception to the representations of social unrest. Such an inquiry provides much needed insight into audience engagement with social protest via the photographic image and audience practices of interpretation in the meaning making and shaping of protest as a political act of dissent as well as a public performance of ritual and contentious politics in our society.

In addition, the study further seeks to explore the performative role of the photographic image in documenting, developing, and diffusing aesthetic modes of resistance as indigenous resources and material cultural artifacts within the repertoires of a Black protest tradition, which are strategically mobilized in periods of Black insurgency. The conceptualization of Black protest repertoires as contentious performances within Black resistance movements provides the necessary theoretical space to examine how social actors use familiar protest strategies,
communications, resources and tactics in claims-making. Such theorization provides much needed insight on the influences of power and coordinated efforts of repression that prompt movement actors to transform tactics or in some case adopt new forms of resistance as deemed necessary especially in cases of protracted struggles as evidenced in the repertoires of contentious performances within Black protest tradition(s). In the aftermath of high-profile cases of anti-black police brutality, a wave of BLM protest has brought the issue of police surveillance of protest events and demonstrators into public discourse highlighting how state power actively works to repress Black political dissent. The subversive power of civic journalism and counter-surveillance reflect tactics adopted by Black communities and BLM demonstrators during interactions with police. Beutin (2017), however, theorizes that attempts at sousveillance and the impetus to film the police fail to account for “racialization as a way of seeing” which Beutin posits as a “historical formation that brings together the history of policing, the development of visual epistemologies, and the history of the naturalization of the criminality of blackness” (pg. 5) in such a way that inherently strengthens the carceral state that is built on structural racism rather than reform it or provide redress for the injustices it perpetuates on marginalized Black and non-Black communities of people of color.

The conceptual framework of visual protest repertoires enables this study to historically situate and analyze the symbolic content, tactical form(s), and strategic practice(s) of modern insurrections, such as witnessed in the uprisings that occurred in Ferguson, 2014, Baltimore, 2015, and Minneapolis, 2020 that (re)occur most often in urban working-class and poor Black communities. This framework provides a comparative lens to examine the repertoires of contentious politics, imaged within protest photography, across the spatiotemporal ties of a Black protest tradition performed within the United States but not exclusively bound to national
borders. Here, performance theory offers a useful contribution to the analysis of movements as
method for mapping embodied resistance and enactments of dissent through performative
citationality and intertextuality made visible in the public sphere and mediated through the
material culture of protest photography. To this date, there have been no substantial scholarly
endeavors to map the expressivity and performativity of Black protest repertoires through their
visual and material culture, which has severely limited knowledge of how Black protest
movements diffuse across spatiotemporal ties transferring cultural meanings of resistance
intergenerationally across national and diasporic identities as well. Such an examination
undergirds this study and seeks to link forms of contentious politics, which includes the so-called
“riot,” rebellions, revolutions, social movements, and cycles of protest that Tilly (1995) describes
as “learned cultural creations emerging from struggle,” through an intertextual citationality that
maps (McAdam, Tarrow, & Tilly, 1996; Tarrow & Tilly 2007; Tilly 1995) a performative
genealogy of Black liberation struggles. This mapping practice facilitates an “epiphenomenal”
linkage, which Michelle Wright defines as the current moment that locates the “Black collective
in history and in the specific moment in which Blackness is imagined” (Wright, 2015, p. 14),
between protest tactics and strategies of resistance across movement temporalities. This practice
provides a useful methodology for researchers to identify the continuity or lack thereof in types
of enactments of public dissent and forms of embodied resistance (in)visible within emerging
protest movements, such as witnessed in Black Lives Matter protest events, within a
historiography of Black insurgency that features spontaneous uprisings, planned rebellions,
protest demonstrations, acts of civil disobedience as tactical forms of contentious politics
performed across various sites of protest throughout the Civil Rights and Black Power
movement.
The medium of photography contributes valuable material resources to the study of social movements as it enables the visualization of Black resistance in the public sphere. Photography facilitated the reproduction of scenes of social unrests, acts of civil disobedience, and images of political dissent during the Civil Rights and Black Power movements which allowed the (re)mediated images to proliferate through the political economy of the media and culture industries and into public discourse where the cultural meanings of freedom, citizenship, civility, human rights, subjectivity, resistance, agency, collective identity, political ideologies and consciousness are constructed, negotiated, and contested (Issac, 2008; Johnston & Klandermans, 1995; Klandermans, 1992; Reed, 2005). Photographic images of protest demonstrations, political rallies, acts of civil disobedience, uprisings, rebellions, strikes, and boycotts help illustrate the dynamism by which Black insurgent movements diffuse through public spheres and shape culture (Issac, 2008) through the implementation of a range of tactical forms of contentious politics and practices of resistance made visible during the mid-twentieth century historical epoch of Black insurgency in the United States. These acts of political dissent and their photographic representations are emblematic of the expressive enactments of Black resistance performed within public sphere(s), (re)mediated across geospatial temporalities, and crystallized into social, collective, and individual memories of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements. Using sociological and historical analysis of the Civil Rights Movement, Larry Issac (2008) identifies the production, diffusion, and circulation of movement culture, in which photography plays a significant role, as a means by which social movements “move” through culture and otherwise come to “move” or shape broader culture. Following Issac’s (2008) call to examine the “movement of movements” through a cultural sociology of social movements, I turn toward an examination of the visual, affective, and performative modalities of movement studies
research (Alexander, 2004, 2011; DeLuca, 1999; Doerr, Mattoni, & Teune, 2013; Fantasia, 1988; McGarry et. al, 2019; Jasper, 2011; Juris, 2008; Klanderman, 1992; Raiford, 2011; Raiford & Romano, 2006; Routledge, 1997; Swidler, 1986; Tilly, 2008) which investigates the role of visuality, affect, emotion, and performance as conduits of cultural meaning and strategic communication in collective claims-making and further elucidate the methodological approaches to investigating their influence and mediated effects on audience reception of protest and audience perception of movement efficacy.

2.2.1 Visual Evidence and (in)Visible Narratives of Black Resistance in Protest

Photography

The ability of documentary photography to capture and convey the material realities of Black life, suffering, and abjection as well as communal acts of refusal and resistance underscores the genre’s contribution to social history and social movements. Photography’s contribution to Black freedom struggles is present in the histories of abolition, anti-lynching, civil and human rights campaigns initiated throughout the protracted struggles for Black liberation and self-determination. Historians and social movement scholars of the Civil Rights and Black Power eras routinely reference photography as pictorial evidence in documenting the political struggle(s) and events of social unrest. However, a record of extensive scholarly engagement with photography that examines its relationship to protest, and the various ways social actors use photographic images in claims-making and meaning construction is missing from the historiography of these protest movements and the corresponding canon of social movement studies literature. Photography documents the visual culture of these movements and subsequently produces an archival record of social actors engaged in repeated public displays of collective action through an array of tactical forms of contentious politics (Gamson, 1975; Tilly,
This archive is not neutral as power is implicated in which histories are recorded and made accessible as such Sadiya Hartman (2006), Christina Sharpe (2016), Tina Campt (2017), Nicole Fleetwood (2011), Leigh Raiford (2011) and others lead interrogations into its silences, omissions, and obscuration that calls attention to the insidiousness of anti-blackness and racial subjugation that permeates the archival space and denies members of subaltern groups subjectivity, voice or agency within social histories or life in public memories. In *Embodying Black Experience: Stillness, Critical Memory, and the Black Body*, Harvey Young (2010) argues that photography captures the Black body and establishes a place for it within historical archive, which Young posits as a powerful act “in light of the concerted efforts throughout the era of legalized black captivity (and beyond) to prevent the recording of black history and memory, the preservation of past experiences within their bodies and the writing of history with(in) their performances” (Young, 2010, p. 29). Borrowing from the language of subaltern and postcolonial studies, this study aims to consider how Black populations of the United States, particularly those descendant from chattel enslavement, come to “speak” (Spivak, 1994) from their marginalized positions as oppressed subjects of an American system of racial capitalism and structural violence(s) through acts of protest, which further substantiates the need to interrogate the photographic representation of this resistance within the dominant historical narrative and its archives as assemblages of “constructed truth” (Holloway, 2013, p. 10) and hegemonic spaces of silencing and erasure that shape public memory.

Few social movement historians work exclusively in photographic archives preferring written text as primary sources. When historians incorporate photography, it tends to be used predominantly for illustrative purposes that fail to assess the role of photography in movement communication, in constructing public, individual, and collective memory of movements, or in
shaping public opinion and attitudes towards social actors engaged in protest, enactments of protest action, and the efficacy of protest movements thus leaving a fissure in research literature. The privileging of written text over photographic image ignores the dialectical relationship between image and text as well as the discursive and semiotic function of photography, a relationship W.J.T. Mitchell (1994) describes as “imagetext” which not only represents material reality but also speaks to social conditions and social relations in communication with audiences through a system of signification (Hall, 1985) of visual grammar. Addressing this fissure, Leigh Raiford (2011), Martin Berger (2011), Mark Speltz (2016), Sara Wood (2018) among others have authored scholarship that acknowledges the importance of photography and the need to interrogate its intended uses and appropriations in documenting mass struggle, representing acts of political dissent, its subsequent functions in producing a visual history of Black insurgency during the mid-twentieth century and constructing meanings and memories of Black resistance movements. Such research challenges the dominant narrative of Civil Rights and Black Power movements through in-depth exploration of their photographic archives. Raiford (2011) and Berger (2011) argue that the predominant use of certain types of images of civil rights struggles, which overrepresent the entirety of the movement, limit and fix ideas of what constitutes valid political action by African Americans. Martin Berger (2011) argues that Northern owned media outlets were complicit in the creation of a distorted narrative of the Civil Rights struggle as photojournalists and news reporters intentionally sought to image the movement through a dominant white gaze that maintained the codes of racial hierarchy and subsequently invested in (re)presentation of Black protest demonstrators as passive and in need of saviors as a means to elicit Northern white sympathies without disrupting white supremacist ideological imaginings of Black inferiority. Berger’s exhibition and accompanying book *Freedom Now! Forgotten*
Photographs of the Civil Rights Struggle (2013) refocuses the visual archive toward images of protesters fighting back and a wider range of forms of political agency performed by women and children. Wood (2018) joins in questioning the “primacy of depictions of white aggression and black victimhood in photographic representations of the Civil Rights movement” and examines an underrepresented civil rights photography “that explores the relation between activism and everyday life” (Wood, 2018, p. 68). These scholarly inquiries are responsible for unearthing forgotten memories and hidden transcripts of the movements, which further highlights the necessity of expanding the photographic “canon” of representation of Black political resistance to include more “varied, radical, and contested” (Wood, 2018, p. 68) repertoires within the historical narrative. Here, a visual analysis of photographic framing is especially important and offers a crucial contribution toward producing a fuller understanding of the complexity of intended purpose(s) and uses of photography in (re)construction of historical narrative of Black freedom struggles.

2.2.2 Photography and Visual Sites of Resistance

Despite the limitations on representation within the dominant historical narrative of the Civil Rights Movement and its archival spaces, movement studies scholars and historians of the era affirm that documentary photography of protest events was instrumental in efforts to expose state sanctioned violence and white supremacist terror during the southern freedom struggle. Sally Avery Bermanzohn (2010) states that violence “was central to politics during the civil rights era” and further argues that “thwarting racist brutality was the most significant victory of the Civil Rights Movement” (p.31). In Imprisoned in a Luminous Glare: Photography and the African American Freedom Struggle (Raiford, 2011), Leigh Raiford recalls Martin Luther King, Jr’s reflection on the public confrontation between African Americans and southern
segregationists that was staged and performed during “Project C,” in which the “SCLC” leader recognizes photography’s rhetorical power in imaging previously unacknowledged police brutality and making it visible for critique and states in his book *Why We Can’t Wait*.

The brutality with which officials would have quelled the black individual became impotent when it could not be pursued with stealth and remain unobserved. It was caught – as a fugitive from a penitentiary is often caught – in gigantic circling spotlights. It was imprisoned in a luminous glare revealing the naked truth to the whole world.

(King, 1964, p. 30)

The rhetorical power of social documentary, as material evidence of Black suffering and resistance imaged in “Project C,” is a derivative of its presumptive verisimilitude which is associated with what Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright discuss as the “myth of photographic truth” (2001, pp. 16-22) that maintains the notion of photographic representation as objective representation of social reality. Commenting on the efficacy of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference’s (SCLC) appropriation of documentary photography as a tactical resource of the visual protest strategies in “Project C,” Raiford (2011) contends that “almost the entirety of the civil rights movement is captured, quite literally, in Birmingham 1963,” and further credits the salience of those images and their rhetorical power with changing public opinion regarding the Jim Crow segregationist regime noting their capacity to “imprison” white supremacist terrorist violence and cast it into public view as “truthful” documentation of the horrors of southern apartheid (Raiford, 2011, p. 3).

As witnessed by the imaging of public performances of political dissent during BPP demonstrations, “Project C,” and other protest events which garnered mass media attention, photography is entangled in both the production and mediation of “image events” (Delicath & DeLuca, 2003). In “Image Events, the Public Sphere, and Argumentive Practice” (Delicath & DeLuca, 2003), the authors define image events as “staged acts of protest designed for media
dissemination” (p. 315), in which social actors seize the public sphere as a political theater and enact performances of protest that come to symbolize larger social phenomena. According to Delicath and DeLuca, image events are rhetorical events best understood as “argumentative practices,” which the researchers suggest are more fully analyzed by “investigating the argumentative function of images of protest” (p. 317). Drawing from Delicath and DeLuca ‘s postulation that “image events are a postmodern form of argument that employs acts of protest to deliver images as argumentative fragments that serve as invention resource of public deliberation and which shift the responsibility for argument construction to audiences” (p. 317), “Project C,” Memphis Sanitation Strike, Birmingham bus boycott, 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, freedom rides, Selma to Montgomery march and countless other protest events produced images with potent rhetorical power that becomes encapsulated within protest photography and subsequently remediated to public spheres where diffused audiences interpret and contest the meanings of these events and their visual representations within photography as a material culture artifact. The impact of mediation of protest events as image events is central to this investigation of protest photography’s influence on audience reception. As Delicath and DeLuca (2003) claim, the impact of protest events, as image events, on public argumentation depends “on how the audience encounters, assembles, and utilizes the fragments” (p. 317). J.C. Alexander (2004) argues that protest as media events are social dramas, as described by Victor Turner (1974, 1982), “whose contents are dictated by writers, journalists, and photographers” and are subject to distribution regulated through corporate and state social powers. Thus, Alexander, who follows Goffman’s (1959) admonishment, reiterates the need to turn scholarly attention to symbolic production of protests as well as towards the ways social power limits and
constructs symbolic communication since control over media has implications on how protest performances are distributed and framed for audience publics (Alexander, 2004).

2.3 Photography, Visual Framing of Protest Image Events, and Black Spectatorship

Social movement scholars concerned with the meaning work or signifying process of movements and movement actors have developed a vast body of literature on the role of framing, conceptualized as a dynamic, active, processual phenomenon that implies agency and contention in the evolving work of generating interpretive meaning (Benford & Snow, 2000). The concept of frame, introduced in sociology through Goffman’s (1959) dramaturgical approach, takes shape as an interpretive lens that “enables individuals to locate, perceive, identify, and label occurrences within their life space and the world at large” (Goffman, Frame Analysis, 1974, p. 21) and is central to understand how Black “Gen X,” “Gen Y” and “Gen Z” audiences engage, interpret, and negotiate the meanings of social unrest constructed through mediated visual representations of protest performances. Dell (2016) extends Goffman’s dramaturgy to critical discourse analysis of political speech. Similarly, this research study incorporates a dramaturgical approach to the analysis of audience reception and responses to visual frames of protest in a comparative case study of visual rhetoric in media frames and collective action frames from the Ferguson, Baltimore, and Minneapolis uprisings.

2.3.1 Framing Processes, Social Movements, and Collective Action

Within sociology, the framing concept has been extensively applied to the study of social movements and collective action. Collective action frames, also referred to as movement framing, is described as a “schemata of interpretation” that work to simplify the world and are “intended to mobilize potential adherents and constituents, to garner bystander support, and demobilize antagonists” (Benford & Snow, 2000, p. 614). According to Benford & Snow (2000),
the growing body of literature on collective action or movement framing reveals scholarly interest in the study of the signifying work or meaning construction of movement actors, as signifying agents “engaged in the production and maintenance of meaning for constituents, antagonists, and bystanders or observers” (p. 613). According to Doerr, Mattoni, and Teune (2013), social movements “produce and evoke image” (p. xi) and activists articulate visual messages that are “perceived by external actors and dispersed audiences via images” (p. xi). As captured within photography, the visual field of protest as a site of resistance and power contestation is where the social and political world is produced, materialized and communicated. This study asks how photography plays a role in transmitting cultural, social, and political meaning(s) of protest image events and further considers how photography is used by social actors as a rhetorical device, mnemonic device, and cultural object through which the meaning of protest and the efficacy of protest movements is determined by framing and contextualizing (Yanoshevsky, 2009). This study is particularly concerned with how Black ‘Gen X’ and ‘Gen Y’ spectator audiences engage in and contribute to the construction, implementation, and distribution of collective action frames as a part of their meaning making, interpretive practices. Following Klanderman’s (1992) processes of meaning construction, movement frames can be seen as operating in the long-term process of formation of collective beliefs, mobilizing consensus through public discourse on collective beliefs, and via participation or observation of collective action in competition with opponents. In such case, audiences are active participants embroiled in a complex relationship along with movement actors, mass media, and the state in meaning construction, contestation, and reconstruction through what Stuart Hall et. al (1980) refers to as “the politics of signification.”
2.3.2 Media Framing, News Media Bias, and Social Media

The sociological perspective of social interactionism, movement studies, communication studies literature converge in the study of framing, as a signifying and meaning making process (Entman, 1993; Goffman 1974; Benford & Snow 2000), to provide critical insight into the practices employed in the battle for control of public perception of political dissent. Critical media studies literature addresses framing as a process of gathering elements of perceived reality and assembling a narrative that highlights connection among them to promote a particular interpretation (Entman, 2007). Entman states, “frames are manifested by the presence or absence of key words and phrases, stereotyped imagery, and sources of information that reinforce facts or judgments” (Entman, 1993, p. 52).

The news media employs various discourse frames, which exert significant influence on audience perceptions and how we make sense of the world (Hameed & Zubair, 2001). Using a critical race theory (CRT) lens, Yasso (2005) argues that mainstream news media, as a state apparatus, perpetuates institutional racism. Catherine Corrigall-Brown (2012) and others argue that images of collective action shape public understanding of social movement campaigns and issues. Chan & Lee (1984) articulated the protest paradigm concept to reference patterns of news coverage that delegitimized protests and political dissent. In an examination of radical protest, Hertog and McLeod (1995) identifies key frames that mainstream media employed in processes of delegitimizing protest activity. Dominant news media reporting often portray protesters as violent, destructive criminals who behave illogically, which ultimately serves to undermine public perceptions of the legitimacy of the protests while subsequently ignoring the structural causes of the events. In recent studies, Leopold & Bell (2017) and Kilgo & Mourao (2019) argue that content analysis reveals that news coverage of Black Lives Matter and the Ferguson
uprisings heavily followed the protest paradigm, which is characterized by Hertog & McLeod (1995) as containing news frames that select and emphasize some aspects of events, reliance on official sources for information, invocation of public opinion, as well as aspects of “delegitimation” and “demonization” that fail to adequately provide context of social protest actions and routinely place emphasize negative consequences such as violence and property destruction (p. 155-59). McLeod & Detenber (1999) and Detenber, B.H., et al. (2007) state that the use of protest paradigm over time may result in more negative evaluations of protesters and protests in general. Campbell, S., Chidester, P., Royer, J. & Bell, J (2012) document the activation and deployment of protest paradigms as tactic to delegitimize Black dissent. Still little is known about the extent to which images of collective action adhere to or diverge from the protest paradigm. Mattoni & Tuene (2014) argues that a hegemonic visual regime orders and situates vision which limits how audiences look at protest within media as well as what audiences are able to see. If protest performances are set within the disciplinary frames of visual culture conventions (Jenks, 1995; Mizeroff, 2006), visual analysis of photos of protest used in media frames is necessary to understand the relationship of power to visuality as a political battleground in an image saturated and mediated culture.

When racial stereotyping, media bias and protest paradigm converge, the results can perpetuate both racialized and racist constructions of Black protestors engaging in legitimate dissent. Studies have revealed that both Michael Brown and the protestors were constructed as thugs and were blamed for violence (Adamson, 2016; Leopold & Bell, 2017). Indeed, a protest paradigm is thought to undergird most news coverage of protests which ultimately frames these events as police versus protesters rather than focusing on the social issues or events being protested, which has especially been the case regarding protests related to issues of police
brutality (Baylor, 1996; Chan & Lee, 1984). While much of the research has focused on mainstream news media reporting practices, there remains a need to study media effects on audience perceptions, as well as how audiences respond to and engage with these framing practices. Such an investigation, as proposed within this study, highlights visual representation as a dynamic of protests and social movement and sheds much needed insight into this research lacuna.

The emergence of social media, as a dominant communication medium, created additional opportunity to examine how networks of users and social actors create collective action frames in the production of meaning and as counternarrative in response to the dominant media framing of protest demonstrations and social movements (Surzhko-Harned & Zahuranec, 2017; Starr, 2017a; 2017b). With the rise of social media activism, Kharroub & Bas (2016), Ince, Rojas & Davis (2017), Neumayer & Rossi (2018), Casas & Williams (2019) and others explore how activists’ struggles play out in visual social media content. Research reveals that activists use multiple tools such as signs, banners, costumes, flags, and emblems to communicate their messages, which all become accessible through the visual field (Bosch & Mutsvairo, 2017). Through photography, the visual field can be engaged in the service of movement framing, which allow activist to use images and performances of resistance as a part of creating their collective identity (Bosch & Mutsvairo, 2017; Jones, 2016; Zubrzycki, 2013, Ince, Rojas, Davis, 2017). Such analysis offers theoretical and quantitative methodological approaches for examining the types of visual image/text frames social actors deployed during the Ferguson uprising via the use of #Ferguson and #BLM (Black Lives Matter*) related hashtags and their mobilizing power (Casas & Williams, 2019). This study considers social media as a critical site of intervention in the counterframing practices of audiences who witness protest via its mediated
representations in news media and online but also addresses how both traditional mass media and social media work in the mediation of trauma amongst witnessing audiences.

### 2.3.3 Visual Framing and Protest Photography

A focus on the textuality of narrative discourse and medium affordances has left a gap in framing research that renders scholarship unable to deepen our collective understanding and critical engagement with the visual field. Visual images play an integral role in framing practices and contribute heavily toward the establishment of protest paradigms (Keye, 2013; Thomson, 2016). Images of protests and protestors proliferate news photos and footage, as they present dramatic visuals that easily fit key news value of conflict (Thomson, 2016). Photos and images that are incorporated into media reporting are framed in such a way that it remarkably affects audience perceptions and triggers collective memory. Hameed & Zubair (2011) show that individuals respond more negatively toward images of conflict as compared to images of non-conflict. Giles (2003) suggests that people’s perceptions, emotions, and feelings are triggered by the angles with which a photo is shown in newspapers. Beutin (2017) contends that images contribute to the racialization of protest frames and further influence framing practices and individual responses to protest as witnessed by research on Black Lives Matter. In 2017, Elmasary and el-Nawawy found differences in public perception based on exposure to “positive” versus “negative” frames of Ferguson protest where images focused on looting, arson, assault, gunfire, and other crimes (Elmasary & el-Nawawy, 2017). Assessing the need to further address the effects of photographic framing on audience perceptions, this case study examines how protest images, which mediate ideological and political struggles between social actors, the media, and the state are represented within the visual field and subsequently extends the research of Hameed & Zubair (2011), Thomson (2016), and others to expand the scholarship on the
relationship between protest movements and media deeper into the visual field (Kharroub, T. & Bas, O., 2016; Ince, Rojas & Davis, 2017).

This study seeks to generate greater understanding of the role of images in framing practices by building upon the use of visual methodologies in the study of protest and social movements. Through the examination of the influence of photographic image frames on participant perceptions of collective identity, movement efficacy, and anger. The study seeks to understand how social actors read image frames as dynamic and construct meanings of the protests, protestors, police, and social issues (Jones, 2016). The study attempts to address gaps in prior research by extending the concept of framing to include the practices of community members and activists as social actors, who exhibit agency through the reading of visual and textual narrative frames to construct their collective identities and social worlds (Gross, 2017). Finally, this study aims to contribute to scholarship on the study of protests, as legitimate forms of political action, through providing knowledge of the material culture of Black resistance and how power is contested and negotiated through representational struggles in the visual field.

2.3.4 Reading, Reframing, Remembering & the Role of Audience Spectatorship in Protest Performance

Raiford’s (2011) examination of lynching photography, social movement photography in civil rights and black power era highlight the role of photographic image in Black social movements. Raiford illustrates how meaning(s) of images of resistance are continuously contested, retrieved, and reused in collective action and political struggle. Raiford (2011) argues for the need to interrogate movement photography as a site of struggle for “the black body, the black eye, and black memory” in which case I seek to follow with an inquiry into how Black audiences engage the performativity of protest through the materiality of photography and
further explore how audiences interpret protest via photographic encounters and the cultural meanings they associate with the visual culture of Black protest movements. An examination of the framing practices found in the visual repertoire of protest within movement frames which represent acts of Black resistance during social unrest in the case of Ferguson, Baltimore, and Minneapolis is a necessary first step towards understanding the visual and affective power of protest photography in the stimulation of perceptions of collective identity, movement efficacy and anger in Black spectator-audiences who witness the mediated event. Juris (2005) argues that protest events as mediated image events communicate and create affective solidarity through performance. Hoyt (2016) states that the visual affective rhetoric of “#HandsUpDontShoot” confronted the public with an image of Michael Brown, the community of Ferguson, and BLM demonstrators as Black victims of police violence, which “revealed the vulnerability of the Black body in everyday America, as a reality of which the mainstream public continued to demand proof” (p. 45) despite the immutable visual evidence that establishes historical continuity from the murder of Michael Brown in Ferguson in 2014 to the brutalization of Rodney King in Los Angeles in 1992 to the murder of Emmitt Till in 1955. Fundamentally, this study approaches the visual archive of protest photography to ask what it means for Black audiences to look, to remember, as a political act and subsequently interrogates what constitutes an ethical gaze and performance of ethical spectatorship which bear witness to and reconstitute Black humanity through acts of protest as public ritual of commemoration and mourning (Alexander, 1994; Baker, 2018; Edwin, 2014; hooks, 1992; Mowatt, 2018; Saunders, 2016).

Embedded in the still and moving images that (re)produce Black death are the memories and experiential group knowledge which Elizabeth Alexander (1994) identifies as informing “African Americans about the lived realities of how violence and its potential informs our
understanding of our individual selves as a larger group” (p. 79). Memory plays a significant role in the enactment of witnessing (Liao, 2010; Smit, 2018). Returning momentarily to Goffman’s (1959) dramaturgy theory to consider the relationality between performer(performance), frame, and audience, this study is guided by a central question of audience response as witnesses. Foundational theories on witnessing, as an active mode of agency performed by audiences, draws from studies of histories of atrocity and genocide (Halbwachs, 1950; Nora 1989; Trezise, 2013) and form an expansive body of literature in history, media studies and memory studies. Coombes (2011) takes up the issue of witnessing and testimony as an embodied practice in the case of reporting on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in post-apartheid South Africa. This study conceptualizes witnessing as an active mode of spectatorship that extends the role of the audience, as an agential subject position, in the performance of witnessing protest as a mediated axial event. Bloom (2009) states that survivors “bear witness by giving voice to the victims,” which is a concept that can be applied to how Black “Gen X,” “Gen Y,” and “Gen Z” spectator-audiences enact practices of critical spectatorship in modes of bearing witness through remembering, critiquing, reading, reframing and testifying to Black political struggles in response to episodic encounters with racial terror. In accessing audience response to the framing of Ferguson, the study also considers how the spectator-audience does the work of witness and how this performance of agency is mediated through both memory and media (Feldman, 2004).

This study aims to explain how social actors read image frames as dynamic and construct meanings of the protests, protestors, police, and social issues (Jones, 2016) through acts of witnessing. Here, the critical gaze and critical memory of Black audiences is explored to gain understanding of audience member’s mediated experiences of witnessing violence against Black bodies and the visual and embodied modes of resistance performed in response. The study
attempts to address gaps in prior research by extending the concept of framing to include the
practices of community members and spectator-audiences, as social actors, who exhibit agency
through the reading of visual and textual narrative frames to construct their collective identities
and social worlds (Gross, N., 2017).
3 METHODOLOGY

The objectives of this qualitative study were to examine the visuality of Black resistance and political dissent in news media and collective action framing of contentious politics during protest events within the Black Lives Matter era, and to gain insight into the interpretive reading practices of Black audiences and the cultural and social meanings that are contested, constructed and assigned to these visual representations via protest photography. I analyzed the visual images of Black resistance emanating from the urban uprisings and rebellions of the Black Lives Matter era, from 2014 through 2020, at the site of the photographic image itself, and the site of audience reception. By analyzing the visual framing of 2014 Ferguson uprising, 2015 Baltimore uprising, and the 2020 Minneapolis uprising within digital photography archives and social media posts found online, the study seeks to answer the following questions: 1) How is Black resistance and political dissent visually represented in the framing of protest events? 2) How do social actors utilize protest photography as a mnemonic device to (counter)frame Black political struggle in the Black Lives Matter era? 3) How do Black spectator-audience(s) interpret and respond to visual representations of Black resistance performed in protest events?

3.1 Design

The study employed a 2-stage analysis strategy in order to examine the visual representation of Ferguson, Baltimore, and Minneapolis protest events at the site of both the image and its reception by Black audience spectators. The 2-stage strategy was developed from Rose’s (2014) observation of uses of visual methodology in social science research. In Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to Researching with Visual Materials (Rose, 2014), the author contends that the best visual methods for image-based research reflect the specific needs of the
research question(s) and correspond with the site(s) of interpretive analysis of concern to the study. I utilized content analysis to identify how Black resistance, political dissent, and performances of contentious politics are visually represented through news media and collective action visual framing of Black protest strategies, tactics, and rituals during the Black Lives Matter era.

The process of identification involved an examination of protest photography, as photoimage texts, presented in news media and collective action visual frames that (re)presented scenes of social unrest during a wave of Black Lives Matter protest from 2014 through 2020. The study is bound by time and location. Based on previous research on the visual representation of protest during the 2014 Ferguson rebellion, I selected Ferguson as a site of investigation because it is the first location where the Black Lives Matter movement emerges from online activity to mobilize into robust collective action in the streets. The 2015 Baltimore rebellion occurred eight months after the 2014 Ferguson rebellion and it was the second major protest event where the Black Lives Matter movement mobilized into collective action in the streets. The 2020 Minneapolis rebellion initiated a wave of solidarity actions that spread throughout the nation and moved around the world. There were a multitude of Black Lives Matter demonstrations that occurred during the 2014 through 2020 cycle of protest actions. At the time of this writing, these three events represent prolonged actions that were widely reported and highly visible. Subsequently, the photographic record of these events is vast.

The study’s sample of protest imagery was collected from news media and collective action visual frames found online that featured visual (re)presentations of scenes of social unrest from the 2014 Ferguson uprisings, 2015 Baltimore uprisings, 2020 Minneapolis uprisings and national wave of Black Lives Matter protest events. The first stage of analysis provided an
opportunity to read the photographic image at the denotative level. Here, I identified the scenes, sites, social actors, social actions, and performances depicted in the photographic images of the protest events.

The second stage of analysis used photo-elicitation methods with focus group participants to identify themes of audience response to the visual representations of the protest events through critical engagements with protest photography. Focus group participants were invited to share their opinions, perceptions, and interpretations of protest imagery and performances of protest captured in photography selected from news media and collective action frames. Focus group discussion provided the ability to capture deeper information and observational data such as group interaction, body language, and non-verbal communication. These discussions encouraged exchange of multiple perspectives and promoted reflexivity among participants. The study included four intergenerational focus groups. I utilized critical discourse analysis (CDA) to assess audience participant-member readings, critiques and modes of engagement in response to protest imagery and the visual representations of social protest, social actors and their performances as communicated through the visual framing and mediation of protest photography as polysemic image texts. The second stage of analysis provided the opportunity for researcher and participants to engage in the interpretive meanings of protest, as political act and social drama performed by social actors, and its performative documentation in photography embedded in news media and collective action frames.

3.2 Sample/Setting

The study gathered primary source data on news media visual framing from a sample of protest images (n=354) selected from four digital photography archives sourced from local and national news media online platforms. Due to the ubiquitous nature of digital protest
photography found online and the hypervisualization of the protest events in question, I selected the sample from the following four online photography albums; “#Ferguson in Pictures” (St. Louis Post Dispatch, 2014), “Dramatic Images from Baltimore Unrest” (ABC News, 2015), “Black Lives Matter: A movement in photos” (ABC News, 2020), and “In Pictures: A racial reckoning in America” (CNN, 2020). “Ferguson in Pictures” archive features protest photography from the St. Louis Post Dispatch’s coverage of the 2014 Ferguson unrest. The “Dramatic Images from Baltimore Unrest” and “Black Lives Matter: A movement in photos” digital archives from the online website of ABC World News features protest photography that documents the 2015 Baltimore unrest and Black Lives Matter protest events and solidarity demonstrations that occurred from 2014 through 2020 in Ferguson, Missouri; Baltimore, Maryland; Minneapolis, Minnesota and other cities, respectively. The digital photo archive “In Pictures: A racial reckoning in America” assembled by CNN and hosted on its digital platform documents the 2020 national wave of Black Lives Matter protests, marches, and solidarity demonstration in the wake of the state sanctioned murder of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and others, which sparked uprisings and unrest across the nation. The entire sample (n=354) of images underwent visual content analysis.

The St. Louis Post Dispatch is major regional news source for the St. Louis, Missouri metropolitan area. Based on proximity to Ferguson, Missouri, photojournalist from the news outlet were among the first to report on the scene. In 2015, the St. Louis Post Dispatch received a distinguished Pulitzer Prize award for photography that captured social unrest in Ferguson, Missouri. The prestige of a Pulitzer Prize award adds cultural significance to the “Ferguson in Pictures” that increased the visibility of the photography within the album. I selected the 18 images that were awarded with the “Best Photography” distinction for analysis.
ABCNews.com is the internet asset of American Broadcasting Company’s (ABC) news reporting division, which is owned by the Walt Disney Company. ABC News is a major national news source with a global reach. I selected the entire 62 images within the “Dramatic Images from Baltimore” album and the entire 44 images within the “Black Lives Matter: A movement in photos” album for analysis.

CNN.com is the internet asset of Cable News Network (CNN), a global television news channel, which is owned by Time Warner. The “In Pictures: A racial reckoning in America” album contained 230 images. I selected the entire 230 images for analysis. Of the 230 images, there were 64 photographs depicting social unrest in Minneapolis, Minnesota that were grouped and analyzed separately in order to examine the visual representation of the Minneapolis event, exclusively. The remaining 166 images were analyzed in conjunction with the above mentioned “Black Lives Matter: A movement in photos” album. While maintaining similarity in terms of the visual content of the albums, the “In Pictures: A racial reckoning in America” and “Black Lives Matter: A movement in photos” both featured an assemblage of photography that depicted social unrest and protest demonstrations from multiple events and were not site specific like the “#Ferguson in Pictures” or “Dramatic Images for Baltimore Unrest” digital albums.

Both Walt Disney Company and Time Warner are global media conglomerates that dominate media markets and control global flow and exchange of news reporting and entertainment. The popularity of these media platforms in addition to the international recognition afforded to the St. Louis Post Dispatch through the Pulitzer Prize award made the aforementioned photography albums ideal sites of investigation into the ways elite media interests and corporate power present Black protest to audiences. The magnitude of agenda setting power of shared between these institutions has implications on what visual
representations audiences see, what they remember, and what they think about in relation to the visual encounter.

The study gathered data on collective action visual framing from a sample (n=18) of protest images shared on the Instagram platform. I specifically sourced images shared online via the “M4BL” Instagram social media platform for the decentralized social movement, Movement for Black Lives. Additionally, I included image posts that featured protest photography that referenced episodes of social unrest in Ferguson, Baltimore, and Minneapolis that utilized popular hashtags that were used during the rebellions. This data set includes protest photography produced by professional and amateur photographers as well as civil photojournalists. The image post selected referenced popular hashtags such as #BlackLivesMatter, #FergusonUprising, #FergusonRiots, #BaltimoreUprising, #BaltimoreRiot, and #MinneapolisUprising, #MinneapolisRiots widely shared online and associated the respective events.

The study collected qualitative data on audience reception obtained from focus group discussions with a participant-spectator audience comprised of members of Black “Gen X,” “Gen Y,” and “Gen Z” demographic population. A participant sample of spectator-audience members (n=22) was composed of Black individuals who encountered visual representations of the protest events mediated through digital protest photography in news media and social media communications disseminated online. Members of the sample audience were assembled through convenience sampling and invited to participate in a focus group discussion on the impact of protest imagery and photographic documentation of Black resistance in Black-led social movements. The participants were assigned to one of four focus groups with six to nine participants who self-identified as Black and within the target age group demographic.
The study’s target participant sample was screened through self-reported demographic information, garnered from a pre-survey, which restricted participation to individuals who identified as Black and members of “Gen X,” “Gen Y,” and Gen “Z” born between 1965 and 2002. The participant sample’s age range between 18-55 years was selected in order to analyze audience response to visual representation of Black-led protest within post-Civil Rights era generations. Focus Group 1 included four “Gen Z” members and one “Gen X” member for a total of five participants. Focus Group 2 included three “Gen Z” members and two “Gen Y” members for a total of five participants. Focus Group 3 included four “Gen X” members and two “Gen Y” members for a total of six participants. Focus Group 4 included three “Gen X” members and three “Gen Y” members for a total of six participants.

The study aimed to construct a diverse and inclusive participant audience with representation across genders and intersectional identities. The study did not exclude participation based on gender identities, sexual orientations, class, education, political ideologies or religious backgrounds. The sample audience included nineteen women and three men. There was balanced representation across the age group demographic with eight “Gen X” members between 40-55, seven “Gen Y” members between 24-39, and seven “Gen Z” members 18-23 who participated in the focus group discussions. Three participants identified as members of the Black LGBTQIA community. The participant sample represented a college educated predominantly middle-class audience as all members were either currently enrolled in a public university in the southeast region of the United States or college graduates. Twelve participants possessed graduate or professional degrees. Three participants reported prior military service. The demographic information was gathered in order to extrapolate and analyze trends that emerged within and across the groups.
3.3 Procedures

Participants were recruited from Georgia State University due to access to the student population, and further expanded beyond the campus to increase diversity across demographics. I distributed digital recruitment flyers through several Africana Studies’ online-course classrooms, the university’s Multicultural Center and LGBTQ centers, virtual Black student organization meeting groups, and via my personal social media account. All key terms were operationalized in the introductory explanation. Explanations of the voluntary nature of this research, expectations of anonymity, and confidentiality were explained. Participants were informed that the virtual focus group study, which was conducted via the WebEx online meeting platform, required approximately 90 minutes to complete. Before beginning the survey, participants read and digitally signed an online consent page. The consent page outlined the title and purpose of the research. It also disclosed the procedures, any risks and/or benefits, agency pertaining to voluntary participation and withdrawal from participation. Information regarding confidentiality, the contact persons, as well as copies of the consent form were made available before, during and, after the survey. Due to social distancing requirements enforced in response to the COVID-19 pandemic recruitment, screening, obtaining informed consent, and participation occurred virtually. Participants were required to provide informed consent via the completion of a digital consent form to confirm and authorize their ability to participate.

Those interested were invited to complete the initial recruitment screening form prior to being accepted into the study. Participants were asked to complete a recruitment form that includes a demographic questionnaire and a survey of media consumption. During recruitment, prospective participants were asked to report (1) amounts of traditional news media (television, digital and print) and social media on a scale (1) 0-14 minutes per day; (2) 15- 30 minutes per
day; (3) 31 - 60 minutes per day; (4) more than 1 hour per day; and social media consumption (1) 0-14 minutes per day; (2) 15- 30 minutes per day; (3) 31- 60 minutes per day; (4) more than 1 hour per day. Participants will also be asked to rate their exposure to political related messages (0) never, (1) 1- 2 messages per day; (2) 3 – 4 messages per day; (3) 5 or more messages per day. This screening of media usage allowed the researcher to identify any anomalies related to the amounts of media use/consumption reported. Participants completed a demographic survey that included self-identified reporting of age, racial/ethnic identity, employment, income range, and social media platform use.

All key terms were operationalized in the introductory explanation. Explanations of the voluntary nature of this research, expectations of anonymity, and confidentiality were explained. Participants were informed that the focus group discussion was confidential and asked to not share any statements or participant information outside of the focus group. Participants agreed to audio and visual recording on the focus group session for the purpose of transcription. Participation was limited to the duration of one focus group discussion, which required approximately 90 minutes to complete. Upon acceptance into the study, participants were assigned to one of four focus groups and provided with date/time, secured password, and online meeting location via hyperlink. As the sample size was small, the findings are not generalizable to the population.

After obtaining informed consent and assignment to focus groups, participants in the online focus group were presented with a sample data set of protest images associated with news media and collective action frames. A focus group interview guide was administered using researcher generated photo-elicitation methods with visual prompts that solicit participant-spectator responses to visual/image texts of protest photography to gain insight on their
experience and memory of social unrest. Photo-elicitation is a method of interview that uses visual images to elicit reflections from participants (Harper, 2002). Photo-elicitation promotes participant agency and reflexivity. This method is useful for qualitative research due to its ability to elicit memory, evoke emotion, and reveal cultural understandings. Each participant-spectator voluntarily submitted to a single focus group discussion. Participants’ names are anonymized to protect confidentiality. Participant responses were transcribed and coded for analysis.

After the completion of data collection from the focus groups and content analysis of the digital photography archives, the data was coded and analyzed in order to develop a holistic analysis of the case. In addition to the data sets listed, the study also referenced additional news reporting and social media posts to establish continuity with participant responses and to further triangulate data reports. Due to the interpretive nature of the analysis, I incorporated quantitative and qualitative visual methods to improve reliability.

The study is bounded by time focusing on photographic records of protest events during the Ferguson uprising (August 9 – August 25, 2014), Baltimore uprising (April 5 – May 3, 2015), and the Minneapolis uprising (May 26 – June 6, 2020). The active processes of viewership, by which the focus group engaged, interpreted, processed, evaluated and responded to images of social unrest is presented thematically to generate a deeper understanding of how participants, within the collective group, expressed agency in acts of witnessing, reading, and testifying.

3.4 Measures

A code sheet was generated and used to identify and group visual frames of protest photography by content type, frequency, and dominant visual frame theme. A separate code sheet was generated and used to identify themes of modes and processes of interpretive reading
and audience response to the visual frames, and themes of audience generated (counter)frames and counternarrative. In order to measure audience reception to the visual representation of Black resistance in scenes of social unrest, a series of questions will be generated by the researcher and compiled into a question guide. The question guide with photo-elicitation prompts will feature questions modified from the “SHOWed method” (Nelson, 2019). Participants will be asked questions similar to the following; 1) What do you see here?, 2) What is really happening?, 3) How does this relate to our lives?, 4) Can you reflect on how you feel after looking at this image?, and 5) How have photographs of unrest influenced your perceptions of social protest, protest participants, and police?

3.5 Analysis

After the completion of data collection and coding the results were analyzed for emergent themes. The results and holistic analysis of the study are presented in the following section.

3.6 Reliability and Validity

In addition to the data sets listed, I referenced additional news reporting and social media posts to establish continuity with participant responses and to further triangulate data reports. Due to the interpretive nature of the analysis copies of the transcribed interviews were made available to participants to ensure accuracy in the description of their responses and increase reliability.

3.7 Limitations

The study’s image sample is sourced from four online digital archives and is not a representative sample of all available protest imagery found online. Due to the subjective nature of interpreting image meaning, this study has several limitations to consider. The study relies heavily on self-reporting. The researcher cannot guarantee that all respondents reported
accurately. Also, the researcher was unable rule out the possibility of preexisting perceptions or attitudes on protest activity, which may influence how participants respond. The study sample is small and not intended to be generalizable; as a result, the findings cannot fully represent the views of entire populations of Black communities in the United States. Due to the targeting of Black college students, the results of the findings may not include enough diverse experiences and perspectives among the various class and social positions. Additionally, the lack of gender balance across the sample participant audience resulted in disparity between the inclusion of Black male voices in comparison to Black female voices.
4 FINDINGS

Structural violence always precedes instances of collective response. - Ashley Howard, 2017

This study initiates a critical engagement with visual representations of social unrest that materialized in protest photography emanating from Black urban rebellions in the Ferguson, Baltimore, and Minneapolis uprisings amongst a national wave of Black Lives Matter protest demonstration from 2014 through 2020. An analysis of protest photography used to frame these protest events reveals how sites of rebellion, enactments of contentious politics, and public rituals of mourning are imaged and made visible through (re)presentations of political theater within the streets of urban America that spanned across the imagined borderlines of the nation-state. This research study examined the visual representation of social unrest in the cases of the 2014 Ferguson, 2015 Baltimore, and 2020 Minneapolis rebellions, which emerged as sites of collective action responses to the contentious perpetuation of antiblack violence, racial injustice, and police brutality in the Black Lives Matter era. This study is concerned with the ways Black protest repertoires of resistance and political dissent are visually represented in imagery used to visually frame protest demonstrations, enactments of Black rebellion, and resistance performed within mediated protest events.

A visual content analysis of digital protest photography found online in digital archives and circulated through news reporting and social media channels was conducted to examine how performances of Black resistance and political dissent were visually represented during urban rebellions and protest demonstrations occurring in the Black Lives Matter era from 2014 to 2020. The following research questions were addressed 1) How is Black resistance and political dissent visually represented in the framing of protest events? 2) How do social actors utilize protest
photography as a mnemonic device to (counter)frame Black political struggle in the Black Lives Matter era? 3) How do Black spectator-audience(s) interpret and respond to visual representations of Black resistance performed in protest events? By extending Goffman’s (1974) dramaturgical approach to the analysis of protest and their visual representations, the study aimed to identify which social actors and actions were made visible and consider how news media and movement actors utilized photographic representation to visually frame episodes of rebellion and acts of resistance in order to construct visual narratives that depict incidents of social unrest during the Ferguson, Baltimore, and Minneapolis events as a social drama.

The findings elucidated the ways images of protest are taken up by news media and social movement actors who use protest photography to visually frame and communicate messages regarding social conflicts between social actors involved in protest events as social dramas. The visual methodology of content analysis revealed patterns of image selection, sequencing, and amplification of photographic representations of social unrest, which created dominant visual frames of (re)presentations of protest, protesters, police and their social actions. These findings further illustrated that protest as a social drama is made visible and retrievable through photography that extends the performance of contentious politics. Media and social movement actors utilized photography as material conduits of cultural transmission that framed performances of contentious politics through visual (re)presentations in order to construct visual narratives of protest as image events and the social actors who participated in them. Following two cycles of coding, this study identified the main stages, sites, scenes, social actors, props, performances of contentious politics and rituals of public mourning imaged within news media and collective action dominant frames.
An analysis of the emergent themes of news media and collective action frames is followed by a critical discourse analysis (CDA) of audience response(s) to the dominant visual frames and visual narratives used by members of news media, social movements and public audiences, as social actors, to construct and contest meanings of social protest, rituals of mourning, rebellion, and resistance within the Movement for Black Lives. Reading alongside focus group participants, I examined the preferred, contested, and oppositional readings of the visual narratives. A final discussion of audience agency and interpretive modes of meaning making implicated the cultural role and significance of protest photography in acts of bearing witness within a critical framework of Black spectatorship.

4.1 Imaging Insurrection in the Visual Framing of 2014 Ferguson, 2015 Baltimore, and 2020 Minneapolis Uprisings

This study returned to sites of rebellion that erupted in Ferguson, Missouri in 2014; Baltimore, Maryland in 2015; and Minneapolis, Minnesota in 2020. The study examined the visual (re)presentation of protest in the cases of four digital photography archives that mediated the collective action responses of Black communities and their allies following acts of police brutality and antiblack violence that claimed the lives of three unarmed Black men. In the following cases, social protest is enacted as a social drama by citizens of the nation-state who as social actors perform repertoires of contentious politics and rituals of public mourning, which are mediated by protest photography. News media, government officials, community members, police officers and their supports, activists and their allies make up factions of much larger multinational audiences who observed events of social unrest mediated through visual encounters with protest photography. As a member of this diffused audience, I entered the visual field of protest via the photographic images used in news media and collective action visual
framing of scenes, sites, and performances of contentions politics that rendered social protest, social actors and their actions within visual narrative themes. I read these image frames alongside members of intergenerational focus groups in discussion of dominant, contested, and counter narrative discourses on Black resistance and political struggle.

4.1.1 Stages, Scenes, Sequences, and Frames of Visual Representation of Protest as Social Dramas

Critical media studies literature address framing as a process of gathering elements of perceived reality and assembling a narrative that highlights connection among them to promote a particular interpretation (Entman, 2007). Entman states “frames are manifested by the presence or absence of key words and phrases, stereotyped imagery, and sources of information that reinforce facts or judgments” (Entman R. , 1993, p. 52). According to Entman’s theory, the process of framing involves selection and salience. Entman (1993) states that “to frame is to select some aspect of a perceived reality and make them more salient” in a way that “promotes a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation” (p.52).

In the following cases, each photograph is analyzed as a single image frame. Following the dramaturgical approach, each photograph was analyzed to identify the social actors, actions, and repertoires of performance visible within each image frame. Through the process of identification, the overall visual salience of image frames was accessed. In some cases, there were multiple social actors and forms of action visible in each photograph. During the initial coding process, a code sheet was utilized to code each frame based on the denotative information visible within the image. This process was necessary to identify the visual elements of each
image frame. Following the initial process, image frames were coded, grouped, and categorized into aggregate groups and subcategories for further analysis.

The process of coding and categorization treated each photograph as a single unit of analysis referred to as an image frame. I read each image frame to identify and record its denotative representational value. The main character social actors are identified as police officers and protesters. There are also auxiliary characters such as state officials, fire fighters, and occasional bystanders. These actors are visualized performing various social actions that are coded in each frame by type, grouped by theme into scenes and sub-grouped by social actor into sequences. I identified six primary scenes of social actions which are referenced as scenes of violence, scenes of contentious demonstrations, scenes of property destruction and looting, scenes of state power, scenes of conflict, and scenes of mourning. It was necessary to distinguish which actors performed certain actions within each thematic scene. The sequence indicates and groups the types of social action by performer. Thematic scenes are aggregated into categories, which are represented as stages of performance. There were two main types of social performance made visible within the sample of protest photography analyzed in this study. I identified these types as the main categories or stages of performance, which are referenced as stages of contentious politics repertoires and stages of public ritual repertoires. Image frames were measured by frequency of use to determine the concentration of representational value units within each frame group, category, and subcategory to identify dominant visual framing themes.

4.1.2 Backstage: Setting the Sites & Staging of Social Unrest as Axial Media Events

4.1.2.1 2014 Ferguson Uprisings

On August 9, 2014, a fatal encounter occurred between 18-year-old Michael Brown, his friend Dorian Johnson both black males, and 28-year-old white police officer, Darrien Wilson.
The encounter would end with Michael Brown’s body riddled with bullets and bleeding out in the middle of Canfield Drive in Ferguson, Missouri. As community members from the surrounding Canfield Green Apartments came outside to investigate what had transpired, they used cellphone photography and video recording to document the scene. These visual representations began to circulate as visual evidence that mediated the initial visual encounter with a marginalized community of Black residents in Ferguson, Missouri who took to the streets to perform public rituals of mourning and repertoires of contentious politics. The visual encounter with Ferguson as a site of resistance materializes Black pain and suffering, previously rendered invisible, within a community that mobilized and generated modes of collective action in response to the structures of antiblack violence(s) and oppression that constrained their lived experience.

To the dismay of the community, the Ferguson Police department left Brown’s uncovered body in the middle of Canfield Drive for more than four hours. This photographic image initiated a visual encounter with the Black body in peril. The photograph of Brown’s slain body was one of the first images to emerge from Ferguson. The other was that of a man, who would later be identified as Brown’s stepfather, holding a cardboard sign that read “Ferguson police have just executed my unarmed son.” That evening, Brown’s family and fellow community members gathered at the site of his murder to erect a memorial. Rose petals, candles, and teddy bears were placed over the bloodstains that ran perpendicular along the yellow median of Canfield Drive. According to residents, the police department drove over the memorial and allowed police dogs to urinate on it. Tensions grew hotter. On August 10th, residents returned to the memorial site to hold a candle vigil. Following the vigil, police assembled in riot gear to disperse the crowd. Tensions overflowed.
What began as a peace vigil and protest turned into a direct and violent confrontation, which captured national media attention. Vehicles and buildings were vandalized and according to media reports, at least 12 business were looted or vandalized including the Quicktrip gas station on Florrisant Drive that was set on fire. On August 11th, police began firing tear gas to disperse a crowd gathered in the shadows of the burnt Quicktrip, which would become an iconic symbol of this rebellion. In the following days community member and Black Lives Matter activists mobilized and rallied in solidarity demanding justice for Brown. “Hands Up, Don’t Shoot” and “Black Lives Matter” would become symbolic shouts heard around the world. By August 18th, Missouri Governor Jay Nixon had declared a state of emergency, implemented nightly curfews, and called out the National guard to “help restore peace and order and protect the citizens of Ferguson” (Hartmann, 2014).

The first wave of the Ferguson unrest lasted from August 9 – August 25, when Brown’s family requested a suspension of protest activity out of respect for the funeral proceedings. Protests erupted again in September, October, and November 17, following the announcement of the grand jury’s decision to not indict police officer Wilson on any charges. Each wave of protest was met by a cadre of reporters and photojournalists from every major news outlet and many of their local affiliates. The spectacular images of militarized police and armored tanks clashing with civilians in America’s heartland turned the community of Ferguson into a global stage for a sensationalized political dramaturgy.

Ferguson, a suburb of the greater St. Louis county area, is a small municipality located 12 miles outside of St. Louis, Missouri. A 2010 census report lists the population as 21,203 residents with a racial makeup of 67.4% Black, 29.3% White. Despite being a majority in population, the Black residents of Ferguson were subjected to racial terror via systemic
oppression, discrimination, racial profiling, predatory policies, and acts of harassment instituted by the predominantly White police department and local governing body that ran roughshod over the community. However, the condition of Black life in Ferguson was suppressed and rendered invisible within the American heartland until the uprisings exposed the racial terror permeating underneath the surface of suburban America. *Cue scene.*

4.1.2.2 2015 Baltimore Uprisings

On April 12th, 2015, officers in the Baltimore Police Department arrested 25-year-old Freddie Gray for possession of a knife. Gray was injured while in police custody after being shackled and placed in the prone position with hands cuffed and transported without a seatbelt. His spinal cord nearly severed from his spine after being subjected to what Baltimoreans referred to as a “rough ride,” a practice of police brutality in which it is alleged that officer’s intentionally take sharp turns and violent maneuvers, to inflict bodily harm during transport. Gray did not receive immediate medical treatment. He slipped into a coma. As reports of Gray’s suspicious injuries and mistreatment circulated, residents of Baltimore gathered in front of the Western District police station in protest demanding answers for Gray’s death. On April 19, 2015, Freddie Gray succumbed to his injuries.

The first wave of protests demonstrations began on April 18, 2015 and were sustained through April 24, 2015 with consecutive days of non-violent direct action. As tensions flared, Maryland Governor, Larry Hogan sent Maryland State Police troopers to Baltimore in response to intensified protest. April 25, 2015, local media reported that protest demonstrations had turned violent. A funeral service was held for Gray on April 26, 2015. Authorities and state officials coordinated what was deemed as a preemptive strike based on social media chatter that suggested local high school students were organizing to meet and engage in violent protest
following Gray’s funeral. Police clad in riot gear mobilized and ascended on the area near the Mondawmin Mall where protesters had gathered. A confrontation ensued. Protesters threw rocks and bottles at police. Police fired tear gas and pepper balls at protesters. In the following days, so-called “riots” had erupted across the West Baltimore neighborhood where Gray was arrested and downtown. The local CVS drugstore, along with several other businesses and cars, was set ablaze. Governor Hogan declared a state of emergency and Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake issued a weeklong citywide curfew to curb violence.

The spectacular images of militarized police and armored tanks clashing with civilians in Baltimore, Maryland, a city situated within 35-miles of the nation’s capital in Washington, D.C., once again propelled a local Black community onto a global stage for a sensationalized political dramaturgy. The images of Baltimore unrest during the events of 2015 conjured recollections of the city’s history of civil unrest as a site of Black rebellion in 1968 following the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. In both cases, Black residents of Baltimore who had been disproportionately affected by poverty, loss of jobs and economic decline in the city’s working-class labor sectors, were chided for their behavior and quotidian expressions of resistance. In 1968, Maryland Governor Spiro Agnew, who would become Richard Nixon’s running mate in the 1968 Presidential election and sworn into office as the 39th Vice President of the United States on January 20th, 1969, castigated Black leaders for failing to do more to stop the social unrest. Agnew had previously been reviewed as a supporter of moderate calls for civil rights but deplored what was considered as militant action emerging within the Black Power movement. Agnew renewed calls for law and order and blamed social unrest not on structural causes of systemic racism but a Black pathology that allowed lawlessness to become “a socially acceptable and occasionally stylish form of dissent” (Levy, 2013, p. 713). Agnew dismissed the 1967
Kerner Commission report that cited persistent white racism as the cause of social unrest during the 1965 Watts rebellion. Agnew blamed Black radicals as outside agitators who foment unrest and Black moderates who failed to control or otherwise suppress Black militancy and anger. In 2016, Mayor Rawlings-Black condemned Black youth in Baltimore as “thugs” and the 44th President of the United States, Barack Obama, subsequently condemned acts of violence by protesters as counterproductive while he applauded what he and others considered as peaceful demonstrations that were undermined by episodic violence (Ransby, 2018). President Obama had been previously criticized for his reactions to unrest in Ferguson eight months earlier.

In mainstream media, political and public discourses Black rage was volatile and counterproductive. However, Black rage had resulted in bringing visibility to the persistence of antiblack violence and police brutality in Black neighborhoods that had long complained of mistreatment and over policing by departments that operated as occupying forces with qualified immunity. Unlike Ferguson where police and city officials were predominately white, Baltimore was considered a Black city in terms of its governance and population demographic. At the time of the 2015 social unrest, the city’s mayor, Stephanie Rawlings-Black, the state’s attorney, Marilyn J. Mosby and the police commissioner, Anthony Batts all identified as Black. As Black elected officials espoused the need for calm, the spontaneous rebellions in Baltimore highlighted the fissures of class division and political ideologies that cuts across Black communities. *Cue scene.*

4.1.2.3 2020 Minneapolis Uprisings

A video recording captured the final moments of George Floyd’s life. The video of Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin kneeling on the neck of Floyd for 9 minutes and 30 seconds sparked outrage and a spectacular wave of global protest in response to the injustice. On
May 25th, 2020, police were called to the Cup Foods at the intersection of East 38th Street and Chicago Avenue where Floyd was arrested for allegedly passing a counterfeit $20 bill. Local members of the community began to stop and plead with police officers who restrained Floyd on the ground. Those pleas were ignored. The cellphone video recordings of George Floyd’s murder in real time captured the pleas of bystanders and Floyd’s audible declarations of “I can’t breathe” via multiple angles that haunt the viewer. The visual encounter with this gruesome scene of violence is historically linked to a genre of horror in which antiblack violence is made visible via circulation of photographs of lynching victims and viral distribution of Black death as snuff video (Mowatt, 2018).

On May 26, 2020, as community members and activists gathered at a memorial site constructed outside of the Cup Foods, protest demonstrations ensued that spread to the Minneapolis Police Department’s third precinct police station. The demonstrations were mostly peaceful with the exception of some protesters throwing rocks and reports of broken windows. These demonstrations were initially met by police with restraint. However, tensions escalated after police advanced on crowds and fired tear gas to disperse protesters. By May 28th, 2015 several businesses had been looted and/or set on fire. The third precinct was set ablaze. Minnesota Governor Tim Walz declared a state of emergency and activated the Minnesota National Guard, which was deployed to the Twin Cities area.

Minneapolis endured a prolonged period of social unrest. As activists and organizations within the Movement for Black Lives seized the public sphere demanding calls for justice for George Floyd and others who had been murdered in acts of state-sanctioned violence. These social actors made calls to “defund police” and envisioned alternate forms of community care. The social unrest in Minneapolis spread nationwide through marches and demonstrations. Some
of these events turned violent while others were largely peaceful in solidarity with Black Lives Matter social actors took to the streets across the nation to forcefully repudiate racial injustice and the structures of antiblackness within U.S. society. Cue scene.

4.1.3 Revisiting Black Rebellion in Ferguson, Baltimore, Minneapolis and Beyond via News Media

Digital protest photography proliferated images of social unrest throughout multiple news media and social media channels. For the purposes of this study, I selected four digital photography albums for content analysis: “#Ferguson in Pictures” (stltoday.com, 2014), “Dramatic Images from Baltimore Unrest” (abcnews.go.com, 2015), “Black Lives Matter: A movement in photos” (abcnews.go.com, 2020), and “In Pictures: A racial reckoning in America” (cnn.com, 2020). These albums were selected based on general accessibility and overall popularity of the news media digital platforms that hosted the archives. The archives featured a combined total of 354 photographic images that were selected for visual content analysis. The protest photography featured in these archives circulated online via news reports. Due to high visibility and circulation of digital protest photography online, some of the images featured in these archives may be found on other digital news media sites and social media sites. For the purpose of this exploratory inquiry, the study did not distinguish between the types of news media sources or any technological affordances related to the digital platforms that hosted the images online.

4.1.3.1 Revisiting Ferguson via Protest Photography

The “#Ferguson in Pictures” archive featured protest photography from the St. Louis Post Dispatch’s coverage of the 2014 Ferguson unrest. Following the uprisings, the photography staff of the St. Louis Post Dispatch received the 2015 Pulitzer Prize in the category of “Breaking
News Photography” for “powerful images of despair and anger in Ferguson, MO, stunning photojournalism that served the community while informing the country” (The Pulitzer Prizes, 2015). The winning work included 19 images from a larger portfolio of photography captured by the staff during the unrest. I selected all of the images from this set for content analysis.

The visual representations of protest rendered accessible in the “Ferguson in Pictures” archive are bound within the stages of contentious politics and public rituals of mourning. The stage of contentious politics is the primary location for the display of repertories of protest demonstrations, embodied acts of resistance, quotidian acts of rebellion, as well as the repertoires of state power. The performances of resistance and social actions of protesters emerged as the most concentrated representations within the visible field of the stage of contentious politics. Scenes of violence were the most dominant themes of social action visible in sequences of performances by protesters and police actors. The stage of public rituals of mourning was a secondary location. Here, protesters and family members of Michael Brown engage in communal practices of memorial and commemoration.

The first visual encounter with Ferguson as a site of rebellion began with the image of Michael Brown’s body laid across the pavement. People are gathered behind police tape in the background. A crime occurred. Who were these witnesses? What had they seen? What happened to Michael Brown? While the image can and does speak, it is unable to answer those questions. Such information is found outside of the margins of the frame. However, this image and others like it communicate to the viewer that an act of violence has occurred. Historically, we, Americans live with slain Black bodies. The visual evidence, as Claudia Rankine (2017) describes, is gazed upon as “a part of normal life here” where the “condition of black life is one of mourning” (p.17). Cue scene.
Figure 1 St. Louis Post Dispatch "Ferguson in Pictures" scene of violence

Figure 2 St. Louis Post Dispatch "Ferguson in Pictures" scene of violence and (disembodied) state power
Scenes of violence are concentrated as a primary site of social action depicted in on the main stage of contentious politics made visible in the “#Ferguson in Pictures” archive. Scenes of violence are visual spectacles in which use of force is made visible as violence is inflicted upon bodies. Such violence ruptures in excess of the image frames. Content analysis revealed that protesters and police officers are represented within these scenes. Figure 1 depicts a Black male dressed in t-shirt with an American flag print and jeans who is captured in the act of lobbing a tear gas canister. This image, now dubbed as “The Patriot,” represents use of force by a protester engaged in a performance of resistance emblematic of a quotidian practice of armed self-defense. Alternatively, an individual in the background of the frame elevated their arms in a symbolic gesture that articulated “Hands Up, Don’t Shoot” as an embodied performance of resistance. Whereas Figure 2 depicts a protester shielding themselves from a plume of toxic chemical fumes. Figure 3 images police use of force as officers in the foreground and midground are
captured in the act of firing tear gas. A pattern of representation emerged across the sequences of violence. The Black body, in particular, was represented as both an agent and victim of violence within these scenes. Police use of force is visible throughout the sample of images. However, upon initial examination, image frames that represented police use of force as disembodied action partially obscured the visibility of police officers as agents that perpetuate state violence. Figure 2 depicts a protest demonstrator engulfed in plumes of tear gas. Absent from the frame is the racialized gendered body of the police officer or multiple officers who performed as agents of the state endowed with the power to use chemical weapons to subdue or otherwise suppress political dissent. This sequence represented the state’s power to generate and wield awesome force as an omnipotent power. Figure 3 was the only image frame within the “Ferguson in Pictures” data set that depicted made police actively engaged in an act of violence. In Figure 3, police use of force appears as an embodied action performed by white males as agents of the state. Failure to include the image frames of disembodied force within the sequences of police violence partially obscures the ways police officers as agents of the state perform social actions that enact violence and inflict harm on vulnerable citizens.

Scenes of state power are also performed on the stage of contentious politics. Based on the emergence of the previous sequence of state violence represented as disembodied force, I recognized the need to distinguish between photographic representations of police engaged in violence as a use of force versus symbolic performances of domination and control where police are visibly present in the frame as guards but not engaged in an active use of force. Figure 4 showcased how state power was represented in image frames as a guard against property destruction and use of force from protesters. In scenes of state power, police perform a symbolic force via their embodied presence in which their uniforms and weapons, also referred to as
costumes and props, aid in the (re)presentation of state power to control, dominate, and intimidate protesters. *Cue scene.*

![Image](image_url)

*Figure 4 St. Louis Post Dispatch "Ferguson in Pictures" scene of state power property destruction*

Figure 4 is also coded as a scene of property destruction. The image denotes the site of a beauty store that was destroyed during the Ferguson uprisings. Based on the polysemic qualities of photography, it is important to note that photoimage texts can, and often do, represent more than one thing. For this reason, I chose to perform denotative readings of the representational value of each image frame as opposed to a connotative reading at this stage of analysis. In preferred readings of news media frames of protest photography, it is implied that the protesters are responsible as perpetrators of damage. The repetition and concentration of image frames depicting violence, looting, and property destruction, as represented in Figures 5 and 6, are a part of the visual grammar of a protest paradigm that reinforce stereotypes of Black criminality, which is made visible and material within the “Ferguson in Pictures” archive. *Cue scene.*
Figure 5 St. Louis Post Dispatch "Ferguson in Pictures" scene of property destruction

Figure 6 St. Louis Post Dispatch "Ferguson in Pictures" scene of looting
Protest rallies, marches and die-ins are the protest strategies presented with the greatest concentration of frame selection within scenes of contentious demonstrations. A typology of embodied acts and symbolic signs of resistance are found here, visualized and made available for retrieval in the photographic representation of protest demonstrations. Sequences of performative resistance and performative solidarity are extended to the viewer through protest photography. As performative documentation, protest photography carries the cultural memories and meanings of the symbolic representation of repertoires of resistance within performances of contentious politics. These visualizations transmit cultural symbols and performances of protest as a form of collective action. The multiracial crowd imaged in Figure 7 is representative of performance of national solidarity in which political dissent is expressed in protest signs that extend the Black Lives Matter movement claims-making and dissemination of prognostic injustice frames. The visibility of Black Lives Matter claims-making in news media and social media channels is connected to their ability to achieve their political goals. Protesters hoist signs that transmit political speech and messages that frame the protest event. “Hands Up, Don’t Shoot” is visible as both a form of political speech in Figure 7 and is subsequently carried over as an embodied performance of resistance in Figure 8.
Figure 7 St. Louis Post Dispatch "Ferguson in Pictures" scene of contentious demonstration

Figure 8 St. Louis Post Dispatch "Ferguson in Pictures" scenes of embodied resistance “hands up, don’t shoot”

Jump cut.
Public mourning, acts of commemoration, and rituals of elaborate funerary are the primary scenes of social action made visible as performances on the secondary stage of public rituals of mourning. A voyeuristic gaze frames Leslie McSpadden and Michael Brown, Sr. in acts of public grieving as they mourned the death of their son in Figures 9 and 10. Private mourning is unveiled for public viewing and thereby mourning within the “Ferguson in Pictures” archive is rendered visible as a communal ritual, a political act of remembrance and public spectacle. While Black women as mothers and wives are common visual tropes within visual narratives of Black political struggle, the visual representation of a Black man expressing inconsolable grief is less visible. Black male emotion is most often rendered legible as anger and frustration. The concentration of image frames of mourning contributes to the emotional and affective salience of the “Ferguson in Pictures” digital archive. *Fade to black.*

*Figure 9 St. Louis Post Dispatch “Ferguson in Pictures” scenes of mourning*
Figure 10 St. Louis Post Dispatch "Ferguson in Pictures" scenes of memorial

Figure 11 St. Louis Post Dispatch "Ferguson in Pictures" scenes of mourning
Revisiting Baltimore via Protest Photography

The “Dramatic Images from Baltimore Unrest” digital photo album brings the viewer into the stage of contentious politics via scenes of violence, state power, and conflict. The dramatic as a theme drives the social action made visible in this digital archive. It is important to note that some of the photography within this album include visual representations of protest that have been influenced by art photography practices such as images rendered via double exposure as well as in black and white. This is not uncommon but is reflexive of photojournalist and photography editors’ stylistic choices, which influenced the overall framing and presentation of the Baltimore unrest as a social drama.

The stage of contentious politics was the principal location of social action made visible by image frame selection in the digital archive. Scenes of state power are represented as the most
dominant frame group. Police officers are visually represented enacting law and order as performances of state power within the image frames of domination and control. In these frames, viewers encounter images of police clad in riot gear with various weapons holding or securing a perimeter area as (re)presented in Figure 13. Adding to the dramatic factor, many of these image frames are photographed at night as visualized in Figure 14, which cast the scenes in ominous hues of blue and red light diffused through plumes of tear gas smoke. Here, police presence is an intimidating force that wields state power to dominate over protesters’ performances of resistance, suppress political action, and control the stage of contention in as such a way that limits the repertoires of a Black protest tradition available for use. Cue scene.

Figure 13 ABC News "Dramatic Images from Baltimore" scenes of domination and control
Figure 14 ABC News "Dramatic Images from Baltimore" scenes of domination and control

Figure 15 ABC News "Dramatic Images from Baltimore"
Figures 14 and 15 illustrate the ways protesters performed embodied acts of resistance in scenes of contentious demonstration. These embodied performances counteract with police performance of state power, which is emblematic of a scene of conflict staged as a racialized gendered conflict between Black protesters and police, otherwise stated as, the Black community versus police. While there may have been white and other non-Black persons of color participating in solidarity with these protest demonstrations, they are not visible within the referenced image frames. In fact, the visual absence of racialized allies within these scenes further helps to perpetuate the Black community versus police conflict narrative. Scenes of conflict, such as the above, are distinguished from scenes of contentious demonstrations based on the visual representations of confrontation between protesters and police. These symbolic demonstrations do not include representations of active use(s) of force by either protesters or the state. Such scenes are a reoccurring visual trope of depictions of Black Lives Matter made visible in protest photography within this album and beyond.

Performative solidarity emerges as sequenced by both police and protest social actors. Similar to the multiracial crowds that perform national solidarity, “Dramatic Images from Baltimore” makes performative solidarity between protesters and police an affective element of the visual narrative (Eyerman, 2006). Figure 16 depicts a civilian on a bicycle performing a fist bump hand gesture, which signifies an act of solidarity. Figure 17 depicts an elder Black woman and a younger Black man taking a selfie picture with a white female police officer who is smiling. Such (re)presentations provide a striking contrast from scenes of violence that depict protesters and police clashing in conflict. The type of solidarity sequence represented in Figure 16 and Figure 17 is not a dominant frame but when juxtaposed with scenes of conflict and scenes
of police domination and control, these visual images work to frame police as benevolent social actors and makes a pro-police contingent of the Black community visible.

Figure 16 ABC News "Dramatic Images from Baltimore"
Scenes of property destruction and looting are concentrated in the visual framing of social unrest in Baltimore. The repeated use of these kind of visual frames continues the dissemination of the protest paradigm. Figure 18 is illustrative of the ways news media utilize visual representations of raging fires and rubble from burned buildings as visual motifs of the protest paradigm, which cue viewers to the dangers associated with Black rebellion. This motif is visually present across each digital archive examined within this study. Elsewhere in Figure 19, a woman is photographed carrying diapers from a store. These representations perpetuate the stereotype of Black criminality that must be controlled by the state to maintain social order. *Cue scene.*
Figure 18 ABC News "Dramatic Images from Baltimore"

Figure 19 Dramatic Images from Baltimore
Scenes of contentious demonstration repeated the embodied forms of resistance made visible elsewhere. The “Hands Up, Don’t Shoot” gesture is visible in image frames of social unrest in Baltimore. This suggest that this particular symbolic performance is a recognizable symbol that carries cultural meaning and value across protest events. As performative documentation, protest photography aids in the circulation of a movement’s oppositional habitus in terms of disseminating and creating new scripts of contentious repertoires. These visualizations transmit cultural symbols and performances of protest from one generation to the next, a transmission visible in the raised fist as an embodied performance of Black Power era struggles. Figure 20 illustrates such transmission and also connects the embodied performance with a scene of public mourning that makes reference to the death of Freddie Gray. *Cue scene.*

Figure 20 *ABC News "Dramatic Images from Baltimore"

Scenes of violence are nearly exclusively visually represented via sequences of protesters as perpetrators. The sequence pattern visible in Figures 21 and 22 show protesters lobbing tear gas canisters and throwing bricks. For the purpose of this study, these acts are characterized as
examples of quotidian performances of self-defense and retaliatory violence. When added to the scenes of property destruction and looting the “Dramatic Images from Baltimore” archive create a visual narrative that depicts social unrest in Baltimore as an example of violent protests otherwise referred to as riots. The visual representation of Black youth, young males in particular, is a racialized gendered sequence pattern that emerges through content analysis. The concentration of frames that visually represent violence as associated with the actions of protesters further works to substantiate state power and use of force as legitimate. The quotidian practices of armed self-defense are not readily made legible as legitimate within the violent versus non-violent protest paradigm perpetuated under the scopic regime of state power. Thus, the state is positioned as holding a monopoly on the legitimate use of force. *Fade to Black.*

![Figure 21 ABC News "Dramatic Images of Ferguson"](image_url)
Cross dissolve. Cue scene.

4.1.3.3 Revisiting Minneapolis via Protest Photography

The digital photo archive “In Pictures: A racial reckoning in America” was published by CNN and hosted on its digital news platform. The photography presented via this archival project featured an amalgamation of representations from the 2020 national wave of Black Lives Matter protests, marches, and solidarity demonstration in the wake of the state sanctioned murder of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and others. Here, viewers encounter visual representation from the Minneapolis unrest following the murder of George Floyd by police, which sparked collective actions and unrest across the nation. There were 230 images present within this archive. I examined the archive in its entirety. During examination, I identified 64 images that
depicted representations of social unrest in Minneapolis, which were separated and analyzed independently from this data set. The 64 images were subject to separate content analysis in order to determine how the Minneapolis rebellion, specifically, had been visually represented within the archive. The remaining 166 images within the data set featured photographic images depicting various protest demonstrations that took place during the national wave of solidarity actions that took place over a period of months during the summer in 2020. After separating the Minneapolis events from the larger data set, content analysis revealed differences in the visual depictions of protest events. Within the archive, the Minneapolis rebellion is (re)presented as an episodic protest event that was predominantly visible via scenes of protest demonstration and scenes of property destruction in comparison to the thematic framing of protest events that occurred throughout 2020 during a national wave of demonstrations in solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement.

The stage of contentious politics is the primary site of visuality of social action depicted in the photographic representation of social unrest during the Minneapolis uprisings. Scenes of violence, state power, destruction and contentious demonstrations are prolific. The secondary stage of public mourning is also visible and assessable in the “In Pictures: A racial reckoning in America” archive. Images of protest demonstrations are the most concentrated frames of visual representation to appear across the dominant frames followed by representations of state power, property destruction, and mourning, respectively.

The death of George Floyd spurred a near instantaneous and visceral collective response. People began to assemble near the site of the fatal encounter. People marched to the 3rd precinct to demonstrate in performances of claims-making that demanded justice and police accountability for Floyd’s murder. The coalition of demonstrators expanded. Multiracial crowds,
as pictured in Figures 23 and 24, flooded the streets with protest signs emblazoned with phrases of political dissent. Raised fists and open palm hands are hoisted high into the sky.

Confrontations with Minneapolis police ensued. Direct action by *escrache*, a type of demonstration that involves public shaming made popular in post-dictatorial Argentina and other Latin American countries in response to state sanctioned genocide and disappearance, was performed (Flesher Fominaya & Montañés Jiménez, 2014). The people were rising. *Cue scene.*

Figure 23 CNN "In Pictures: A racial reckoning in America"
Figure 24 CNN "In Pictures: A racial reckoning in America" A multiracial crowd of protesters demonstrate in Minneapolis, MN.

Figure 25 CNN "In Pictures: A racial reckoning in America" Protesters demonstrate outside police precinct in Minneapolis, MN.
Figure 26 CNN "In Pictures: A racial reckoning in America" An act of escrache

Figure 27 CNN "In Pictures: A racial reckoning in America" An act of escrache
The scenes of contentious demonstration outlined above are representative of the most frequently used image frame found within the “In Pictures: A racial reckoning in America” archive. Scenes of contentious demonstration account for 29 of 64 photographic representations of social unrest during the Minneapolis uprisings. This numeric figure is significant as approximately forty-four percent of the image frames of protest events in Minneapolis were visually represented as contentious demonstrations. These visual representations made the various forms of demonstration and embodied acts of resistance performed during the period of social unrest in Minneapolis visible to audiences as a dominant theme of news media frames.

The marches and rallies visualized are a common type of demonstration performed within the repertoires of a Black protest tradition. The presence of escrache performances as an act of public shaming and repudiation exemplifies the ways social movements adopt strategies and diffuse protest repertoires across time and space (Landa, 2016). The escrache performance pictured in Figures 26 and 27 is a form of direct action more commonly associated with a Latin American protest tradition in which it is common for demonstrators to march and assemble at the homes of offenders or government sites to call public attention to atrocities and those who are responsible for perpetuating them. Most of these demonstrations are framed as non-violent forms of protest and civil disobedience. However, as interactions and confrontations with police intensify, these demonstrations can become scenes of violence that protesters and police actively enact via their performances of social action. Cue scene.

A cloud of dark smoke wafted into the sky. Flames engulfed the structure of what had been the Minneapolis Police Department 3rd precinct. Fire was the mise-en-scene during the Minneapolis uprisings. The spectacular image of a police department set ablaze was followed by a parade of images that depict Minneapolis as being burned asunder by the explosive rage of
protesters. The “In Pictures: A racial reckoning in America” digital archive depicts Minneapolis unrest through the lens of scenes of destruction. The fire is biblical. The police form a barrier, a demarcation of space, in an attempt to contain the danger and destruction of fury and rage roiling the city center (Figure 28). A protester runs past a building engulfed in flames (Figure 32). A man stands in the foreground of raging flames that cast his body as partial silhouette within the orange and black umber of urban fire and brimstone (Figure 31). Another protester doses a flammable accelerant as another appears to be innocuous as he passes through this scene of destruction (Figure 29). Flames dance off of the wires hanging above as the fire consumes the liquor store (Figure 30). The fire illuminates the upside-down flag. America is in distress. *Cue scene.*

*Figure 28 CNN "In Pictures: A racial reckoning in America"*
Figure 29 CNN "In Pictures: A racial reckoning in America"

Figure 30 CNN "In Pictures: A racial reckoning in America"
Figure 31 CNN "In Pictures: A racial reckoning in America"

Figure 32 CNN "In Pictures: A racial reckoning in America"
The scenes of destruction evoked via the image frame selections found within “In Pictures: A racial reckoning in America” represent a dominant framing pattern of the Minneapolis uprisings. The frequency of appearance of buildings and cars on fire creates a visual motif that shapes the framing of the Minneapolis uprisings through the lens of the protest paradigm. Of the 64 photographs that exclusively depict social unrest during the Minneapolis uprisings found within this archive, scenes of destruction such as those referenced above represent 11 image frames or approximately seventeen percent of the visual (re)presentations.

Police officers are visually represented responding to protesters’ tactics and strategies of resistance with uses of force or with the threat of force. Officers are positioned in a ready mode of attack or actively engaged in the use of force to suppress demonstrations and dominate demonstrators in an effort to restore law and order. The scenes of state power are illustrative of the ways police officers, as agents of the state, enact performances of domination through the use of an arsenal of weapons, tactical strategies and maneuvers. The police also perform state power through their exclusive ability to arrest and detain. Subsequently, the state bestows power through assigning a monopoly on the legitimate use of violence to police. *Cue scene.*
Figure 33 CNN "In Pictures: A racial reckoning in America"

Figure 34 CNN "In Pictures: A racial reckoning in America"
Figure 35 CNN "In Pictures: A racial reckoning in America"

Figure 36 CNN "In Pictures: A racial reckoning in America"
The (in)visibility of state violence within protest photography is important to note considering that accounts of structural violence and police brutality have been documented as causes of urban uprisings and Black rebellion. While images of militarized police or armed service members are visible within the mediated representations of state use of force, the detachment of state actors from acts of violence is a framing practice that potentially reduces the legibility of state violence. Nearly half of the image frames that depict sequences of state violence are symbolized through disembodied actions. Through content analysis, I gleaned a repeated pattern across all of the archives that (re)presented state violence as a disembodied act. Such image frames produced victims of state assault as detached without a physical presence of police engaged in the use of force. Disembodied acts of force were identified in 29 of the 60 image frames depicting state violence found within the 230-image data set of the “In Pictures” archive. State violence, then, is visible in roughly twenty-six percent of the image frames. However, nearly half of said (re)presentations are disembodied uses of force. If these acts are left
unidentified or unattributed to state actors who perpetuated violence, the visibility of state violence across the digital album is drastically decreased.

A woman is doused with milk to counteract the chemical reaction of tear gas (Figure 38). Another protester wipes milk from his eyes after being exposed to tear gas (Figure 39). A journalist, bloodied from a direct hit to the head with a projectile, is the next victim of police force (Figure 40). A group of protesters scramble in an attempt to avoid a projectile launched by police (Figure 41). Another group of protesters stands with hands raised enacting a performance of embodied resistance as tear gas surrounds them (Figure 42). State violence exists as an (in)visible force to disperse, dominate and suppress. Cue scene.

Figure 38 CNN "In Pictures: A racial reckoning in America"
Figure 39 CNN "In Pictures: A racial reckoning in America"

Figure 40 CNN "In Pictures: A racial reckoning in America"
Figure 41 CNN "In Pictures: A racial reckoning in America"

Figure 42 CNN "In Pictures: A racial reckoning in America"
The racialized gendered conflict (re)presented between protesters and police officers or agents of the state appeared within the archive. This conflict is made visible in the direct confrontations between protesters and police in the form of physical standoffs. Additionally, the race and gender of the police officers is primarily represented via a white male body that is positioned in opposition to protesters who are visually represented as Black and white, male and female. The visual (re)presentation of conflict as a performance between white police officers and Black men and women is a reoccurring visual motif with historical undertones. These scenes of conflict underscore a visual narrative and a historical narrative that renders this social drama as staged between the police and the Black community. Figures 43 and 44 offer a glimpse of interracial solidarity amongst protesters in coalition with a Black-led antiracist social movement.

*Cue scene.*

*Figure 43 CNN "In Pictures: A racial reckoning in America"*
The stage of public ritual of mourning provided additional visibility to performances of resistance that are linked to acts of memorial and mourning. Protesters gathered at the site of Floyd’s death to demonstrate performances of resistance. A man dances in tribute (Figure 46). The memorial site grew as people brought items such as flowers and balloons to adorn the pavement. This location became sacred ground. Here, men and women kneel in positions of prayer and reflection (Figure 47). Some people are visibly overcome with grief (Figure 48).

Communal practices of mourning are publicly visible and hypermediated as cameras capture the rituals from multiple angles. Performances of solidarity are made visible as well underscoring the intertextual relationship between protest and mourning as public rituals (Figure 45). The mediated representation of scenes of mourning extends these acts to global audiences. Here, the
photographic gaze focused on the “pain of others,” as Sontag (2003) reminds us, is rendered visible as a consumable commodity. *Fade to Black. Cue scene.*

*Figure 45 CNN "In Pictures: A racial reckoning in America"*
Figure 46 CNN "In Pictures: A racial reckoning in America"

Figure 47 CNN "In Pictures: A racial reckoning in America"
Both “In Pictures: A racial reckoning in America,” and “Black Lives Matter: A movement in photos” digital archives documented the cultural and political diffusion of the Movement for Black Lives as made visible in the wave of Black Lives Matter protest events. These albums featured protest photography that documented Black Lives Matter protest events and solidarity demonstrations that occurred from 2014 through 2020 in Ferguson, Missouri; Baltimore, Maryland; Minneapolis, Minnesota and other cities, respectively. I examined 44 images from the “Black Lives Matter: A movement in photos” archive and the remaining 166 images from the “In Pictures” archive for content analysis.

These archives provide viewers with a kaleidoscope of Black Lives Matter protest imagery. The selection of image frames connects the events in Ferguson, Baltimore, and Minneapolis to a wave of protests that occurred across the nation in various cities and municipalities as collective responses to the extrajudicial killing of unarmed Black men and
women. Within these archives, social memory is created and utilized in media framing that links the victims of state violence to a larger discourse on the continuity and pervasiveness of antiblackness that haunts Black life. The repetitive pattern of social unrest as well as the patterns of representation and visual grammars of protest photography are underscored through encounters with these archives. The repetitiveness has sustained the visibility and social recognition of the Black Lives Matter movement as both a national and global phenomenon. The visibility of Black Lives Matter has forced a dialogue on race and injustice in America, predatory policing in Black communities, propelled policy demands ranging from police reform to defunding over-inflated police department budgets and inspired others to imagine radical possibilities of abolition.

In addition to connecting victims of state violence to the social movement, these photographic records also provide a visual bridge to the histories of Black political struggle and resistance. Demonstrations at historical monuments such as the Martin Luther King, Jr. memorial site in Washington D.C. further serve to link the Black Lives Matter movement to the legacy of civil rights activism (Figure 49). Additionally, these visual records are in conversation with other archives that document the history of Black rebellion that has occurred across multiple temporalities and geographies such an example viewed through photography of Baltimore uprisings in 1968 and 2015. The historical linkages made with visual reference to prior sites of rebellion or political demonstration and the significant events, figures and notable activist of previous eras such as Martin Luther King, Jr., Rosa Parks, Fannie Lou Hammer, and Angela Davis who is pictured at a protest demonstration in Figure 50, are carried in demonstrators’ clothing, political protest signs, posters, and other protest ephemera made visible through photography. Likewise, the cultural symbols and memories of the Civil Rights Movement and
Black Power Movement embedded in performances of resistance and contentious demonstrations are visible and retrievable via their photographic representations. The use of black and white photography opposed to color also harkens back to historical eras and their visual narratives. As such, these representations carry intertextual meanings that are frequently referenced in Black Lives Matter protest as particularly salient and symbolic cues for audiences. *Cue scene.*

*Figure 49 CNN "In Pictures: A racial reckoning in America"*
The protest photography presented in these archival projects mediated the visual image of protest and urban uprising to diffused audiences. The photographic image documents Black pain and suffering as much as it documents Black resistance, rebellion, and resilience. Each image frame is embedded with social, cultural and political meanings related to Black protest and resistance. The photographic image is sutured together frame by frame, sequence by sequence and scene by scene into visual narratives of Black death and mourning, antiblack violence and racial injustice, and histories of Black resistance and survival. These visual narratives are materialized in the photographic representation of repertoires of contention performed within a Black protest tradition signified by the performative documentation of protest photography. As the photographic image is circulated through mass media and interpersonal communication channels, the image frame transmits rhetorical fragments of the visual narrative as visual
messages to distant and diffused audiences who subsequently read the images to interpret their meaning.

The digital archival projects examined in this study visually narrate the origins and evolutions of the emergent Black Lives Matter movement via protest photography of the Ferguson, Baltimore, Minneapolis uprisings and national wave of protest demonstrations. As a type of social documentary, protest photography recorded social outrage against state sanctioned antiblack violence, structures of oppression that mandate Black death and dying, as well as the individual and collective grief expressed in public demonstrations and rituals of mourning. As cultural artifacts, these performative documents transported the symbolism, poetics, performativity and theatricality embedded within repertoires of a Black protest tradition alongside the oppositional habitus of Black Lives Matter movement culture. The protest photography analyzed within these digital albums aid in the diffusion of movement culture and political ideology.

The dominant visual narrative themes presented across these archival projects are fragmented discourses that have been (re)assembled and constructed into master narratives of social conflict that exposes underlying tensions and anxieties between Black people and police officers as agents of state power and an occupying force in Black communities. Close readings expose ongoing racialized gendered, and class intergroup conflicts experienced between Black people, as members of a racialized subordinate group, and the dominant white social order. These conflicts are emblematic of American social disorders that are materialized in the forms of antiblack violence, racial injustice and inequality. The visual narratives also construct themes of social restoration that espouse national mourning and solidarity as constitutive demands of multiculturalism that mandates racial reconciliation and social repair. The politics of
(in)visibility and (mis)recognition shape these narratives and audience response(s) to Black political demands. The dominant narrative themes encountered within these archival projects contribute to wider discourses on Black peoples’ experiences with race, gender, and class struggles in an antiblack racist sexist capitalist social order.

The visual grammar of spectacle used to render the political and performative acts of protest visible through photography is remediated through the archival projects. These photographic (re)presentations depicted sites of Black rebellion, mourning and performances of resistance as aesthetic and affective visual motifs that characterized the repertoires of contentious politics performed within Black Lives Matter protest events as political social dramas. The photo galleries are filled with imagery that serve as signifiers of the dichotomy of black life in the United States; one of death and survival, one of oppression and resistance. These visual phenomena promote the act of seeing blackness within communities, that were rendered invisible through marginalization and disfranchisement. The systemic erasure of Black bodies is framed through the photography from Ferguson, Baltimore, and Minneapolis uprisings and subsequently made visible through the capturing of acts of violence and public rituals of mourning. Traditional media used photographic practices in acts of “racialized surveillance,” as described in Simone Browne’s (2015) *Dark Matters*, which produced reification of Black trauma and turned victims of state violence, their families, and communities into objects to be commoditized and exploited. According to Andrea Mubi Brighenti (2010), “visibilities are constituted from within social events” by which the gaze forces “inscription in the flesh of the social” (p.43). Therefore, it is through the visibility of protest as a political performance that photography captures the social acts of dissent, resistance, and remembrance that are intertextually linked to performances of
mournings that enable those murdered by the state and their communities to achieve visibility through death that was previously inaccessible and otherwise denied.

The visual analysis of photographic (re)presentations of Black rebellion and protest during the Ferguson, Baltimore, and Minneapolis episodes of social unrest revealed a pattern of media frame selection, sequencing, and amplification in the curation of online digital photography archives. The results of content analysis on the visual (re)presentation of protest and social unrest during Black Lives Matter protest events featured in the digital photography archives from *Saint Louis Post-Dispatch, ABC News*, and CNN indicated that frame selection, sequencing and amplification patterns constructed the visual grammar that signified violence, mourning, and political resistance as spectacle. These framing processes aid in the hypervisualization of antiblack violence, Black death and trauma through a visual language of spectacle. Spectacle in turn shapes the visuality of Black Lives Matter protest events through the lens of a protest paradigm. Here, institutional media power constricts what we, as audience(s), are able to see in the visual field of protest. The hypervisibility of Black rebellion in urban uprisings and Black Lives Matter protest events as media spectacles rendered Black bodies and Black communities vulnerable to exploitation via commoditization and consumption.

The visual power of protest photography embedded within these archives allowed sites of rebellion and episodes of unrest to transcend locality and become transnational sites for the representation of Black vulnerability, pain, and mourning. Rankine (2017) asserts that “the Black Lives Matter movement can be read as an attempt to keep mourning an open dynamic in our culture because Black lives exist in a state of precariousness” and mourning “bears both the vulnerability inherent in Black lives and the instability regarding a future for those lives” (p. 19). It is through the spectacle of protest that the place names – Ferguson, Baltimore, Minneapolis
become sites and iconic signs of Black resistance. Kashif Jerome Powell (2016) argues for a “hauntological politics of justice” through which Black life is made to matter by reckoning with “the memorialized, inherited, and generational mourning of blackness” (p. 259). Within the photographic field, stages of contentious politics and mourning are interconnected in the visual representations of Black Lives Matter protest events. The photographic gaze captured communities of protesters engaged in active resistance and mourning within demonstrative scenes of contentious demonstration that situated communal practices of commemoration and funerary rituals into public rituals of protest and mourning as political acts. When engaged through an ethics of “humane insight” (Baker, 2015), the protest photography emanating from the Ferguson, Baltimore, and Minneapolis rebellions creates space for prolonged reflection on the negated humanity of Black bodies and the “specters of blackness” (Powell, 2016, p. 258) that exceed death and demand response. Visual encounters with these photographic representations interpolate viewers into the act of seeing and looking for what has happened. As referenced by Andrea Mubi Brighenti, in Visibility in Social Theory and Social Research, “the relationship of looking at each other constitutes the site of mutual recognition, misrecognition, or denial of recognition of the other” (Mubi Brighenti, 2010, p. 27). Through a process of seeing and looking vision is enacted in the creation of the ‘subject,’ which is formed in relation to visibility (Mubi Brighenti, 2010, p. 27).

Social recognition is mediated by and between relations of power and perception. In the cases of social unrest and Black Lives Matter protest events discussed in this study, protest photography mediates the social recognition of Black resistance, mourning, and political subjectivity amongst diffused audiences. Considering photography’s ability to construct and erase through framing, audiences must negotiate the consequences of proliferating and
sensationalizing violence and trauma with the goal of obtaining and representing photographic truth. Thus, an examination of audience reception and interpretation of the visual imagery used to depict Black Lives Matter protest events and rebellions is necessary to gain a deeper understanding of the mediated effects of visual representations of social protest on perceptions, memories and cultural influences of Black freedom movements and political struggle.

Critical oppositional readings of the “#Ferguson in pictures”; “Dramatic Images from Baltimore”; “Black Lives Matter: A movement in photos”; and “In Pictures: A racial reckoning in America” archives exposed Black collective response to antiblack state violence through the prism of corporate news media institutional power that scripted visual narratives of Black protest that mediated the sociopolitical phenomenon of urban unrest and spontaneous rebellion through the hypervisualization of violence, mourning and trauma. The dominant narratives encapsulated in these archival projects (re)presented social protest as social dramas with the aid of protest photography that mediated visual encounters with racial conflict, racialized gendered violence, imaginings of social danger imposed by Black pathology and unsuppressed rage, myths of the dangerous Black male, and the commodification of Black trauma. “Shadow archives” (Sekula, 1989) also emerged providing a brief glimpse into the shadow population of white residents as counter protesters deputized by the state and immigrant business owners living in and/or near the community of social unrest. The notion of a “shadow archive,” defined by Sekula as a “generalized, all-inclusive archive,” reminds us that images situate individuals in relation to a social hierarchy (Sekula, 1989, p. 314). The protest photography within the archive produces race and further “works to discipline its subjects and its viewers into discrete class groups” (Raiford, 2011, pp. 11-12). Racial animosity between the shadow populations and the members of the local Black population engaged in demonstrations was not made readily visible, but the
image frames worked to (re)present these individuals as sympathetic victims of social unrest who are outsiders of the communities with interest only vested in protecting their personal safety, private property and financial investments. These news media platforms legitimized state power and continued the practice of framing the predominately white police presence as necessary for public safety. Ashley Howard (2017) offers a poignant reminder of the ways dominant media narratives “focus on the barbarity of popular violence” in such a way that allows the patterns of “cultural, state, political, gendered, racial, legal, and structural violence” that “always precedes instances of collective response” to be obscured. In doing so, whiteness and state power continue to prevail as benevolent savior and protector against Black rage. Social activism and performances of national solidarity and mourning are mediated as civic acts of social recognition. Necessitated by the mandates of multiculturalism, news media photography archives espoused racial reconciliation of the nation-state as organized and maintained under a white patriarchal dominate social order.

Dominant or preferred readings encoded in these archives perpetuate the seeing of police officers as civil servants, who risk their lives to protect and serve, providing an authoritative response to imminent threats of danger. Black death and dispossession are unfortunate results of a culture of pathology and personal failings. Black grievances toward racial inequality are the vestiges of bygone era of discrimination and social inequality that was addressed through civil rights legislation. The visual testimony of multicultural solidarity is proof that America has progressed. Black rage and not structural inequality threatens the beloved community.

A negotiated reading might challenge the state’s use of force as excessive and problematic. The viewer’s race, class, gender, and overall social positionality will influence this negotiation. The visual encounter with the image, itself, is another site where social location can
trouble and interrogate meaning through critiques of news media representation and bias as well as critiques of social actors and actions.

If the spectacle of mass media, as Guy Debord (1970) warns, does in fact mediate social relations, the visual (re)presentations of Black protest and political struggle rendered through the grammar of spectacle as featured in the contents of the photography albums further (re)mediates the social visibility and recognition of Black claims-making and political subjectivity within the Black Lives Matter era. Each visual encounter with antiblack violence ruptures and reopens unhealed psychic and emotional wounds. What then does it mean for the visual spectacle of Black death and dying to be a viral commodity? What type of society produces material culture(s) of Black death spectacle for social consumption? What does it mean for a society to mandate antiblack violence and the grief, pain and suffering it produces to be circulated as visual spectacles that are traded as commodities of media and culture industries? How do we decipher the pleasures of looking that occur concurrently with the traumas of (re)exposure to Black death and the infliction of antiblack violence onto Black bodies? In what ways does the ordering of these images create a hypervisualized Black victim that is denied social recognition or misrecognized by a voyeuristic and desensitized audience. What practices of looking do we adopt when each visual exposure triggers a traumatic memory? What then are the responsibilities of looking and whom do they belong to? What are the ethics of looking? I explored these questions with the focus group participants. The focus group discussion produced modes of Black witnessing that I call toward in a form of heteroglossia that comments on the visual encounter with modes of interpretation, critiques, and critical responses that emerged in themes of testimonial rooted in Black experiential knowledge.
4.2 Collective Action, Social Media, & Visual Counter Framing of The Movement for Black Lives

Social media channels were popular sources of information and offered opportunities to see how audience social actors engaged protest imagery to make sense of the uprisings in Ferguson, Baltimore, Minneapolis, and beyond. Social movement actors and those who posted in solidarity as a form of social media activism created their own collective action frames.

Social media and digital technology, including smartphones, proved to be instrumental as indigenous media resources that provided marginalized communities with platforms that extended performances of collective action performed in the streets through increased visibility and amplified voice within digital publics. The use of social media provided groups of social actors that included activists, community members, and allies of the Black Lives Matter movement with resources to create visual counter narratives that challenged traditional media’s hegemonic representation of Black lives and the rebellions in Ferguson, Baltimore, and Minneapolis.

Through the technical affordance of social media platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook, users were empowered with the ability to increase their social visibility and the social visibility of Black claims-making within the Black Lives Matter movement. Ashley Howard (2017) argues that “Black Lives Matter activists and allies employ social media as framing, tactical, and witnessing tools” that create “collective consciousness, both locally and globally” (pp. 120-121). Social media facilitated the emergence of a Black “digital counterpublic” capable of contesting dominant representation and abandoning the restraints of “respectability politics,” which was able to mobilize in solidarity both online and in the community of Ferguson (Hill, 2016, p. 287). Such digital counterpublics create space for
counternarrative discourses to flourish through the networked communication of a digitized Black public square (Brock, 2020). Social media as a communication channel emerged as a site of intervention during the episodes of unrest in Ferguson, Baltimore, and Minneapolis. Kate Hoyt (2019) contends that images indexically linked to the hashtag #HandsUpDontShoot operate as rhetorical devices through which multiple meanings emerge. Hoyt states that the “connective affordances” of the Twitter, which I concurrently extend to Instagram, social media platform “shape viewer’s experiences” with the aesthetic features of the hashtag imagetext post in such a way to “engender ethical witnessing” (Hoyt, 2019, pp. 104-105). The popularity of the hashtags “#HandsUpDon’tShoot,” “#ICan’tBreathe,” #BlackLivesMatter,” “#Ferguson,” “#FergusonUprising” and “#MichaelBrown,” “#Baltimore,” “#BaltimoreUprisings, and “#FreddieGray,” “#MinneapolisUprising,” and “#GeorgeFloyd” provide evidence of the ability of marginalized communities to harness viralness of social media to disseminate information, challenge narratives, and build social movements. Here, movements and social actors in solidarity with them were able to seize an image, as a rhetorical fragment, to create arguments that legitimized and fortified the urgency of social action through prognostics and diagnostic collective action frames. However, due to the voyeuristic gaze, the visuality of spectacle remains prevalent in social media and the proliferation of viral images featuring slain Black bodies continues to promote consumption aiding in increased commodification of Black trauma.

Visuality and hypervisuality remain issues for marginalized communities but this study revealed how the convergence of multimedia platforms, social media, and digital technology were used with photographic framing practices to create visual collection action frames that reconstructed imaged of Black resistance and political dissent into visual testimonial that challenged dominant narratives.
I examined the ways social actors utilized the visuality of protest photography in collective action visual frames. I was particularly interested in the visual counter narrative themes that emanated from the discursive hashtags referenced above. The textual discourses that accompanied the image was treated as a caption that further contextualized the meanings users encoded into the visual messages as imagetext post. In addition to the rendering the intertextual relationships between the imagetext post and the discursive hashtags visible, I set out to identify and understand the ways protest was visualized within the cultural frames of collective action by movement actors and to what ends protest photography served in communicating collective action demands. I selected 12 image posts from the Movement for Black Lives “M4BL” Instagram social media platform as well as 6 additional image posts made by social actors that utilized the previous mentioned hashtags to frame social action within the Ferguson, Baltimore, and Minneapolis protest events. The collective action frame sample (n=18) included 18 image posts in total.

I observed a variety of protest imagery presented in the form of injustice frames, human rights frames, memory frames, call to action frames, and counternarrative frames that are taken up and contested in social media communication as a form of public discourse. These images based social media posts extend the claims-making rhetorical arguments of performances of contentious politics. Social media users interacted with Black Lives Matter via the use of hashtags that shaped movement framing and meaning construction (Ince, Rojas, & Davis, 2017). Social media enabled movement actors and their allies to articulate expressions of political dissent, engage in claims-making, and perform acts of solidarity as an extension of social activism performed within the digital spaces of the public sphere.
Figures 51 and 52 are representative of the ways social movement actors used imagery from previous historical moments within the timeline of the Black freedom struggle. Social memory is mediated through the photographic (re)presentations of the 1965 Selma to Montgomery march and the quotidian expression of Black resistance performed within contentious claims-making of the 1967 Watts rebellion. The act of remembering evoked by the “M4BL” social media account is a political one. The social movement seized the historical image in service of contextualizing and locating current rebellions within the visual narrative of Black political struggle in the Civil Rights Movement and Black Power Movement eras. These image posts bolster the legitimacy of injustice framing. They historical image reproduces the stages of contention in these frames as visual testimonies that serve as evidence of the
continuities of antiblack state violence and structural violence as causes of Black resistance and rebellion. As Walter Benjamin (1973) observes, the still images seize the past and render it visible to be recognized and retrieved by future generations.

The mediated memories of histories of urban rebellion circulated through the visual juxtaposition of image frames of scenes of social unrest. Viewers encounter the so-called “riot” scene of Ferguson, Baltimore, and Minneapolis through the (re)presentations of 1960s struggles as harbingers of impending cycles of social unrest. The historical memory is called upon as a reminder of the incomplete status of a long Black freedom struggle. The urgency to regenerate Black rebellion is hastened by the increased visibility of antiblack violence, structural oppression and disposability mandated as a part of the carceral regime.

Figure 53 "#BlackLivesMatter" solidarity
Figure 54 "#BlackLivesMatter" solidarity

In Figure 53, the “#BlackLivesMatter” as a political call to action and cultural symbol performs the function of communicating movement solidarity as a transnational and diasporic conversation that extended beyond the imaginary boundaries of nation state. The mapping of the oppositional habitus of #BlackLivesMatter via the visual illustrated the global visibility of the protests and political demonstrations in solidarity with the antiracist social justice claims-making present in the media image events of protest as social dramas. In Figure 55, a Black nationalist paramilitary organization, the Not Fucking Around Coalition “NFAC,” participate in an armed demonstration near Stone Mountain State Park in Georgia, a public site steeped in the historical memory and legacy of southern Confederacy ensconced in the racist white supremacist ideologies of the Civil War era. The visual spectacle of Black people armed with automatic weapons and clad in paramilitary gear harkens back to the theatricality of Black Panther performances of militant resistance. This performance challenges the legitimacy of the state’s
monopoly of use of violence and produces a Black insurgent visuality that counter frames the discourses on non-violence as the only legible and appropriate form of Black claims-making. This image frame carries the fragmented rhetorical arguments in support of the training and mobilization of an armed force to protect and defend Black sovereignty.

In Figure 55 the social media user describes the scene of state violence in the context of liberation in struggles in the “Middle East” not “Middle America,” which brings viewers to consider what is the appropriate context for such violence to take place. Through the visual encounter remediated in the social media post, we have been transported into what resembles more of a war zone than that of a midwestern suburb in America. The night shots are particularly dramatic revealing an ominous danger as the light erupts through plumes of tear gas. Protestors
use shirts and bandanas to create makeshift masks in attempts to protect themselves. These images reveal the startling reality that no one was safe in Ferguson. The power of photography reproduces the protests via the spectacle of shock and awe. This is political dramaturgy being performed on American soil between fellow Americans. The visual image reveals the widening social chasm that appears ready to swallow us whole. Such graphic sites make protest photography ripe for consumption. They allow us to see the spectacle and experience it safely from behind our digital screens. The power of the “24 hour” news cycle ensures that these images are available to be replayed over and over on demand. While social media allows users to take the image from news media frames and reframe or otherwise counterframe the scene in such a way that structural and state violence are legible as projects of empire. Both traditional news media and social media exploit the viewer’s psychological desires to see more of the spectacle by providing continuous updates in live feed.

The image post in Figure 5 suggests that Americans are unaccustomed to seeing such forms of political dramaturgy on “American soil,” a point underscored by many who compared the events in Ferguson and beyond with the militarized state of Israeli occupation in Palestine. Via these connections, #Ferguson posts emerged as sites of reflection where we must once again encounter antiblack violence and return to reconcile the continuation of state-sanctioned oppression of Black bodies and reinforced suppression of agency and right to self-determination. In this context, the visuality of Black insurgency in Ferguson becomes a sign of the global struggle against oppression being waged by marginalized groups. In *Freedom Is A Constant Struggle: Ferguson, Palestine, and the Foundations of a Movement* (2016), activist and scholar Angela Davis calls on critical Black memory and gaze to place Ferguson in a global context in relation to the militarized police reaction to resistance stating “the militarization of police leads
us to think about Israel and the militarization of police there – if only the images of the police and not of demonstrators had been shown, one might assume that Ferguson was Gaza” (Davis, 2015, p. 14). Davis makes a critical reflection. What would it mean for state violence and use of force to be readily legible in this image? The practice of critical looking is required to make state violence and structural violence visible, when it seeks to conceal itself.

Movement actors shared protest imagery in collective action frames to mobilize support, spread awareness, and create digital activism campaigns that channeled counter narratives into online discourses. Social media posts can be read as a type of audience commentary on protest action and pervasive antiblackness. As a form of networked communication, social media platforms are a prime location to observe the shaping and evolution of public discourse on the efficacy of Black Lives Matter protest, race, policing and social justice. This study focused on the ways movement actors and allies used protest photography in collective action frames. The findings illustrated that movement actors utilized protest photography to construct social memories that visually connected protest events within the context of historical continuity of Black political struggle. Movement actors reframed state power to contest the legitimacy of state violence and link state violence to the (in)visibility of structural violence. Social actors also interrogated the visual representations of protest and engaged in critiques of the use of scenes of violence, property destruction, and scenes of looting used by news media to visually frame Black Lives Matter protest through a hypervisual, hypermediated protest paradigm. Social media users also critiqued the repetitious use of antiblack violence as affective triggers that remediate Black trauma in heinous practice that exploits Black pain and suffering for profit.
5 AUDIENCE RESPONSE TO VISUAL FRAMING OF 2014 FERGUSON, 2015 BALTIMORE, AND 2020 MINNEAPOLIS UPRISINGS

Can you be Black and look at This? - Elizabeth Alexander, 1994

To be a Negro in this country and to be relatively conscious is to be in
a rage almost all of the time. - James Baldwin, 1961

More than six years have passed since the city of Ferguson, Missouri erupted in protest following the shooting of Michael Brown. Since then, Black Americans and fellow citizens have witnessed a wave of protest as collective action in response to the repetitious terror of antiblack violence in the form of policing. Following the death of Michael Brown in 2014, Black Lives Matter protest and solidarity demonstrations proliferated across news media and social media channels. We return to these sites of resistance via the photographic image in search of meaning. What can an image tell us about what transpired on that tragic summer day in August or the spectacular events that transpired in the aftermath? How do we interpret or otherwise make sense of what we have seen? What is to be learned by revisiting and remembering the site(s)? What forms of redress does the documentary photograph, as artifact and evidence, offer viewers? These are the questions that confront viewers of protest photography archives such as the “Ferguson in Pictures” digital archive produced by the St. Louis Post Dispatch, which was awarded the 2015 Pulitzer Prize in breaking news photography for capturing “powerful images of the despair and anger in Ferguson, Mo” and “stunning photojournalism that served the community while informing the country” (The Pulitzer Prizes, 2015).

Staging the encounter.
I conducted four focus groups to discuss how the visual framing of social unrest in Ferguson, Baltimore, and Minneapolis protest events mediated encounters with antiblack violence and the histories of Black political struggle presented in the visual archives. In the following section, I draw on these discussions as a participant observer who speaks with and reads alongside the voices of a multigenerational participant audience of Black Americans who critique visual representation of protest in news media and social media framing of Black resistance and rebellion. The participant audience responses offer testimony to the effects of visual encounters with protest photography that mediates collective and social memory and triggers emotional response in the viewer. We, as members of a critical Black audience, encountered performances of Black resistance and mourning through the visual representations of protest in the public sphere. The role of protest photography as documentary evidence and cultural artifact is explored in relation to the ethics and politics of looking at antiblack violence.

Focus group participants were exposed to a slideshow of images, which included at least one of each of the primary scenes of action identified via content analysis of protest photography depicting social unrest in Ferguson, Baltimore, and Minneapolis protest events. The focus groups were conducted utilizing a researcher generated photo elicitation. I used the 18 images from the “Ferguson in Pictures” album with Focus Group 1. I selected 18 images from each of the subsequent online photography albums for presentation in Focus Group 2, Focus Group 3, and Focus Group 4, respectively. The image selection included photographic representations of each scene type as previously coded during content analysis. Each slideshow featured a balance selection of scenes of violence, mourning, and protest demonstrations. Participants’ responses were recorded and examined to answer the following research question: How do Black spectator-audience(s) interpret and respond to visual representations of Black resistance performed in
protest events? Critical discourse analysis of participant responses showed that the interpretive meanings of Black protest and resistance were constructed, negotiated and contested through a collective knowledge gained from a shared lived experience as racialized marginalized subjects. This interpretive framework was utilized in critical practices of Black spectatorship, which allowed participants to bear witness and give testimony via the photographic image. Through an analysis of these discussions, I explicate how memory and visuality shape audience response and initiated Black witnessing through the interpretive readings of protest photography used to frame Black urban rebellion and repertoires of Black protest performed during the Black Lives Matter era.

_Cue scene. Ready._

I assembled a gallery of 18 image frames into a slideshow. Each focus group had a its own slideshow presentation. The image gallery in each slideshow was selected from one of the four digital archives. I created a visual assemblage of scenes of violence, mourning, protest demonstration. I did not include any captions as I was interested in how the focus group participants would read the image. What words, feelings, actions would they associate with the scenes from Ferguson, Baltimore, Minneapolis? What memories would they share? I began the virtual group discussion by clicking through the image slideshow and I asked participants to create one-word descriptions to caption the photographs. The following statements are excerpts of witness testimony:

- Performative.
- Unity. Solidarity.
- Ironic. Confused.
- Suffering.
Causality. Casualty.
Struggle.
Hopeful.

With the aid of group discussion, we began to address how we process powerful images of anger and despair. We interrogated the visual representation. We testified to its uses and limitation. We troubled its circulation. We talked back to the visual message and its sender. As a community, we articulated a response. We witness and testify to what it means to be BLACK and look at This.

5.1 Critical Readings on Protest, Photography, & Performativity

5.1.1 Enactments of Critical Black Spectatorship: A Case of Audience Reception to Protest Photography

5.1.1.1 Act One: The Visual Encounter

When prompted via protest photography to recall their initial reactions to images of social unrest, participants in all of the focus groups expressed feelings of anger. However, several participants in Focus Group 3 and Focus Group 4 who identified as “Gen X” and “Gen Y” articulated feelings of shock and disbelief that acts of racial terror remained a common reoccurrence in the lives of Black people during a post-Civil Rights era. Discussions in Focus Group 3 and Focus Group 4 revealed that the study’s Black “Gen X” and “Gen Y” participants remained invested in electoral politics as a conduit of social change and many shared personal beliefs in the promise of progress.

The “Gen Z” participants in Focus Groups 1 and Focus Group 2 also expressed an investment in electoral politics as a means of producing social change. Yet the “Gen Z”
participants were more critical and expressed doubt in the narrative of racial progress. The election of Barack Obama, the nation’s first African American president, had not ushered the United States into a post-racial society as neoliberal rhetoric had once proclaimed and the shock wave of social unrest that began in Ferguson, 2014 reverberated through Baltimore, 2015 into a violent crescendo in Minneapolis and beyond in 2020 is evidence of the permanence of racism in our society (Ransby, 2018; Taylor, 2016). While still espousing a general belief in racial progress narratives, the study’s “Gen X,” “Gen Y” and “Gen Z” participants expressed frustration with continuities of racism and antiblack violence that erode the social condition of Black life in the twenty-first century.

Chelsea, 34: Here we go again. Every time a Black man is killed it takes me back to a different place. It definitely makes me feel some type of way as a Black individual. It is disheartening and it really brings up a lot of rage, pain, like just so much. You know. It’s a new century and we’re still dealing with the same stuff that we been feeling and dealing with.

Layla, 48: I think that we’re back…and this is something my grandparents who grew up in Mississippi experienced.

Dante, 22: I remember the first time I saw images of protest. I remember seeing the police with their dogs, firehouses, bloody individuals. I don’t even know what it was for or when it was. I was a child, maybe in middle school. After the Trump election, I went out to protest with my friends.

Shawna, 35: The imagery of Ferguson unrest resonates, and it definitely feels like history is repeating itself because those angles are very similar to what I saw in textbooks or on documentaries as a little girl.

Layla, 48: It makes me sad that in 2020, people have to sit and think about harassment based on race. It takes me back to a Civil Rights moment where peaceful protest turn chaotic because people are mad, you know, the police are mad or angry because you are taking a stand.

Jayna, 18: In a country that says we are better than this, but you say that every two weeks…makes me think it’s not true. It is not the case. We are not better. This is America.
In agreement with Chelsea and Layla’s assessments, participants stated that the images of unrest in the Black Lives Matter era triggered memories of other episodes of social unrest. Along with historical memories of Civil Rights struggles, the 1992 Los Angeles uprisings that followed the acquittal of four police officers in the brutal beating of motorist Rodney King was a collective memory shared amongst the participants. The 1992 Los Angeles rebellion was a moment of political socialization for these participants, who are all members of a post-Civil Rights generation. Black “Gen X” and “Gen Y” audiences came of age outside of the Civil Rights and Black Power movement struggles of the twentieth century. Black “Gen X” members, also referred to as the “Hip-Hop” generation, have been characterized as growing up during the “relatively apolitical generation of the 1970’s and 1980’s” (Jones, 1998, p. 2) era through which rap and hip-hop culture were conduits of cultural transmission for Black radical ideology.

James, 48: To be honest, when I saw Rodney King and everybody was rioting, well protesting first then rioting, I was like I want to be out there. I was in Korea at the time, so I really couldn’t do anything, but I was like fuck this. As I’ve gotten older, we see more protest and more riots, and nothing really comes out of it. We may need more immediate results. I think the time for marching has gradually gone away. I’m not saying we all need to adopt a Black Panther mentality. Marching and singing and praying brought us together but we need something else cause this shit ain’t stopped.

Shawna, 35: The first time I saw social response, probably was going back to Rodney King. Seeing LA respond, seeing it play out as a little girl on television. The city took a hit, but that imagery resonates. When I think about the Civil Rights movement, it resonates. When I see people out there like that, I automatically assume that it is coming from like the pain body, like a place of extreme hurt. I know it’s coming from a place of hope that things can be accomplished…but are there other ways that we can be working to affect the sort of change that you hope will come from the activity itself?

For James, the eldest Black male and “Gen X” participant, the visibility of Black resistance and rebellion during the Black Lives Matter era is linked to his memory of the Los Angeles uprisings and his desire to perform social action that effectuates change in the material reality of Black people. Shawna’s memory, too, is connected to seeing images of the LA
rebellion and protest imagery from 1960s struggles. The prosthetic memory of Civil Rights and Black Power movements flows through protest photography to younger generations, who were not present to witness but they carry a collective cultural memory of what it means to resist. This memory informs how they read scripts of social action performed in the Black Lives Matter era. The performances of resistance and repertoires of protest are directly linked with the learned cultural scripts of contentious politics passed from Civil Rights and Black Power movements into contemporary conflicts.

Among the study’s Black “Gen Z” participants, the Ferguson uprisings was a moment of political socialization. This was their Rodney King moment. Most of the “Gen Z” participants stated that they believed they were in middle school during the Ferguson uprisings. They struggled to find their memories, but they were able to articulate feeling outraged even if they didn’t have a language to express how they felt. Elizabeth Alexander (2020) refers to them as the “Trayvon Generation,” born in the last twenty-five years and bread on the visual encounters with antiblack violence and hate in cell phone videos and viral memes. They have been repeatedly exposed to antiblack racism embedded in the algorithm, what Ruha Benjamin refers to as the “coded exposure” of the “New Jim Code” (Benjamin R., 2019, p. 97). Ferguson, as a site of resistance, was an inflection point for this generation. Participants in Focus Group 2 and Focus Group 3 discussed how they took to social media to post and some of them took to the streets to protest. Black “Gen Y” participants also expressed how they became politically active in the wake of Michael Brown’s murder.

Teresa, 25: Those “Don’t Shoot” signs reminds me of being there (in Ferguson), being face to face with police who have military gear on. Walking by where Mike Brown passed and knowing it could be you.

Rasheeda, 22: We were standing in something we believed in. We were fighting back.
The visual encounter with scenes of violence and property destruction triggered social memory of prior episodes of social unrest and urban rebellion that occurred in response to structural inequality and antiblack state violence. In addition to triggering social memory, the visual encounter triggered an emotional response. As Chelsea lamented, visual encounters with scenes of antiblack violence and Black collective responses to racial injustice ruptured the consciousness of the participants and exposed the generational wounds shared by many Black Americans as manifestations of the afterlives of slavery.

Monica, 45: I look at her face and I know the story. So many times, this incident has happened. I see our pain and sorrow from all the way from slavery. Generations of pain.

Brandi, 27: I hate to see these kids having to protest for human rights. Kids should be able to just be kids, even though I know in a sense they can’t just be kids because they’re going to be dealing with institutional racism.

Stephanie, 22: I actually agree. Protesting is a response to trauma and you’re putting that energy around kids. It’s not safe for them to be out there. I just feel like Black kids are used to trauma.

Jasmin, 23: That one little dark-skinned Black girl that went viral…

Stephanie: You did not see white child at the Trump insurrection. Black people, we’re so used to trauma and I think that’s sad, and we shouldn’t be exposing our children to that so early.

Brandi, 27: I know that there is a responsibility to teach kids about racism and how this country is going to treat them…personally, it’s just dangerous for kids…

The visual encounter with Black pain and suffering in scenes of mourning was another emotional trigger for participants. The image of Black children protesting is a popular visual motif that bears psychological repercussions for these viewers. Black children are not visual props. They mourn and feel, too. The visualization of children protesting and mourning did not inspire hope in these participants. For these participants, the loss of childhood innocence is a traumatic experience rooted in white supremacy that robs Black children far too early and far too
often. What does it mean for Black children to bear witness, to have to bear witness in this way? As Brandi inferred, “it’s just dangerous” for Black kids. Here, lies the psychic wound exposed by the punctum of the image (Barthes, 1980). The wound reminds the stigmatic viewer of their vulnerability, of how it feels “to be a problem” (DuBois, 1903). We see and recognize the generational wounding concealed behind the veil. The unveiling of Black mourning ruptures, again.

To look at Black grief and grieving from one generation to the next as a perpetual loop, image after image and scene after scene, left some viewers feeling triggered with feelings of rage and anger. Yet, others expressed frustration, despair, hopelessness and feelings of desensitization. The protest photography found within digital archives revealed the historical continuity of antiblack terror and entrapped these viewers in a cycle of remediated trauma. Within the cycle, participants discussed the racialized gendered violence inflicted upon Black males as an ongoing experience with antiblack state violence, the perpetuation of structural inequality and the ongoing struggle for social justice.

Jayna, 18: It’s your people, every time it happens, you have to think about your family. You think about people close to you. What if it was you?

Shawna, 35: I think about my son. I hope and pray that I never have to experience this. That a city never has to come together in response to his death.

Phyllis, 45: It seemed like before I can truly process what happened, something else happened. And then there was another. I can’t remember them all in order, but you know, every time you turn around there was another incident involving young Black man and police. Before you could process one, there was another one, so I hate to say it, but eventually I almost start to become somewhat desensitized.

Derrick, 40: I’m getting numb to it. I remember Amadou Diallo. This been way too long.

Sidney, 22: I was so young doing Ferguson, but I remember. After George Floyd, I had to go back to therapy. It all takes a huge toll on you. Activism is a huge toll.
Rasheeda, 22: The media just jumble it all together. One after another and it’s dehumanizing. The death is a blur. These people, they didn’t want to be martyrs. They didn’t want to be reduced to a symbol.

Jayna, 18: Yeah, I have a brother and he is a big guy, but he wouldn’t hurt a fly. What if he is deemed as a threat one day? What if it was my brother? And I had to see him reduced to a meme or a headline.

Desiree, 30: It’s a balance between being desensitized, but actually being, like having real feelings and emotions about what’s going on.

James, 49: You know what happens? I think we get numb to shit because the shit happens so much more frequently than it did in the past. Maybe, we hear about it more. That’s the key. You hear about it more frequently than you did in the past. You start hearing the same story again and the same story keeps happening. You don’t know how to react to that shit anymore. But what we’re seeing right now. Right now, we’re seeing more females being killed than anything else. So, I’m like, what the fuck is happening.

5.1.1.2  *Act Two: Reading / Interpreting*

Encounters with images of protest are mediated experiences. The images from the “Ferguson in Pictures”; “Dramatic Images from Baltimore”; “Black Lives Matter: A movement in photos”; and “In Pictures: A racial reckoning in America” archives operate as forms of pictorial evidence of the mediated image events. As mediums of communication, photographs are embedded with meanings which are subject to interpretation, negotiation, and contestation between the social actors (performers) who produce them, who are represented in them, and audiences who view them. When encountering visual representations of protest in these archives, respondents expressed critical assessments of news media and the practices they use to frame protest.

Rasheeda, 22: The way they portray it on the news, there was not heart to it. They made it all like anarchy. Not like somebody lost their life. I’m desensitized to it.

Jayna, 18: I was in middle school during Ferguson, but I don’t remember seeing one good image. I went to google and typed in Ferguson, Missouri and it came up as Ferguson
riots. It was made out as a dangerous place. Even seven years later it is still portrayed negatively.

Shawna, 35: The visual representation, the composition of it, it always appears mobbish. It turns me off from wanting to participate just because of the nature of my work. If I view it in a negative light, I assume that my Caucasian counterparts would also. So, that negative space when you have those lines of people facing off, police in riot gear like you going to war with people who are unarmed. I don’t want to put myself in that situation. But then again, that’s the perception that the media may give us, too.

Carla, 18: A lot of the pictures showing the idea of “us versus them” with “them” being mostly people of the state.

Jayna, 18: The media plays a role in showing the ugly side of America, that isn’t shown enough. There are two America’s.

Jasmin, 23: The destruction, the anger is what sells, which is essentially exploitation of Black people.

Amy, 47: Black protest is criminalized and negatively portrayed.

Brandi, 27: I rather see images of us burning their shit down, not giving a fuck. I’m not going to keep sacrificing Black bodies, even in death, at the hopes they will give a fuck. They’re not going to. Burn it down.

Jasmin, 23: They don’t care. They only hear money.

Amy, 47: After George Floyd, after the summer of protest…I was ready to go burn some shit down myself.

Desiree, 30: I think my generation was ready to boycott with they money but the young people they just want to rage. They not thinking about consequences. They are enraged and after seeing what happened last summer, I’m enraged, too.

Jayna, 18: I don’t care about burning buildings, but I do care about destroying Black communities that will not be rebuilt.

Amy, 47: What happens when you burn down the neighborhood CVS pharmacy that carries all the “black disease” medicine?

Researcher: “Black diseases?”

Amy: All the diabetes. All the high blood pressure. Dialysis. All the diseases that Black people suffer from disproportionately.
Chelsea, 34: We burning down our own communities. They look at us like we stupid for burning down our own communities. They look at us like we savage, when we just trying to be heard but they ain’t listening.

Jasmin, 23: I don’t advocate burning down the local Mom and Pop, or whatever especially, if they Black owned. But I don’t give a damn about people running through Gucci.

Brandi, 27: Burn it all down, it’s trash.

Visual representations of Black people through negative portrayals in news and entertainment media is well documented. Historically, news and entertainment media have invested heavily in the perpetuation of notions of Black male criminality and Black cultural pathology. Visual images are routinely used to make “implicit visual associations” that prime racial stereotypes of Black people (Abraham & Appiah, 2006, p. 183). Participants’ readings of the “riot” frame indicate a critical awareness and double consciousness associated with the burdens of representation that inform Black people’s evaluations of how they see themselves when visualized in media and popular culture (Gibson & Zillman, 2000). Amy’s admonishment that “Black protest is criminalized” highlights the ways the participant audience brings their awareness and experience with visual encounters of antiblackness to bear in the reading of media representations of Black protest action. Desiree, who is 30, recounted her experience of “searching for unbiased news” that did not discuss Mike Brown’s alleged criminal past or Freddie Gray’s arrest. Phyllis, who is 45, stated that the media perpetuated the conflict as the “Black community versus white police officers” and expressed a lack of trust in the credibility of media reporting. Shawna recalled her experience of watching news outlets that “looped certain angles” and the need to assess “the jadedness of the news outlet.”

Dante, 22: The fire, the looting and riots is all they show. We know there are peaceful protests. What about the organizing that goes on? What other forms of protest are going on that are not visible.
Jayna, 18: Protest gets attention, but the real change is hard and done behind the scene. They never show that.

The participants extended their critiques beyond news media visual representation to consider the efficacy and ethicality of quotidian armed resistance and retaliation that is often associated with Black rebellion. A charred Wendy’s sits in the distance. Demolished police cars abandoned in the street. A CVS is engulfed in flames. These images are spectacular and disturbing to the viewer. Protest photography encapsulated urban conflagration that ravaged communities as it spread across the nation. What the image fails to capture is the structural violence that always precedes collective action. When structural violence and in many cases state violence are able to evade capture, they are able to evade criticism. However, the political dissent performed in the public sphere is made retrievable via the photographic image. Black peoples lived experience with structural inequality, systemic racism and state violence provides critical knowledge which must be applied to how audiences read and understand the quotidian practices of resistance performed by working-class people who hold grievances regarding their exploitation and oppression. Historically, these practices have included stealing time, slowing labor, and in some cases destroying portions of the structures, whether material, symbolic or imagined, that maintain their subjugated status. This practice has been characterized as illegal and outside of the acceptable realm of political action. Subsequently, it is deemed counterproductive to those invested in electoral politics and considered taboo among many sections of American society, including many members of Black middle-class communities.

The focus group participants, who predominately identified as middle class based on their socioeconomic status and education, performed negotiated readings of protest repertoires that used violence and destroyed property. In addition to negotiated readings of the visual representations, the focus group discussion revealed negotiated perceptions of protesters who
perform social action with the use of force. Participants’ comments on burning buildings are reflexive of debate and ongoing discourse regarding violent versus non-violent protest action. The comments revealed a certain level of acceptance in the use of violence as well as vocal hesitancy towards advocating its adoption as congruent and at times competing ideas expressed amongst participants. Participants comments are also informed by notions of respectability and conservatism. Black “Gen Y” and “Gen Z” participant comments suggested that post-Civil Rights generations are less beholden to respectability politics and show an embrace of the Black Lives Matter movement’s inclusive vision that insists liberation and equity for all Black lives.

Protesters are not the only social actors made visible within the encounter. The images also hold representations of police and acts of policing visible within the archive. Desiree stated that images of militarized police in confrontation with Ferguson residents “reinforced the negative perception” she held prior of police and dissuade her from wanting to participate in protest demonstrations. The following exchange offered insight into the ways Black people navigate interactions with police as a part of their daily lives, which is actively balanced against antiblack violence that is perpetuated by police as agents of the state. Criticisms of policing in Black communities are met with nuanced portrayals of police as civil servants. Black Lives Matter protest demonstrations have pushed “Defund the Police” into public discourse and thereby infused a radical abolitionist vision into twenty-first century contentious repertoires.

Desiree: We protest. Just to do the basic level human thing and say look you’re hurting us. We just want to be heard. We want to be seen. But if we are perceived as being out of line, we know what it is, the things they do to try to make us fear. The intimidation. And the media perpetuates it. So that we fear speaking out or having a voice or showing any form of emotion.

Layla: We need police. Let me just say that. I believe we need police, and we need that structure. I’m not antipolice. I think the police have a hard job. I know police officers. I have friends and family who are police and I know that they would never hurt anyone. I try to be objective.
Phyllis: You never get the whole story. But then I, I’m like does it even matter. I work in the legal field. I am around police. Every cop is not bad but when you see them brutalizing people, it’s like I know that they were trained to deescalate. This didn’t have to happen.

James: These cops’ man, they don’t give a fuck. They triggered and looking for a reason. Not all cops are bad. Not all white people are bad but where I’m from and how I was raised…we were taught to not trust them. To avoid.

Derrick: The cops don’t stop crime. You call them. They respond after the fact. It’s a waste. Then you call them and they might kill you. We need to stop calling police. We need to defund the police.

Layla: Defund the police? I don’t know how that works. Let me just be honest.

Camille, 50: If people understood the history of policing…this shit goes back to modernity. It’s a tradition of oppression that morphed from slavery, to the prison pipeline. My grandmother escaped the south and she told me about Jim Crow and all that. It’s not about one cop, two cops that are good or a couple bad ones. The system is designed to perpetuate antiblackness at all cost. The system is not broken. It is working. It is systematic oppression and the majority in power have no incentive or motivation to change. It works for them.

Desiree: Defund the police. Put those resources into our communities. Mental health workers and stuff like that.

Amy: After George Floyd, we have new language to even think about what it would mean to imagine something different. There is a problem with policing in Black communities.

In terms of the visual representations of protest performances and political actions presented through the photography archives, participants questioned the ethicality of visual framing practices that “sensationalized violence” by repeatedly highlighting graphic scenes and images. Particular concerns were raised in relation to how protest performances and the social activist-actors engaged in these performances were ultimately viewed in a negative light by white audiences. As Chelsea stated, “they already look at us like we’re savages and stupid for fucking up our own communities” in exasperation. The risks associated with Black protest carry significant mental, emotional, and physical weight for those social actors who take to the streets
and those who witness through the visual encounter. The decision to engage in non-violent direct action versus the decision to engage in modes of armed resistance both carry consequence. Chelsea, Layla, Desiree, Shawna, Phyllis and James each expressed an inability or hesitation to engage in protest action, even when they wanted to, due to restraints of their occupation.

Any form of Black resistance is met with force and suppression. Figure 1, also referred to as “The Patriot.” is iconic. The Black male figure embodies American iconography and patriotic identity in his dress. He is an inspiration for some and a warning for others. James remarked enthusiastically, “now that is what we need to see more of,” in response to the sight of a young Black man adorned in a t-shirt in the design of the American flag perform a radical act of resistance. The image, which has been dubbed “The Patriot,” features the man center frame in a defiant stance as he forcefully returned a flaming canister of tear gas that police had previously launched in his direction. According to James, “the time for marching is over” and “we need to see ourselves as powerful and achieving more immediate results.” There are nods of agreement amongst the “Gen X” and “Gen Y” participant members within Focus Group 4 but there is also trepidation and collective concern for the risk associated with such defiant direct action. Additionally, participants in Focus Group 1 and Focus Group 2, which were “Gen Y” and “Gen Z” members described “The Patriot” as an aspirational figure whose representation has become an iconic symbol of the Ferguson rebellion. The participants comments revealed the tension around an understanding that full citizenship rights are not equally bestowed to all citizens. Black people’s histories in the United States include the lived experience as 3/5th human, non-citizen, and as second-class citizens who are marginalized as racialized others. That this young Black man chooses to embody the national identity and perform Black resistance as an American patriot who fights back against the oppressive state is both celebrated by
participants and simultaneously read as ironic. The juxtaposition of symbolic iconography inscribed on the racialized gendered body revealed a tension around the meanings of patriotism and national identities.

Teresa, 25: That image was everywhere.

Researcher: How would you caption it?

Teresa, 25: I would definitely mention he’s wearing an American flag and someone behind him has his hands up. I would probably mention how he was mysteriously passed away.

James, 48: I love to see us, powerful like that. But I hate the results of it. When we see all these brothers and sisters that get hurt, and get locked up, and then have some shit on a record. I hate the number of brothers and sister that end up suffering from protesting, sometimes that shit is higher. That’s fucked up. You know, I’m saying I understand that you have to stand for something. You don’t stand for something; you’ll fall for anything. So, I understand what they are doing. And I applaud them for that without a shadow of a doubt.

Jasmin, 23: I see a Black male fighting back. In the Civil Rights movement, it was shown that they were passive.

Carla, 18: The flag stood out to me too. When there’s protest in our communities, we kinda reject the American flag because it seems like they, they being the right side, has kinda taken it as their own. Maybe he believes in the core American values.

James: He’s like fuck that. YOU Think You America. Fuck that, I’M AMERICA. A lot of Black men served in the military. A lot of Black people are conservative. Not conservative in like republican. There’s just a lot of conservatism that runs through the Black community, I think. I consider myself somewhat conservative. I wouldn’t burn the flag. I served. I know a lot of brothas who served, who feel like burning the flag is a little too far and would be uncomfortable with seeing that. But I like what this brotha is doing. He is all action. I like back in the day when brothas would be like, oh you fucking with them, oh, okay, if you gonna fuck around then what we need to do. Sometimes we need more immediate results.

Jayla, 18: In previous movements, African Americans and Black people were fighting back against oppressive systems but, it seemed to be within the confines of what society said was acceptable. He is rejecting what makes people comfortable. Not acting in a way to appease the majority of society to make them comfortable with us fighting for our rights.

Jayla: It’s a necessary discomfort that needs to happen. I feel.
The audience’s readings of protest as a form of political dramaturgy included analysis of performances of racialized gendered and national identities as well as critiques of the visual conflict staged between social actors. Participants also critiqued the performativity of solidarity action. The participants exhibited strong rebukes of solidarity actions that they deemed were inauthentic performances initiated by a supporting cast of social movement allies. Such criticism calls attention ongoing debate on the value and efficacy of social media activism as well as the role of white and non-Black POC allies within Black led movements.

Jayna, 18: The images of Ferguson were mostly Black people looting and rioting. George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery those protest over the summer were more diverse. When the media showed white people, it was typically in the day and everything was peaceful but as soon as it was night, they only showed Black people as violent.

Amy, 47: I was excited with Black Lives Matter. Seeing the youth feel it in their spirit. But then when the white people got involved all my excitement got dashed. Like, oh, okay, here we go again. Movement being coopted.

Jasmin, 23: Do y’all remember Black out Tuesday…and I was like what’s that gonna do?

Rasheeda, 22: Very performative…

Jasmin: Yeah, that’s what I was gonna say. More people posting little quotes and stuff and being like we in this together. But be from people you been known from middle school who said all this racist stuff. I’ve been posting since Ferguson, since middle school and it made me annoyed to see those kinds of post. Because it seemed kinda fake.

Rasheeda: Yeah, they make it to a trend. When it’s not. It’s people’s lives. They protesting to trend. They go down to the protest to take pictures. It’s an aesthetic.

Jasmin: Because it’s acceptable to be inclusive and care about other people, now.

Rasheeda: Like this been going on for centuries and I’m just now seeing people post…so, what was the turn up point for you? What was the time to be like…all right, NOW, I’m going to post something. George Floyd? Black people been dying.

Jayna: Posting raised fist as a snapchat emoji. Very performative acts but your words should mean something. There should be action with it.
Rasheeda: Meanwhile, but I saw some of the same folk was just posting racist stuff. Just posting blackface last Halloween. I called em out, too. It makes no sense.

Monica, 45: Some of them are posting just because they don’t want to look bad. They want it to look like they down and onboard with the movement.

Jasmin: Black lives are trendy now. We could have saved a lot of Black lives, if we were listening to people say Black Lives Matter.

Rasheeda: That’s exactly what I was about to say

Jayna: Yeah, I saw some of the same people who had been on my timeline talking about “All Lives Matter” and “Blue Lives.” First of all, there is no such thing as a “blue life.” The same people trying to justify Jan. 6.

Rasheeda: It’s a disconnect. It’s funny how they wanna call us looters and rioters. We see what they did. We know it could not have been us. But people will riot cause their favorite sports team won and they will go tear up downtown and it will be looked at like its nothing. We out here for our life and its looked at as this big negative thing.

Jayna: Yeah, people really were out here trying to compare what happened on Jan. 6th to Black Lives Matter, when there is no comparison. Black Lives Matter is on moral ground and we have moral outrage. Y’all were lied to and you mad cause you lost an election.

Jasmin: It’s entitlement really. They believe that this is there America and that the capital was theirs and they felt entitled to go and storm the capital. Black people and Black Lives Matter wouldn’t have made it up the steps.

These audience responses reflect the initiation of critical reading practices, which are deployed in the interpretive meaning work of frames, that are informed by the social positionality, individual and collective memories, cultural values, and lived experience of audience participants. The critical reading of media frames, movement frames, and social actors engaged in protest generates perceptions of collective identity, anger, and movement efficacy amongst participants, which must be processed and evaluated both individual and collectively as a part of the meaning making/shaping and signifying work performed in acts of critical spectatorship.
5.1.3 Act Three: Testifying

As I clicked through the digital photo galleries, the audience(s) attentively scanned each frame as if to take in the full weight of the political dramaturgy that came to be represented as the Ferguson, Baltimore, and Minneapolis uprisings. Our encounter with the visual spectacle of these social dramas was affectively charged. It triggers feeling and memory. We were hailed into the scene. We viewed one spectacular image after another with each one being as dramatic as the next. We came across an image of a protestor kneeling with their face covered in an attempt to protect their vulnerable eyes, lungs, and skin from the plumes of tear gas surrounding them. We looked together. Next, Black bodies with arms lifted to the night sky signifying “Hands up, Don’t Shoot” crowd the frame and overflow its edges. Next, a man holds a tattered cardboard sign which reads “Ferguson police have just executed my unarmed son.” We see together. Next, we encountered the same man with his armed draped around a tearful woman. We stop to discuss this iconic image, that of a mother in the midst of inconsolable grief, as members of the audience wipe away tears from their eyes. We felt together. These visual encounters produced emotional responses as well as opportunity for reflection. Through the process of looking, social recognition was shared between Black people who were then able to testify to their lived experience. You are the stigmatic. To be Black and look can be painful. It can be traumatic. The image that haunts, the one that wounds, it calls out and interpolates you. The stigmata of antiblackness and the violence(s) it produces rupture the psychic body. Your viewing is not merely the pain of others, but your own. This is not distanced spectatorship. We, the stigmatized, performed an embodied spectatorship.

Shawna: Sitting here, seeing these images, I am terrified because I am the mother of a Black boy and every day I pray. We just had to have a conversation the other day where he wanted to walk to Chik-fil-A for lunch and I had to say no. Because, he had a hoodie on and would be walking down West Paces Ferry pass million-dollar homes and someone
might think that he didn’t belong. Then, I’m upset with myself because I put him in that environment, but I can’t put him in the schools in the neighborhood because they are failing. So, what do you do?

Layla, who is also a mother was visibly shaken at this moment, chimed in stating that she can no longer see images like this in her day to day because they cause anxiety and rob her of joy.

Layla: Trayvon was a trigger for me. After the verdict, I was triggered, and I had a conversation with a white co-worker of mine who came to me crying and emotional, and I explained to her that I’m not emotional because this is my reality. I told her that I live this every day and she could never understand because at the end of the day I have to have a conversation with my son that she will never have to have with her son.

Amy: I am triggered by these scenes and the continued display of the horrific things happen to us. I don’t voluntarily watch them anymore. We are internalizing all of it. Last summer, I had so much anger and rage. I have no hope. I fear for my people. I had anxiety that tap danced on depression.

James: I try to teach my son how to handle interactions with the police, to be respectful, keep your hands out of your pockets cause’ they already looking at you suspect and these muthafuckers don’t give a fuck. Just like the cop the other day in Cobb county, who jumped out the car and stomped on that brother’s head. He could have paralyzed him; anything could have happened.” As a Black man, that shit make you mad as hell and emotional as fuck.

Chelsea: Every time we have this situation it’s always a white cop. I don’t think all cops are bad but it’s always a white cop and I think they need more sensitivity training. But when I look at Ferguson, I just feel like they trying to take us out cause we are really powerful, and they know that and are afraid of us. I am not a threat. I’m an empath. This stuff really be messing me up and I have to censor. I can’t just keep looking cause then I’m down a rabbit hole and then I’m all messed up.

Phyllis: I try to be objective and get the full story but why does this keep happening. I know there are ways to deescalate the situation and I don’t understand how this keeps happening, but we need to figure out how to go from a moment to a movement and get some real leadership behind it.

Desiree: All our leaders died forty years ago and my generation ready to boycott with their money but there is no leadership or direction. It really be having me in my emotions about what’s going on and acknowledging my own level of involvement. Do I care enough? And so, it’s a lot of guilt and shame.

Jayna, 18: Protest gets attention, but the real change is hard and done behind the scene.
Derrick: For me, the negative connotation from protest stems from it’s always reacting never proactive. We’re always reacting to somebody else. I don’t get a lot of motivation from that. I just want to live. Free. I want to see more black people, everywhere, doing everything on our own terms.

Camille: This is what made me want to see about what else was there beyond the African American experience in the U.S. Antiblackness is everywhere but, I just could not stomach anymore.

Nikki: Protest brings awareness. Somebody along the way always benefits from the work that someone else put in. We benefit from all that happened generations past from our parents and grandparents that put in the time and made the sacrifices, including their lives sometimes. So that their grandchildren and great grandchildren can do what we are doing right now. Educated. Sitting having a conversation and speaking freely. ..and I’m from Mississippi. I never thought in my lifetime that I would see that flag come down. That a confederate flag would not be the state flag…and sadly, I feel like it took George Floyd dying for that flag to come down.

There is also power in the look. To be Black and return the gaze is to embody a critical looking. There is power in remembering. To be Black and choose to bear witness is to dare to look, to remember and to respond. We responded. We testified to our lived experience, our shared memories, our fears and anxieties. We remembered the injustice. We shed tears and released frustrations. The process of witnessing was now completed.

5.1.2 Process Themes of Critical Spectatorship

5.1.2.1 Acts of Bearing Witness

The photography archives crystallized and represented the uprisings as sites of mourning and sites of commemoration of Black political struggles. The photographic images mediated protest as a performative act of political dissent. Photography is implicated in the making and performing of identity. These visual testimonies operate as a mode of documenting the event for retrieval and reuse by future generations. In this sense, protest photography from Black rebellions operates as a type of rejoinder. Black death and dying is interstitial and antiblack violence “situates Black bodies as matter/elemental media necessary for
the materialization of Western (White) man” (Towns, 2018). The act of bearing witness to the encounter of racial terror and violence is a radical act of agency, which speaks truth to power and gives voice to those who have been marginalized and silenced through systemic oppression. In the audience accounts of bearing witness, the process of remembering previous injustice becomes a political act of second-witnessing.

During this stage, critical Black memory is evoked through looking and the recalling of memories of the Civil Rights Movement, the murder of Emmitt Till, and the beating of Rodney King serve as reminders of the prevalence of institutional racism and systemic violence. Those who perform acts of bearing witness through the retrieval of memory mandate that society does not forget the atrocities that have occurred. Remembering and forgetting are political acts. Re-membering the lives lost also symbolically reconstitutes the Black community as a collective body, which has gathered to honor and mourn the loss of life through ritual. Remembering as connected to ritual practices of mourning are rooted within the diasporic practices of elaborate funerary, which resist against forgetting and the disposability of Black lives (Saunders, 2016).

5.1.2.2 Acts of Critical Reading/Interpretive Meaning Construction

The symbols, signs, and embodied performance of resistance are encoded with meanings, which are communicated to audiences through visual representation. Black spectator-audiences have developed critical reading practices in response to being objectified and exposed to racist stereotypes, degrading tropes, and otherwise negative depictions of blackness in dominant media and popular culture. The spectator-audience’s responses to media frames and movement frames of protest reflect expressions of criticality and double consciousness. Critical readings are informed by social
positionality, identity, cultural belonging, values, social norms, memories, and
the particular racialized and gendered lived experience of Black audience-
spectators. The audience is consciously aware of media bias and the potentiality of Black
suffering being ignored, dismissed, invalidated, pathologized, or mischaracterized within
dominant media portrayals and thus create and interpret frames through negotiated and
oppositional reading practices.

5.1.2.3 Acts of Processing Emotion

Along with a plethora of contested meaning and memories, images also carry emotional
affect. A recurring theme in participant responses is related to feelings of anger, helplessness,
anxiety, fear, shame, pain, disbelief. Respondents report feeling charged, triggered by exposure
to images of violence being inflicted upon Black bodies. Chelsea, who describes herself as “very
empathetic,” stated that she had to censor her exposure to news reporting and certain films
depicting the horrors of slavery because the experience is traumatic. James, Shawna, and Layla
agreed with the sentiment of feeling traumatized by racial terror. Multiple participants noted
that increased media exposure often left them feeling numb and desensitized because before they
were able to fully process what had occurred, another event of racial terror had taken over the
news cycle.

5.1.2.4 Acts of Evaluating Perceptions and Attitude

Through the process of reading image/text frames and constructing, negotiating, or
contesting meanings of the representations, respondents generate perceptions of the political
performance of protest and the social actors who participate in the dramaturgical scene. These
perceptions are heavily influenced by the framing practices and the efficacy of frame
resonance. Since perceptions are generating through the act of reading/interpreting and
constructing meaning, they are also informed by the same factors related to social positionality and identity as well as manifestations of double consciousness. Black spectatorship, like the photographic image, is polyphonic. What it means to look and what we see, when we look is never fixed as the meanings inscribed in visuality are always in flux. In this regard, Black spectatorship plays a vital role in Black self-efficacy, which subsequently extends to movement efficacy.

5.1.2.5 Acts of Reconciliation / Mitigation / Redress / Retelling

As reflected in the participants’ responses, visual encounters with social unrest can be traumatic and emotional experiences. The processes of critically engaging, reading, and interpreting the meanings of protest photography and the performative political act they signify facilitates assessment of efficacy and evaluation of the benefits, costs, and risks associated with this mode of political action. Participants expressed a need to censor their exposure as a mitigation tactic to limit feelings of anxiety and desensitization. Chelsea, Layla, and Phyllis acknowledged the need to “stop looking at some point,” which reflects agency in the form of refusal through censoring as self-care. While Layla and Sharon both expressed critical views of protest demonstrators and questioned the efficacy of protest movements to bring about change in Black communities, both women viewed the Ferguson uprisings as a teaching moment for their adolescent sons. Ultimately, participants had to reconcile their feelings, perceptions, and knowledge of the events with the reality of their lived experiences. This performance of agency reflects a practice of reconciliation which is manifested in various ways. In this act, participant-spectators take meanings generated through the encounter, reframing and reusing them when and how they feel it is most appropriate or useful. The retelling is a witness testimonial that passes on crucial information and tools for survival for the next generation repeating a cycle that had
previously been enacted through the participants’ parents and grandparents witnessing and testifying to how they survived.

5.1.3 Discussion

Through focus group discussions, participants decoded and constructed new meanings of protest and resistance that are embedded within discourses on race, gender, national identities. Critical discourse analysis of audience reception illustrated the process themes the participants initiated in their critical reading practices. Participants relied on critical Black memory as a form of historical critique that enabled a critical looking practice. Through enactments of critical Black spectatorship, focus group participants were able to view contemporary protest photography in news media and collective action frames and situate their meanings within the historical, cultural, and political contexts of their production. Further, critical spectatorship enabled participant analysis of visual representations of Black protest and political dissent in the Black Lives Matter era. Participants performed agency through their reading and reframing of protest performance and the social actors involved in contentious politics. Participants dominant, negotiated, and oppositional readings were informed by their social location and identities as members of Black, predominately middle-class communities. The standpoints of Black “Gen X,” “Gen Y,” and “Gen Z” participants center the lived experience of Black American men and women with antiblackness and structural violence in U.S. society. Discourses of audience response yielded situated knowledge about the ways power and inequality shape Black social movements, protest actions, performances of resistance, and their visual representations. Following an analysis of participant comments the following discursive themes of audience reception emerged.
5.1.4 Audience Response as Counternarrative Discourse

5.1.4.1 Race, Resistance, and Visual Representation

The visual representation of protest influences perceptions. Protest as a form of contentious politics is a longstanding practice that has produced a well-documented visual archive within the histories of Black political struggle in the United States. The photographic image is a vital tool in the claims-making repertoires of social actors. Photography extends the visibility of protest movements and disperses it throughout the public sphere. Photography has always played a prominent role in how we, as a society, see race and understand racial difference. The spectator-participants identified how the visual representation of Black resistance and political dissent found within protest photography worked to reinforce negative stereotypes of Black criminality and cultural pathology. Participants stated that young Black males, in particular, were frequently visualized as perpetrators of violence and property destruction, which was viewed as problematic. Black women’s resistance and leadership was visible and legible within the photography archives. Participants expressed criticism of media practices that sensationalized protest violence. The racialization of Black-led protest movements requires an analysis of the ways Black social actors are visually represented in media. The presence of a visual protest paradigm amplified the (re)presentations of “riot” frames that included spectacular images of burning buildings and Black people “looting” goods. Participants indicated that news media frames frequently (re)present protest as a racialized gendered conflict between Black communities and the police. Participants read police violence as excessive and as a form of intimidation.

Participants expressed negotiated readings of visual representations of violence, armed-self-defense, and property destruction employed by Black social actors. Participants expressed
collective identity and solidarity with notions of fighting back or engaging in forms of active resistance. Participants contrasted the active resistance of Black Lives Matter imagery with what several identified as the passive resistance of Civil Rights imagery. This observation suggests that images of active resistance are influential in Black self-efficacy, which also influences how Black spectators evaluate movement efficacy.

Participants identified a shift in media representation of Black Lives Matter that is noteworthy. According to spectator witness accounts, the image of the Black Lives Matter movement shifted from primarily Black representation to representations of multiracial crowds and white people as allies. Participants stated that following the murder of George Floyd and the unrest in Minneapolis news media and social media channels featured images that showed diverse participation. Multiple participants expressed confusion and distrust of white and non-Black POC on the front lines or receiving heightened visibility in a Black-led movement.

5.1.4.2 Performativity, Visibility, and Social Recognition

In conjunction with critiques of the visual representation of race and social action in Black Lives Matter protest events, participants critiqued the visual representation of solidarity actors and actions. Participants discussed fears of the Black Lives Matter movement being coopted by individuals and corporations with ulterior motives. Participants stated that they had witnessed people who routinely made racist remarks perform embodied solidarity. According to these witness-spectators, solidarity actors used the cultural symbols and scripts associated with the movement such as “taking a knee” or raised fist as aesthetics to display as a part of their digital activism. Participants decried this behavior as fake and inauthentic. Black “Gen Z” participants, who are digital natives, were particularly upset that many of their white peers had previously posted racist remarks or support for “All Lives/Blue Lives Matter” counterprotest and
then began posting performative acts of solidarity following the Minneapolis uprisings in the wake of George Floyd’s murder.

Black “Gen X” and Black Millennial participants expressed similar disapproval on the solidarity performances of police who posed for pictures taking a knee. This visual motif is widely visible in the “In Pictures: A racial reckoning in America” digital archive. The participants argued that Black people are protesting for their lives, not for likes. The politics of visibility mediate the relationship between protest and social recognition. Brighenti (2010) argues that social visibility is orchestrated through aesthetics and politics. The social relationships that produce recognition are mediated by perception and power that can misrecognize or deny recognition entirely. Herein lies the frustration expressed by many of the participants who lamented a desire to be seen and heard by dominant society. Such a demand acquiesces to the logics of white superiority and further legitimizes racial hierarchy. This same power, to define and control perception, orchestrates the cooptation and delegitimization of Black insurgency. When viewed in relation to the cooptation of Black Power aesthetics, the participants desire to protect or otherwise control the image of Black Lives Matter is informed by history. However, digital technology makes such a desire unlikely.

5.1.4.3 Visuality, Protest and Mourning

The visibility of Black Lives Matter protest as image events has contributed to the circulation of political discourse and movement culture to diffused audiences. As participants noted, the visibility of these protests has increased public awareness to the issue of over policing and police brutality in Black communities. The spectacular image of militarized police occupation in Ferguson became the backdrop of a global Movement for Black Lives. Where there is oppression, there is resistance. Following Ferguson, a new generation of Black youth
became politically socialized and would continue to mobilize from 2014 through 2020 in response to antiblack state violence. The visuality of protest photography extended the political theater into the homes and social media feeds of a global audience. Black spectator-participants were interpolated into the scenes of protest and mourning in Ferguson, Baltimore, and Minneapolis protest events as social dramas. The embodied and communal experience of Black spectatorship initiated a collective mourning and grieving practice, which itself is a political labor enacted through the visual encounter.

5.1.4.4 Visuality, Memory and Remediated Trauma

The circulation of protest photography in traditional news media and social media crystallized social memory of uprisings and rebellions. Participants expressed anxiety, anger, and desensitization from repeated exposures to antiblack violence within the photographic image. Additionally, protest photography produced emotional responses in the viewers. Participants reported feeling triggered, suffering from numbness and depression due to prolonged exposure to images of social unrest in response to the extrajudicial killings of Black men and women.

Exposure to protest imagery from the Ferguson, Baltimore, and Minneapolis uprisings triggered memories of previous political struggles and prior rebellion. Participants reported anger and frustration seeing images of protesters being abused by police. Visual representations of Black children engaged in protest was also identified as a trigger amongst participants. Participants discussed the need for censoring and self-regulation to guard against over-exposure to the trauma of protesting. Participants were critical of what they described as the martyring of victims of police violence. Participants argued that news media and movement actors use images of the victims in an exploitative manner that commoditizes Black pain and suffering to generate profit.
5.1.4.5  *Black memory, Testimony and Witnessing*

Visual encounters with Black protest in news media, social media, and popular culture are impactful, in part because they dramatize human struggle through the spectacle of Black pain and suffering. The Black body, rendered as “flesh” (Spillers, 1987), stands in as the site of conflict through which the national trauma and social anxiety are excised from the social body and inscribed onto the Black body. In an antiblack society, Black suffering is required as a public act that (re)inscribes social identity. The visual testimony is found in lynching photography, protest photography, police worn body cameras, civilian cell phone video recording, and other apparatus of state surveillance. If, the beating, brutalization and lynching of Black bodies as public spectacle is read as a ritual of national flagellation, then what role are Black viewers being made to participate within these “scenes of subjection” (Hartman, 1997). What does it mean to be Black and look? More precisely, what type of looking are Black viewers asked to perform when confronting the visual record of antiblack violence bound by generational memories of Black trauma. Visual content analysis of image frames illustrated patterns of visual representation found in media and movement frames that sensationalized violence and mourning in the process of documenting and preserving a visual history of American social unrest in the twenty-first century. Institutional power constructs the dominant historical narrative and its visual archives. This is important because much of what we understand about race and the experience of racialized subjects is rooted in the visual domain, which in Western society is dominated by white imaginations and racist ideologies. As illustrated by content analysis of news media and collective action framing of Black protest, antiblack violence is embedded in the visuality of Black resistance. This reality fixes the visual encounter with Black insurgency as a temporal experience that is historically and contemporaneously entangled with the perpetuation
of oppression, structural inequality, and antiblack violence by the state. To be a Black spectator and take on the responsibility of looking is to weaponize the gaze.

Photography archives mediate the visual encounter with protest and enable the viewer of the visual narrative to derive meaning from the photographic representations of Black protest and spontaneous rebellion as well as the histories of political struggle and performances of resistance signified by the image. The viewer, as an audience member, performs agency through their engagement with the visual encounter. Here, at the level of audiencing, the meaning of image frames and the discursive narratives they articulate, is read, critiqued, negotiated with and contested through active or passive modes of spectatorship. The audience interpretations of dominant, negotiated, and oppositional readings are subsequently disseminated through mediated channels of public discourse as observed in the collective action frames circulated in social media.

The findings suggest that Black spectator-audiences engage, interpret, and process images/imaginings of protest and social unrest as resistance that responds to crisis in Black communities. The participant-audience’s responses reveal that meaning is derived and filtered through the lens of our collective experiences of surviving racial terror and attending to the trauma of the afterlives of slavery, which creates the psychological and social conditioning that prescribes and mandates the use of “extra layers of care,” as described by Phyllis, for our continued survival. Raiford (2011) describes Black spectatorship “as the modes and paths by which black viewers navigate a hostile representational terrain structured in dominance” (p. 49). These techniques, technologies, strategies, and tactics are subsequently preserved and retransmitted through witnessing, remembering, and retelling through testimony to future generations. This critical Black spectatorship endeavors toward self-determination. Critical
Black spectatorship talks back to and critiques the dominant narrative and its visual archives. In this case, critical Black spectatorship intervenes in the archival project and interrogates the gaps, excesses, and silences that it attempts to conceal. This is a praxis of reconnaissance and retrieval that is rooted in a Black radical tradition. Critical Black spectatorship, in this context, ushers towards Black memory and orality as alternative archives of knowledge.

The processes of witnessing, reading, and testifying reduces the distance between passive viewers and incorporates the participant-spectator in active forms of meaning making that operates in conjunction with signifying work of meaning construction of collective action frames, described by Benford and Snow (2000) as a “schemata of interpretation” that work to simplify the world and are “intended to mobilize potential adherents and constituents, to garner bystander support, and demobilize antagonists” (Benford & Snow, 2000). An understanding of the processes of witnessing, reading, and testifying as a schema of interpretation reinforces the agency and importance of participant-spectator witnesses as social actors. Applying the spectator-witness conceptual schema to this study’s central research question elucidates how Black “Gen X” and “Gen Y” spectator-witnesses interpreted meanings of the Ferguson protests events through critical analysis of media framing which interrogates dominant reporting strategies and practices that remediate Black death and trauma as spectacle. This conceptual schema also illustrates how the spectator-witnesses interpreted meanings through association with other axial events such as the Rodney King beating and the subsequent rebellion that consumed Los Angeles in 1992 following the acquittal of the police officers who were captured on home video brutalizing King in a mediated account of racial terror enacted by the state. The conceptual schema highlights how cultural memory operates in and flows through the processes of witnesses, reading, and testifying, which in turn aid in the circulation of cultural
memory through production and reproduction of knowledge and memory as mechanisms of survival. In the process of testifying, spectator-witnesses reconcile the interpreted meanings with their lived experience and appropriate and reuse these meanings in their performances of resistance, resilience, refusal.

From the active spectator-witness position, Black “Gen X,” “Gen Y,” and “Gen Z” audiences engaged with protest as political performance within expressive visual and material cultures of Black resistance. The audience’s encounter with protest was mediated by photography as an axial event. As performative documents, protest photography transmitted a communicative embodiment of Black political voice and radical practice of political dissent. The findings illustrate that the role of active-spectator witnessing is a subject position where agency is embodied and performed through the act of critical looking, accessing, evaluating, remembering, retelling, and reusing experiences and encounters of racial terror mediated as crisis and disaster within black communities. The performance of this role generates and transmits knowledge, strategies, and tactics of survival which are passed down through cultural memory as generational inheritance.

Enacting the role of spectator-witness facilitates an emancipatory performance of what Christina Sharpe (2016) refers to as “wake work,” which offers radical reading/reframing of acts of resilience, resistance, and refusal present in Black responses to racial terror mediated as crisis in our communities. Assuming this agential position requires Black audiences to engage in critical looking which reduces the distance between audience, actor-participant, and event as opposed to passive viewership. This process of witnessing cultivates what Courtney Baker (2015) refers to as an ethical practice of “humane insight,” which mandates that “we who look” at the pain, death, and suffering of others must move beyond a voyeuristic gaze into an “ethics-
based” looking that recognizes and responds to the Black body in peril in order to restore
humanity to the victims of antiblack violence (Baker, 2015, p. 5). From the active spectator-
witness position, audience members are able to develop and deploy ethical looking practices that
utilize critical media literacy and critical memory to provide historical critiques and
counternarratives that have the potential to produce new Black liberationist discourses and
strategies.

Modes of Black looking, remembering, and retelling construct alternate archives of
knowing and experience, which are vital components in the process of bearing witness. Black
witnessing, in turn, plays a crucial role in advancing the Black radical tradition as each
generation “assembles the data of its experiences into an ideology of liberation” (Robinson C. ,
2000, p. 317). Standpoint theory is a valuable resource in terms of dealing with “historically
shared, group-based experiences” (Collins, 1997, p. 375). Black witness testimony is fertile
ground from which scholars are able to harvest the situated knowledge gained through Black folks’ experiences with antiblackness, structural violence, and systemic inequality. Critical race
theory underscores the spectator-witness as an important subject position in power struggles for
visibility and legibility due to its generative capacity to produce counternarratives that dispute
hegemonic representations found in mass media. In a hyper-
mediated society, images matter. The war over representation is more than simply
symbolic because at first strike we are attacked by sight. If this case study is any indication of the
power of visuality in political struggles, Black insurgent visuality must be weaponized. Those
who choose to bear witness, to look, to remember are the first line of defense.
6 CONCLUSION

Protest photography as a form of social documentary plays an important role in how societies understand the sociopolitical phenomenon of protest. Empowered by its communicative and cultural affordances as documentary evidence and artifact, photography shapes how protest is represented, remembered, and understood by audiences. In a hypervisual, hypermediated society, protest photography is particularly salient and can be a powerful tool for movements and repressive regimes. The proliferation of protest movements globally underscores the need for scholarly attention to examine the ways images are used to represent social action and demands for social change.

Photography has historically played an instrumental role in Black movements and freedom struggles. The photographic image continues to mediate public perception and understanding of Black protest and Black-led social movements. The hypervisibility of Black Lives Matter, as a global movement, has produced an expansive archive of visual documentation of Black resistance and political dissent in the twenty-first century. These visual documents offer evidence to the continuity of Black struggle against structural inequality, racial injustice, and antiblack violence. Black claims-making, however, is delegitimized through racist visual grammar and media bias. The perpetuation of anti-blackness through visual representation is historically entangled in the project of creating and maintaining racial social hierarchies of domination and control.

The study was guided by the following research questions: 1) How is Black resistance and political dissent visually represented in the framing of protest events? 2) How do social actors utilize protest photography as a mnemonic device to (counter)frame Black political
struggle in the Black Lives Matter era? 3) How do Black spectator-audience(s) interpret and respond to visual representations of Black resistance performed in protest events?

In reference to answering research question 1, the study examined protest photography from the “Ferguson in Pictures,” “Dramatic Images from Baltimore,” “Black Lives Matter: A movement in photos,” and “In Pictures: A racial reckoning in America” digital archives. The photography reproduced performances of Black resistance and political dissent through visual representations of protesters engaged in contentious politics. Embodied acts of resistance are visible in forms of violent and non-violent direct action. The findings of visual content analysis revealed that news media frames primarily represented Black resistance and political dissent via visual performances of contentious politics that included spectacular scenes of violence, contentious demonstrations, property destruction and looting, public mourning rituals. The Ferguson and Baltimore rebellions are episodically framed through the “Ferguson in Pictures” and “Dramatic Images from Baltimore,” respectively. “Ferguson in Pictures” made Black resistance against a militarized police force visible through representations of enactments “Hands Up, Don’t Shoot,” direct confrontations with police, and acts of armed self-defense. Public vigils and rituals of mourning were most visible within the “Ferguson in Pictures” archive in comparison to the other three digital albums. The “Dramatic Images from Baltimore” represented Black resistance as rebellion that produced destruction and gave way to acts of looting and social disorder. Scenes of public mourning were less visible but acts of solidarity between protest demonstrators and police was a reoccurring theme that emerged within the visual representation.
The “Black Lives Matter: A movement in photos” and the “In Pictures: A racial reckoning in America” digital albums thematically framed the Black Lives Matter movement through visual depictions of Black resistance in the form of embodied performances and contentious demonstrations that included protest marches, rallies, and die-ins. Multiracial crowds were highly visible as coalitions of allies took to the streets to demonstrate in solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement. The “In Pictures: A racial reckoning in America” album also included visual (re)presentations of the Minneapolis uprisings that featured spectacular scenes of property destruction caused by violent fires. The fire ravaged built environment became the misc-en-scéne. Images from the “In Pictures” archive present the Minneapolis uprisings and the national wave of protest demonstrations through a lens of racial solidarity. While the efficacy of symbolic actions of resistance is debated among the study’s participant audience members, the imagery of solidarity presented in the “In Pictures” archive offers a glimpse of multiracial coalition that is more salient than mere performative gesturing as Black, white, and other non-Black POC community members place their bodies in perilous positions to actively demonstrate against police brutality and antiblack state violence. Additionally, the “In Pictures” archive is the only album that shows non-Black victims of police force and state violence.

Previous research indicated that news media widely and liberally applied a protest paradigm to delegitimize Black protest and claims-making. This study’s findings illustrate that the presence of a visual protest paradigm that undergirds the frame selection, sequencing, and amplification processes used by news media to visually represent Black Lives Matter protest events through image frames of violence and mourning. In conversation with critical media studies, communication studies, and social movement studies, this research study elucidates the ways news media and social movement actors utilized protest imagery to frame Black resistance
and political dissent in the Black Lives Matter era. The visuality associated with the protest paradigm substantiates the need for more in-depth investigation into the ways the visual representation of protest operates as a visual discourse that can be utilized to delegitimize protest as social action.

The media’s framing practice influence public discourse through its role of agenda setting, which ultimately has social implications on audience perceptions of Black Lives Matter social justice claims-making and political demands. Visual content analysis of protest photography digital archives reveals the hypervisualization of violence, protest, and mourning as public spectacles of social drama performed during episodes of social unrest staged within the political street theater of urban rebellion. The dominant media framing of Black Lives Matter protest events uses protest photography to construct hegemonic narratives social protest that mediate visual encounters with themes of racial conflict, racialized gendered violence, imaginings of social danger imposed by Black pathology and unsuppressed rage, myths of the dangerous Black male, and the commodification of Black trauma.

News media remain a primary source for information that plays an active role in creating social memory of protest events. In reference to answering research question 2, the findings revealed that both news media and social movement actors utilized the technological and cultural affordances of photography as a mnemonic device to situate Black Lives Matter protests within the histories of Civil Rights and Black Power era struggles. The photographic document carried the social memories of previous movements as the forms of visual representations depicted modes of resistance within the repertoires of a Black protest tradition as reoccurring visual motifs of Black political struggle. Social actors did not have to explicitly link Black Lives Matter
protest events to historical rebellions or political demonstrations for the participant members of the focus group discussion to make mental connections with their shared memories of visual encounters with spontaneous rebellions and the state’s use of force to suppress active resistance.

The visual narratives of Black protest in the Black Lives Matter era are consistent with the media’s portrayal of 1960s era political turmoil. These visual narratives are in conversation with the hegemonic historical narratives of Black political struggle during the Civil Rights Movement and Black Power Movement. In fact, this study’s findings illustrated that news media and collective action frames actively used protest photography to create visual juxtapositions between Black Lives Matter protest events and 1960s political struggles. News media frames relied on the visual spectacle of violence, protest, and mourning to construct social memories of the Ferguson, Baltimore, and Minneapolis uprisings through the selection, amplification, and circulation of a relatively fixed set of representations.

The collective action frames analyzed in this study actively utilized protest photography to produce counter memories that movement actors and supporters used to extend prognostic, diagnostic and motivational claims that pushed awareness of political messages of dissent into public discourse as forms of counternarrative. Social media became a site where meanings and memories of Black protest were actively contested. The technological affordance of the Instagram social media platform allowed social movement actors and other social media users to disrupt hegemonic narratives of Black protest and resistance through the creation of discursive image text posts indexically linked to hashtags. Imagery of protest demonstrations was used in collective action frames to mobilize supporters, raise awareness, legitimize movement actors and actions, challenge the legitimacy of the state’s power and use of force, and gain public support.
Collective action frames (re)constructed and remixed protest photography from sites of rebellion to (re)contextualize contemporary waves of Black protest within the historical continuity of a long Black freedom struggle.

Because photography is polysemic, media actors, movement actors, and government officials can and often do use the same images to contest meanings and construct rhetorical arguments. The study reinforces the importance of applications of extending critical analysis of framing to include visual representations and the competing ways they are used by social actors to advance their goals and agendas. Such analysis requires consideration of the ways institutional power restrict visuality within its scopic regimes, which shapes what we see, when we see Black resistance to systemic oppression. Just as critical scholars have called for the expansion of the photographic canons of Civil Rights and Black Power movements, this study finds that an intervention in the visual documentation and archival projects of Black Lives Matter is necessary to produce and preserve a more nuanced visual history of the movement for future study.

This study contributes to research knowledge on the relationships between photography as a visual medium, framing, and memory in respect to their influence on public perceptions of protest as a form of contentious politics performed within social and political movements. Visual analysis of protest photography draws the relationality between oppression and resistance that forges the aesthetic, performative, and affective qualities of Black protest traditions into starker relief. The study’s findings illustrate how protest photography transmits movement culture, ideology, and performative scripts across spatially, temporally, and geographically diffused audiences. This process of cultural transmission circulates the oppositional habitus of Black
movements and makes the repertoires of Black protest traditions visible and retrievable for future generations and movements.

In relation to the research question 3, the study’s findings illustrated that Black audiences engaged in interpretive processes of analysis that actively utilized memory and experiential knowledge in order to critique news media representation as well as the efficacy of protest as a performative and political social act. The focus group participants involved in this study performed agency as members of a critical Black spectator audience. The study of audience response to offered critical insight into media effects of visual framing of protest on perceptions of collective identity, self-efficacy and movement efficacy. Additionally, participants’ critiques of the visual representation of Black protest further underscores the need for critical media interventions in news reporting on Black-led movements and social justice issues.

This study’s analysis of audience reception of visual framing of Black protest makes a significant contribution to research knowledge of the effects of photographic framing on public perceptions of Black protest movements and political struggle. This shift of focus allows for researchers to consider the context of viewership as an integral component of meaning construction. The shift towards audience reception within visual methodologies also ensures that the study’s findings are contextualized in the historical, political, and cultural knowledge of Black people’s lived experience as members of racialized marginalized groups. This is a necessary intervention in the study of protest tactics, strategies and performances of resistance within the repertoires of contentious politics in Black-led social movements. There has been a privileging of white perceptions and analysis of movement efficacy as well as erroneous attempts to extrapolate race from social movement studies. This study illustrates that the audience plays
an active role as agents who interpret meanings of protest performances through readings of protest photography. As performative documentation, protest photography extends the visual field of protest performance and allows for viewers to engage and critique social action and social actors who are visually represented via the photographic image.

Performances of critical Black spectatorship engaged with media and collective action frames to produce negotiated and oppositional readings of visual narratives of the Ferguson, Baltimore, and Minneapolis uprisings. Participants’ use of critical Black memory and gaze activated modes of Black witnessing to bear on visual encounters with antiblackness and the perpetuation of Black dying and death by the state. Ungirded by critical race and standpoint theories, Black witnessing offered testimony to the copiability of institutional power in the suppression of Black political agency. This form of witnessing facilitated the retrieval of the situated knowledge of the study’s participant to produce discursive narratives. In speaking with Black witness testimony, this study begins the necessary work of articulating an ethics of looking, remembering and attesting to Black humanity and survival as political acts that disrupt hegemonic narratives and intervene in the remediation of Black trauma embedded within the visualities of antiblack violence and oppression. Such an intervention is a significant contribution to the discipline of African American Studies, critical media studies and the ongoing study of the Movement for Black Lives, Black liberation, and Black resistance in the twenty-first century and beyond.

6.1 Implications:

Considering few studies have examined how the framing and representation of race impacts the perceptions of collective identity, anger, and movement efficacy amongst Black
audiences, the proposed case study research is a critical intervention in African American Studies, media studies, and social movement studies that can expand our collective understandings of the role of visual culture and media in social and political struggles. The study did not examine meaning construction at the site of production, which would offer another level of analysis. Black photographers and photojournalists who are documenting the movement is an additional population worthy of study. There is also a necessity to study how non-Black photographers and photojournalists construct race and visual narratives on race through their photographic practices. Future research study on the practices of photographers, photojournalists, and photography editors that further elucidates how these practices shape the ways protest is imaged and (re)presented via selection and amplification processes is warranted. A comparative study of the photographic gaze and documentary praxis of Black photographers would offer additional insight toward the operationalization of Black gaze and memory in visual representations. There remains a need to examine protest imagery beyond professional photography and photojournalism to include civilian forms of sousveillance, social movement actors who document their organization and mobilization practices, as well as other forms of art and culture production that utilize protest imagery in their work.

The visibility of Black Lives Matter protest has expanded beyond the imagined borders of the United States. Future studies would benefit from the visual analysis of Black Lives Matter as a diasporic cultural movement with transnational exchange. There is no single unified Black audience, as such, future explorations of audience reception can and should expand beyond the limitations of the study’s sample to include various audiences and backgrounds. This study begins to map the flows of Black Lives Matter movement culture and political ideologies. As museums, art galleries, and other cultural institutions collect protest ephemera from Black Lives
Matter protest events, there must be continuous interrogation regarding the ways elite power and hegemonic discourse shapes both archival records and public memories of these events. More research will be necessary to examine how various audiences respond to alternate forms of protest imagery that address the contemporary moment of crisis and continue the diffusion of movement culture and ideology. The study asserts the viability of visual analysis in the study of social movements. This study offers a Black perspective of movement efficacy.

6.2 Limitations:

The selection of photographic representation was limited to four specific online albums. Other digital platforms may have included different types of images in their depictions of social unrest. The images selected for content analysis were selected by the researcher based on visual encounters with the digital archives, which prompted this inquiry. The data sets were non-representative of all media types, which may have skewed the findings of the content analysis. The protest imagery captured within the photographic frames of Black rebellion in Ferguson, Baltimore, and Minneapolis do not reflect the fullness of the Black Lives Matter protest movement or the decentralized social movement referred to as the Movement for Black Lives. Additionally, this study focused primarily on photojournalist visual representations of protest as a news event. Different forms of documentary photography such as social movement photography would also likely reveal different types of visual representations.

Due to the objective nature of visual analysis and assessing perceptions, this study has several limitations to consider. The study relies heavily on self-reporting. The researcher cannot guarantee that all respondents reported accurately. Also, the researcher is unable rule out the possibility of preexisting perceptions or attitudes on protest activity, which may influence how participants responded. Participant sample ages range from 18-55 years old. The participants’
annual income and education status reflect that of a Black middle-class socioeconomic affiliation, which presents a limitation to these findings as it reflects a potential lack of representation across class identity. The participants sample audience was relatively balanced in age demographics. However, the sample audience was comprised of nineteen women and three men, which may also limit the findings in terms of differences in gender expression. Although the sample is not large enough to be representative of the general Black population the variety of experiences and perspectives represented offer valuable insight for future considerations across demographics.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Demographic Questionnaire

Age: ____

College Classification____________________________________

Employed____ Unemployed____ Self Employed____ Student____ Other (specify)____

Occupation (if employed)____________________________________

Income Range 0-$9999_____ $10k-$24,999_____ $25k-$39,999_____ $40k-$54,999_____ >$55k_____

Religious Affiliation____________________________________

Sexual Identity___________________________________________

Ethnic Identification______________________________________

Do you have an interest in social justice? (please type)
Y/N

Do you consume traditional media such as television and newspapers including online? (please type)
Y/N

Do you use social media such as Twitter, Instagram, Facebook? (please type)
Y/N

Please indicate amount of media use as follows:
(A) amounts of traditional news media (television, digital and print) on a scale:

(1) 0-14 minutes per day;
(2) 15-30 minutes per day;
(3) 31-60 minutes per day;
(4) more than 1 hour per day;

(B) and social media consumption
(1) 0-14 minutes per day;
(2) 15-30 minutes per day;
(3) 31-60 minutes per day;
(4) more than 1 hour per day.

Please rate your exposure to political related messages as follows:
(0) never,
(1) 1-2 messages per day;
(2) 3-4 messages per day;
(3) 5 or more messages per day.

Appendix B

Participant Screening Questions

Framing Perception

After viewing the stimulus packet. Please rate your answers on a scale of (1) to (5) for the following question(s):

1. **Highly Negative**  (2) Negative  (3) Neutral  (4) Positive  (5) Highly Positive

1). What is your overall perception or attitude or opinion regarding the representation of the protest event as depicted by news media?
2). What is your overall perception or attitude or opinion regarding the representation of the protest event as depicted by Black Lives Matter social media post?
3). What is your overall perception or attitude or opinion regarding the representation of protestors and their behavior as depicted?
4). What is your overall perception or attitude or opinion regarding the representations of police and their behavior as depicted?
5). What is your perception or attitude or opinion regarding how the image(s) represents the protest events.

Group Identification
Please rate your answers on a scale of (1) to (5) for the following question(s):

1. **Strongly Disagree** (2) Disagree (3) Neutral (4) Agree (5) Strongly Agree

1). The Black Lives Matter movement broadly represents how I feel and think about social injustice.
2). I identified with the protestors during the Ferguson uprising.

**Movement Efficacy**

Please rate your answers on a scale of (1) to (5) for the following question(s):

1. **Strongly Disagree** (2) Disagree (3) Neutral (4) Agree (5) Strongly Agree

1). I have the ability to contribute a collective action that influences the government.
2). I have the ability to contribute to a collective action that influences society.

**Anger Response**

Please rate your answers on a scale of (1) to (5) for the following question(s):

1. **Strongly Disagree** (2) Disagree (3) Neutral (4) Agree (5) Strongly Agree

1). I am angry about the prevalence of police brutality against Black communities.
2). I am angry about how the police responded to protest demonstrations in Ferguson.

**Social Justice**

Please rate your answers on a scale of (1) to (5) for the following questions:

1. **Very uninterested** (2) Uninterested (3) Neutral (4) Interested (5) Very Interested

1). I express an interest in political and current affairs.
2). I have an interest to learn more about social justice.
3). I have an interest to learn about social movements.

**Appendix C**

**Focus Group Guide**

Participants are requested to answer the following questions to the best of your ability. For the purpose of this study the term(s) Ferguson protest, Baltimore protest, Minneapolis protest, social unrest, protest demonstration is used to describe the social/political events
Imaging Insurrection

which occurred in 2014 in Ferguson, Missouri, 2015 in Baltimore, Maryland, and 2020 in Minneapolis, MN in response to and immediately following the deaths of Michael Brown, Freddie Gray, and George Floyd, respectively. In addition to the following questions, participants will be subject to visual prompts to elicit responses. The identity of respondents and responses will remain confidential and anonymous.

a. Sample focus group questions:

i. What do you see here?

ii. What is really happening (what does the representation mean)

iii. Can you recall a similar image / incident?

iv. Are there certain types of images or symbols that you associated with Black political struggles? Where and in what context have you encountered these images/symbols?

v. Can you reflect on how you feel after looking at these types of images?

vi. What does this image communicate to you about race and social relations in the United States?

vii. How does this relate to our lives, currently? Historically?

viii. How have photographs of unrest in Ferguson, Baltimore, Minneapolis and other locations influenced your perceptions of social protest, protest participants, and police?

ix. How do you feel about Black-led social movements?

x. Does this image influence your opinion about the movement and demonstrators, police, news media?

xi. What does this image communicate about existing social problems?

xii. What can we do about it?
xiv. Can you identify and describe the most impactful image of Black protest that you have seen? Why is this important to you?

xv. Have you encountered any images or forms of visual representation that inspired feelings of solidarity, race consciousness, anger, or pride?

xvi. Has the visual representation of Black political struggle ever inspired you to want to participate in a protest demonstration?

xvii. Does viewing images of protest photography in this setting evoke any emotions, feelings, or responses?

xviii. Can you describe what Black resistance looks like to you?

1) Caption this image in one word.

2) Are there certain types of images or symbols that you associate with protest? Are these specific to Black protest movements? Is there a historical significance? (1)

   Can you identify any symbols or similarities between these images and historical depictions of Black political struggle? (2)

3) How would you describe news media’s representation of Black protest? What types of images do you associate with news media representations of Black protest and resistance? Is your interpretation the same for social media post or is there a difference? (1)

4) What does this image make visible? What do we not see? (1)

   i. What do you see here? (3)

5) What does the image suggest (tell/communicate) about Black life in America in the 21st century?
Imaging Insurrection

i. What does this image communicate to you about race and social relations in the United States? (1)

i. Can you reflect on how you feel after looking at these types of images? (3)

6) When we reflect on the visual narrative of these images, what does the visual narrative tell us about the death of George Floyd, the assault on Black lives? (1)

7) Does this image influence your opinion about the movement and demonstrators, police, news media? (3)

8) Is protest important? How would you describe the role of photography in documenting protest? (3) What is important to remember? (2)

9) Can you describe what Black resistance looks like to you? (3) How would you like to see the movement remember, represented for future generations?