“If I Die in Police Custody”:

Abolitionism, New Social Media, and Queering the Politics of Respectability

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On March 22, 1867, Pennsylvania’s Governor John Geary signed a bill outlawing streetcar and railroad segregation. It aimed to punish conductors, by fine, imprisonment, or both, who either denied service or engaged in unequal treatment toward black riders.[[1]](#endnote-1) Just days later, a conductor on the Lombard Street line refused service to Caroline LeCount: a well-known figure in the black community, a teacher, and a graduate of the Institute for Colored Youth.[[2]](#endnote-2) The conductor dismissed her with, "We don't allow niggers to ride." LeCount immediately lodged a complaint with the nearest police officer. Either ignorant of the recent political victory by black activists throughout the Commonwealth or unresponsive to LeCount on the grounds of her race and gender, the officer insisted the conductor was lawful in his refusal. Carrying a newspaper announcing the new legislation, LeCount promptly showed the officer. Deemed as unofficial by his standards, she took her plea to the Commonwealth Secretary of State who was visiting the city. Familiar with the almost decade-long battle over streetcar segregation, he provided LeCount with a certified copy of the bill. She returned with it to the same policeman. The conductor was arrested and fined $100.[[3]](#endnote-3) As for the officer, who dismissed LeCount? He performed the arrest.

On July 10, 2015, Sandra Bland was arrested in Waller County, Texas while en route to a new job at her alma mater, the historically black Prairie View A&M University. A police officer pulled her over for failing to signal a lane change. After issuing the ticket, he asked her to put out a cigarette. After Bland questioned the request, the officer ordered her out of her personal vehicle. Thrown to the ground, handcuffed, and detained, the Department of Public Safety charged Bland with assaulting a public servant. Three days later she was found dead in her jail cell. Officially ruled a suicide by hanging,[[4]](#endnote-4) questions arose as to why a mere traffic violation would result in a multi-day jail captivity and death.[[5]](#endnote-5) Public concerns increased after dash cam video showed Brian Encinia, the arresting officer, threatening Bland with his taser: "I will light you up!”[[6]](#endnote-6) In response to ensuing protests, the Department of Public Safety declared Encinia violated procedures during the traffic stop.[[7]](#endnote-7) Beyond being placed on administrative duty, repercussions for Encinia, and justice for Bland, remain uncertain.

Responding to the circumstances of Bland’s death, the hashtag #IfIDieInPoliceCustody erupted on social media. Some describe it as a “somber collection of last words” by those who may likely be found dead under similar circumstances.[[8]](#endnote-8) A combination of individual expression, activist organization, and 21st century public sphere construction, the hashtag insists the criminal justice system is broken. Forgoing the contextual evidence for African Americans’ skepticism of the official accounts of deaths of black people by and in police custody, some Americans, whose interactions with the police do not reflect this reality, may see its message of as premature.[[9]](#endnote-9) Yet in 1903, W.E.B. Du Bois theorized this very discrepancy when he declared “the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color-line.”[[10]](#endnote-10) Over one hundred years after this diagnosis of American social and racial relations, the election of the first African-American President, Barack Obama appears to provide descriptive evidence for the transcendence of this dilemma. The emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement (BLM), however, highlights structural and substantive evidence to show that a post-racial America is still yet to come. Linda Faye Williams appears to predict these uprisings: “The problem of the twenty-first century is not the color line but finding a way to successfully challenge whiteness as ideology and reality.”[[11]](#endnote-11) A human rights lawyer based in New York City provides meaningful context to Williams’s assessment of white skin privilege when he says that Bland's death is “unfortunately all too familiar to African Americans. ... Sandra Bland's death is a reminder for some that even if you are a woman, or upwardly mobile, ultimately all that matters to the police is your Blackness. Respectability will not save you.”[[12]](#endnote-12) Both LeCount and Bland appeared to imitate respectability, but it did not provide an inoculation or a shield of protection against the poison and violence propagated by agents of the state entrusted with enforcing the “public and psychological wage” of whiteness.[[13]](#endnote-13)

In *Dark Continent of Our Bodies*, E. Francis White describes the ideology of respectability as “one of a number of strategies that African Americans have developed to create unity.”[[14]](#endnote-14) Respectability, as a politics, works through a two tiered logic largely aimed at black women.[[15]](#endnote-15) First, it attempts to deflect sexual stereotypes of black women as promiscuous by rewarding those who embody asexual lives or conform to hetero-patriarchal marital desire. A call for sexual repression works to cover the long history of white men’s rape of black female slaves;[[16]](#endnote-16) however, it ends up reducing sexual propriety to racial uplift, protecting certain black women at the expense and sometimes public shunning of others.[[17]](#endnote-17) Second, the politics of respectability narrowly defines feminine behavior as domesticity. Effectively, black women’s contributions to social and political movements are seen as secondary or merely supportive, leaving them out of the cadre of political and intellectual leadership.[[18]](#endnote-18) Some black feminists trace the philosophical support for this pragmatic political strategy to Du Bois, a protofeminist himself.[[19]](#endnote-19) Du Bois's theory of double-consciousness engages both the negative consequences of black people’s invisibility, or presumed invisibility, in political and social movements as well as their positive contributions as agents directly combating discrimination. Double-consciousness is “a peculiar sensation ... of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness, - an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body.”[[20]](#endnote-20) For Du Bois, this “two-ness” acts as both gift and burden. Put simply, the experience cultivates in blacks the foresight necessary for political engagement, yet it requires their interaction in a hostile environment. He advocates for the “thinking classes”[[21]](#endnote-21) or “Talented Tenth”[[22]](#endnote-22) of the black community to be the primary interlocutors with(in) the dominant (white) world. This theorization, however, requires a splitting of the black community: a private sphere for recuperation and a public sphere of contestation. Jasmine Farrah Griffin highlights this tension when describing Du Bois’s project as “a sincere attempt to address the conditions of black people both internally and externally.”[[23]](#endnote-23) Black women are caught in the cross-section of Du Bois’s theory since their labor as activists, care-givers, and community organizers requires the transgression of the public and private divide advocated by 19th century racial science, Victorianism, and industrialism. Because respectability links to the mobility thesis found in democratic theory,[[24]](#endnote-24) I intend to highlight the nuanced shift in the political context from Reconstruction to BLM all the while attending to abolitionism’s centrality to both.

Borrowing from Cristina Beltrán's scholarship on DREAM Activists, I read the social movement of BLM as departing from the 19th century norm of respectability by participating in a “‘queer’ vision of democracy - a participatory politics that rejects secrecy in favor of more aggressive forms of nonconformist visibility, voice, and protest.”[[25]](#endnote-25) Using the insights from queer of color critique, I suggest that black women's presence and participation in BLM is less an issue of “coming out.”[[26]](#endnote-26) Rather, BLM's attention to the centrality of the police in our neoliberal society hones in on black Americans being locked out of social mobility opportunities. Such a locking out is achieved by the locking up of more and more people of color understood by the state and market forces as “surplus populations.”[[27]](#endnote-27) Attending to #IfIDieInPoliceCustody, I show how these millennials refocus attention away from individuated behavior common to both respectability and neoliberal politics to emphasize the structural aspects of racism inherited from slavery that persist in a society that claims to welcome diversity. In centering state violence as the defining problem of anti-black racism, these activists push the idea of race, gender, and linked fate beyond the traditional confines of uplift towards a radical call for survival.[[28]](#endnote-28) Finally, by resisting the normativizing effect used by the neoliberal turn to co-opt diversity for state and market exploitation, these women reclaim a commons in the virtual, transcending the borderlands in which they are presumed to be trapped. Gaining global attention while engaging activism attentive to the local, they reaffirm their bodily integrity while struggling with the legacies described by Adrienne Davis as the "sexual economy of American slavery.”[[29]](#endnote-29)

**Abolition Democracy, Reconstruction, and the Origins of Respectability**

Abolitionism’s end, as a social movement, commonly corresponds to the Civil War era. Political theory as a discipline is no different.[[30]](#endnote-30) An interdisciplinary scholar, Du Bois locates its theoretical center proceeding the war. In *Black Reconstruction*, Du Bois meticulously shows the legacies of slavery extending beyond the Emancipation Proclamation and at times reinforced by the subsequent Constitutional amendments. Synthesizing this tome, Angela Davis describes the aftermath of the Civil War as an "abolition of slavery ... [only] in the negative sense.”[[31]](#endnote-31) New institutions were necessary to integrate the “literally tens of thousands of people - both black and white - [who] found themselves landless, jobless, and homeless” after the war.[[32]](#endnote-32) The four fixtures denied to blacks before emancipation for which they struggled in its aftermath were land, wages, the vote, and education. Under the tenure of the Bureau of Freedmen, Refugees, and Abandoned Lands (a.k.a. the Freedmen’s Bureau), advances were made. General William T. Sherman’s Field Order No. 15 initiated the redistribution of land to newly freed black families. Industrial cities and centers became attractive sites for black migrants in search of jobs in factories and the newly growing service sectors.[[33]](#endnote-33) The passage of the 15th Amendment in 1870 procured voting rights, albeit only for black men. Various benevolent organizations established schools for children, black and white alike, throughout the South and the West. In summation, the origin of the American welfare state is found during Reconstruction.[[34]](#endnote-34)

After the war a backlash spread throughout the nation curtailing these accomplishments.[[35]](#endnote-35) Laws emerged specifically targeting former slaves: predatory credit schemes, black codes, and new sanctions against vagrancy and listlessness. Combined, they contributed to the initial growth of the prison-industrial-complex,[[36]](#endnote-36) began the gutting and underfunding of welfare programs, and promoted policing of welfare recipients.[[37]](#endnote-37) In overturning the progressive elements of the era, the advancements made by black women were also forgotten. Some such women met at Oberlin College, the first to openly and regularly admit both women and people of color alongside white males. One student was Fanny Jackson Coppin, a former slave and the first black woman to serve as principal of a high school, the Institute of Colored Youth in Philadelphia.[[38]](#endnote-38) In her autobiography, Coppin references Philadelphia’s streetcar segregation:

I had been so long in Oberlin that I had forgotten about my color, but I was sharply reminded of it when, in a storm of rain, a Philadelphia street car conductor forbid my entering a car that did not have on it ‘for colored people,’ so I had to wait in the storm until one came in which colored people could ride. ... Visiting Oberlin not long after my work began … President Finney asked me how I was growing in grace: I told him that I was growing as fast as the American people would let me.[[39]](#endnote-39)

Coppin vividly describes the conscious attempts to render black people illegitimate, even when cities were moving towards pluralism under new economic and political commitments. One of the foremost proponents for social and education reform around race and gender, many of Coppin’s black female students would join Reconstruction’s cohort of educators.[[40]](#endnote-40) Collectively these young women catalyzed their own grace through abolitionist activism.

In the 19th century, black women and their allies pushed for "a host of democratic institutions … needed to fully achieve abolition - thus abolition democracy.”[[41]](#endnote-41) The struggle for political equality combined and played out in urban centers on city sidewalks and streetcar platforms. Naming these spaces as "theaters of war," Judith Giesberg identifies Black women's actions against streetcar segregation as distinctly political and connected to other battlefields of the Civil War. “Choosing their bodies as sites of resistance, women defied a gendered and racialized urban geography and pushed freedom of movement onto the wartime agenda of state lawmakers.”[[42]](#endnote-42) Despite the everydayness of moving through a city like Philadelphia, black women risked life and limb when they climbed aboard a horse-drawn streetcar or “colored car.” Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, the first African American novelist, became keenly aware of both her race and gender as she traveled the circuit delivering anti-slavery speeches to audiences. At the Eleventh National Woman’s Rights Convention held in New York in 1866, she spoke of Philadelphia’s streetcar segregation: “To-day I am puzzled where to make my home. I would like to make it in Philadelphia, near my own friends and relations. But if I want to ride in the streets of Philadelphia, they send me to ride on the platform with the driver. … One day I took my seat in a car, and the conductor came to me and told me to take another seat. I just screamed ‘murder.’ The man said if I was black I ought to behave myself.”[[43]](#endnote-43) Providing an initial glimpse into the politics of respectability, Harper describes the offsetting of unjust institutional arrangements onto individuals. It became a strategy of the 19th century. Abolitionists would use also use respectability by appealing to Christian and Victorian values to critique white actors. In Harper’s own recounting of the driver’s call for her decorum she employs respectability; “I knew that if he was white he was not behaving himself.”[[44]](#endnote-44)

As for securing economic goods, two ideologies combined in the 19th century to foreclose upon the era’s democratic potential - industrialism and Victorianism. Post-antebellum America, particularly the North, envisioned itself as a “post-racial” society. Classical liberalism emphasized individual rights and responsibilities. A familiar cry of the Republican party’s pre-cursors, the “free soil” anti-slavery advocates, the equation of free market plus wage labor was held up as freedom for all. But the attempt to transcend race became more difficult as gender lines were redrawn, since scientific “ideas about women and people of color were interdependent.”[[45]](#endnote-45) Marriage, specifically, became the institutional means to provide refuge from the more unsavory aspects of the state, the market, or the demos. It provided what Griffin calls "the promise of protection.”[[46]](#endnote-46) This promise does double duty in relationship to gender reinforcement: "it restores a sense of masculinity to black men while granting black women at least one of the privileges of femininity.”[[47]](#endnote-47) The Victorian emphasis of femininity translated into an ideology of domesticity. In *Freedwomen and the Freedmen's Bureau*, Mary Farmer-Kaiser provides a historiography of black women’s interactions with Bureau agents. As advocates of Victorianism, the agents linked free market values to domestic ones. They understood marriage as a means to facilitate free market industriousness in men, which could only be effective if supported by a “civilized” family arrangement with a chaste and obedient wife.[[48]](#endnote-48) Put differently, these agents sought to change the personal behavior and social culture of the poor, newly freed slaves towards an industrially driven working-class black people. The result was a politics of respectability. Taken together, the promotion of both Victorianism and industrialism transformed into one overarching ideology of progress. The more separation between the genders, the more civilized the society as a whole.[[49]](#endnote-49)

Evoking the promise of protection, the activism against Philadelphia’s streetcar segregation relied on differentiation amongst gender within the black community. Octavious Catto, son of a former slave and a young veteran of the U.S. Colored Troops, was an outspoken civil rights proponent of that era. Speaking in front of largely male audiences, black and white, Catto framed streetcar segregation as a matter of masculine self-defense: “Vindicate your manhood … and no longer suffer defenseless women and children to be assaulted or insulted with impunity by ruffianly conductors or drivers.”[[50]](#endnote-50) According to Giesberg, many of the black women that prominent black men such as Catto were referring took their own initiative, rejecting the Victorian standard of defenseless femininity and filed suits on their own behalf.[[51]](#endnote-51) Despite these women’s agency, the politics of respectability embraced a promise for protection. It was mobilized and remained highly visible in public spheres where abolitionist men, both black and white, continued to dominate, namely politics and press.[[52]](#endnote-52) These strategies employed by upwardly mobile blacks and their classed white allies created another cleavage both within their community and between potential classed allies. Respectability discourse demeaned poor white ethnics and newly freedmen and freedwomen, or ignored them altogether. Fortunately black female intellectuals like Anna Julia Cooper insisted on the centrality of poor freedwomen from the South as the social, political, and economic catalyst for the abolitionist movement. Her response to “masculine self-defense” was that “only the black woman can say ‘when and where I enter.’”[[53]](#endnote-53) By not only claiming their voices, but also claiming space by entering streetcars and transgressing Victorian boundaries, these black female abolitionists continue to inform their 21st century counterparts.

**Rejecting Respectability in the Neoliberal Age: A Queer of Color Critique of Social Mobility**

The era from which BLM emerges is decidedly different, yet all the while familiar, to Reconstruction. Founding member of Millennial Activists United (MAU), Brittany Ferrell describes it as a youth led revolution: "The dynamics are different. We have identified what is lacking and what is needed for us as a people to move forward in strength.”[[54]](#endnote-54) Globalization is the dynamic, and neoliberalism is the difference.[[55]](#endnote-55) “Globalization means a change in terms of what the state does, rather than a decline in its power - it moves from being an agent of redistribution to a promoter of enterprise.”[[56]](#endnote-56) In favoring corporate solutions to attract global capital, governmental redistribution no longer defines political association. As a result wealth concentrates amongst elites who are then fortified by the dual logics of gated communities and a surveillance state backed by police intervention,[[57]](#endnote-57) further entrenching the prison industrial-complex.[[58]](#endnote-58) According to Lisa Duggan, "all this privacy is rendered desirable by the recycling and updating of nineteenth-century liberalism's equation of economic activity with voluntary, uncorked, private freedom and with productivity, efficiency, and wealth expansion.”[[59]](#endnote-59) Neoliberalism, therefore, recreates a hierarchy of labor that mirrors Reconstruction - a few hard working, creative, possessive individuals and the masses made up of noncitizen immigrants or racialized citizen poor.

In an increasingly global society, the neoliberal paradigm no longer understands actors through their membership of a common society (i.e. as citizens) but largely as entrepreneurs. Previously excluded as members of unwanted groups, particularly queer people, the neoliberal order actively seeks them in order to harness their creativity.[[60]](#endnote-60) Richard Florida’s “gay index” provides cities with a statistical tool to predict their likelihood of capturing those from the Creative Class; however, his index only included lesbian and gay men in same-sex partnerships. This narrow operationalization of gay-friendliness provides “an index of respectability, of nicely gentrified neighborhoods, and the only accepted presence in public space is the Mardi Gras festival, itself turned from a political demonstration into a celebration of ‘difference’ staged for tourists.”[[61]](#endnote-61) As for those laborers necessary to serve the creative class, Grace Hong describes them as “existentially surplus”: those who are rendered “vulnerable so as to produce them as a form of surplus labor, but they are also abjected as backward, homophobic, and patriarchal as a way to render them as morally bankrupt and exclude them from a privileged liberal subjecthood.”[[62]](#endnote-62) Clearly respectability continues to play a role in the 21st century. However, by drawing on the theories, strategies, and activism of those Joy James calls “the aberrational Talented Tenth,”[[63]](#endnote-63) the queer black women who launched and continue to sustain the BLM movement reject a politics of respectability as “triple jeopardy.”[[64]](#endnote-64)

The spatial demarcations of political and personal are central to how women participate in political and social movements. In negotiating these spaces, they do so largely through a logic of occupation - either intentional or not. Ruth Wilson Gilmore describes this logic when historicizing the organization “Mothers Reclaiming Our Children." While negotiating the bureaucratic gates of the prison-industrial-complex in order to gain information or access to their loved ones, women of color in Los Angeles met by happenstance.[[65]](#endnote-65) By operationalizing these radical links, they successfully organized against prison expansion. Turning these sites that aim at destroying community and relationships against themselves, a common political consciousness formed. Zakya Jemmott of MAU explains a similar process in how they came together: “What began as making sandwiches for protesters and marching every night turned into us becoming street medics after being tear-gassed and shot at. After working together for weeks we realized we needed a name.”[[66]](#endnote-66) By giving themselves a name, this collective forged in space assumed to be male. A name, however, is not a guarantee for the recognition of human dignity. “When we go out to protest or even speak at town hall meeting there is a lack of support from a majority of the men and we are treated as if we're invisible and haven't been the most vocal since the movement mobilized.”[[67]](#endnote-67) Given their active participation in protests and vigils outside police departments, courthouses, and county jails, these young women are well aware of the vulnerability that their bodies face in theaters of struggle.[[68]](#endnote-68) By distributing food and medical aid, they actively combat bodily harm. Preparation for the kind of subjection that occurs with high frequency in supposedly democratic spaces like town halls, universities, and other public fora requires a different set of preparations.

Departing from the Reconstruction period, the current activists push back on external forces employing the strategy of respectability, while simultaneously attempting to disrupt it within their ranks. This discussion traverses multiple media sites from Twitter to Instagram, editorials and blogs. Jamilah Lemieux writes how respectability, expected by authorities, is a mask many young people wear: “I was taught how to interact with the police from a young age.... It wasn't about revering them or their position in the community, but about self-preservation. Sometimes this is at the cost of my dignity or my humanity. ... [F]or black people, being polite or deferent to police is not a guarantee of safety. [Taking such precautions] has more to do with the police than it has to do with us.”[[69]](#endnote-69) A tweet by Brie Powell exemplifies a pushback against the rhetoric of respectability from the outside: “#IfIDieInPoliceCustody know that 2 college degrees and a 'proper' English vocabulary couldn't save me, fuck your respectability politics.”[[70]](#endnote-70) In a contribution to *The Root*, Jasmine Banks criticizes within when she insists that the deaths of Black youth by police are tragic, whether or not they are on their way to college: “We cannot and should not engage in discussions that look like black and brown people explaining that an unarmed person shouldn't have been shot because they lived in a way of which we are proud.”[[71]](#endnote-71) Johnette Elzie, another founder of MAU, describes the various responses to her activities as a black women activist and protestor as she shifts from one space of the struggle to another: “To go from the streets protesting with women being on the frontline, to inside closed meetings were women are the minority discussing what has happened in Ferguson, I continue to tell the truth of what happened in Ferguson from a female's perspective. By being involved in private conversations, hopefully it inspires other women who stood on the frontline to do the same.”[[72]](#endnote-72) In each of these instances, these women reject respectability by directly highlighting, with intent to address, the structural barriers that replicate marginality. In doing this they also highlight the volatility of social mobility as a basis for democratic thought or practice. This volatility is heightened when they face public objectification, even amongst their fellow protestors:

As women are the majority in the movement here in St. Louis, it puzzles me as to why we have to make sure we are heard and seen for the work we are doing, rather than just pretty faces. I’ve had to check so many brothers for coming at me …. [One asked] me if my clothing I had on were my ‘activist clothing’ because I looked way to[o] beautiful to be out there at night.[[73]](#endnote-73)

Alluded by Adrienne Davis’s legal history of the roots of sexual harassment in slavery, black women in all their workspaces as laborers, mothers, and even activists continue to feel the effects of bodily objectification.[[74]](#endnote-74) And, by ways of a queer of color analysis, these women in rejecting respectability “debunk the idea that race, class, gender, and sexuality are discrete formations, apparently insulated from one another.”[[75]](#endnote-75)

BLM’s inception and evolution also centers black women’s relationship to citizenship as defined by illegitimacy.[[76]](#endnote-76) Turning back to the events with which I opened this analysis, both LeCount’s Philadelphia and Bland’s Waller County, Texas can be read as borderlands. Borrowing from Gloria Anzaldúa,[[77]](#endnote-77) by this I mean they are physical sites rich with black women’s history and lived experience but are also where black female bodies are always already vulnerable to state violence. These women do not actively choose to risk life and limb in transit. They are already *at* risk.[[78]](#endnote-78) Throughout U.S. history in their attempts to gain mobility by accessing modes of transportation, state sanctioned violence against Black women varied from region to region and from racial regime to racial regime. The execution of such violence also shifted correspondingly to the evolution in societal advances such as technology and economic prosperity. These shifts are materially reflected in the changes of the dominant method of transit by all peoples in a given society - boat, streetcar, train, bus, and private vehicle. I have turned to two cases from two significantly different regions and periods. In doing so, I do not mean to suggest that these cases are representative of Black women’s experience of violence while in transit. However, I use them because individually and taken in concert they raise important questions about the central and distinctive role that Black women’s bodies and mobility play in the horizon of democratic thought, particularly but not exclusively, in the context of a post-emancipation United States.

**Hash-tagging: Iterability, Digital Democracy, and Living Wills**

Attending to DREAM activism, Cristina Beltrán theorizes new media’s role in social movements: “Facebook groups such as UndocuQueer and online video series such as ‘Undocumented and Awkward’ and ‘UndocuCribs’ show the many ways social media operates as spaces of confrontation, contemplation, and self-assertion.”[[79]](#endnote-79) Thinking of the myriad ways BLM operates through and alongside social media, I find this analysis fruitful. Here, I want to think specifically about hashtagging. In this section I turn to the particular hashtag that emerged after the death of Sandra Bland: #IfIDieInPoliceCustody. I extend Beltrán’s characterization of the Dreamer’s “queer vision of democracy” to this “most soul-tugging hashtag” from Black Twitter.[[80]](#endnote-80) Put simply, #IfIDieInPoliceCustody rejects the politics of illegitimacy aimed at black women both internally and externally through the policing of their bodies. Those using it reclaim their selves (bodies and agency) from the state violence and police harassment that infiltrates their homes, work, and commute by enacting their living wills in a virtual commons.

Historically, black Americans have always carved out space in opposition to the official public sphere. Michael Dawson refers to this as “the black counter public.”[[81]](#endnote-81) In an age of new media and almost instant communication facilitated by both the material groundwork and global reaches of the internet, the specific use of hashtags by the black counter public performs an almost ancient function for democratic consciousness. It acts as a Socratic wake-up call, a confrontation: #BlackLivesMatter. It is then echoed across neighborhoods, cities, states, and nations. The usage, circulation, and repetition of such hashtags does not imply revision; rather, they act as signatures compounding collective power through their multiple iterations.[[82]](#endnote-82) The hashtag that emerged after the death of Sandra Bland is particularly telling as a device that holds the simultaneous oppositions that Derrida expressed as iterability - difference and sameness. If the hashtag “#IfIDieInPoliceCustody reveals both vulnerability and resilience,”[[83]](#endnote-83) then it is an expression of a similar emotional state that has been singularly felt by each author who uses that sign.

As a political or ideological intervention, one can measure the effectiveness of this form of iteration at the moment when it departs the “counter” and reaches the “official” public sphere. On September 27, 2015 Senator Elizabeth Warren (D-MA) delivered an address to the Edward M. Kennedy Institute that exemplifies the rise of this particular hashtag to the public writ large. As the headline for its “Getting to the Point” series, Warren got to the point of BLM, MAU, and #IfIDieInPoliceCustody. She spoke of the tools of oppression aimed “to deliberately deny millions of African Americans economic opportunities solely because of the color of their skin.”[[84]](#endnote-84) Mentioning the racial disparities in the New Deal and home ownership policies, she draws a line between past failures and present conditions. What is possibly even more significant is how this hashtag, with its ability to capture the abolitionist discourse of human dignity, inspires a abolition-democratic horizon in Warren: “I speak today with the full knowledge that I have not personally experienced and can never truly understand the fear, the oppression, and the pain that confronts African Americans every day. But none of us can ignore what is happening in this country. Not when our black friends, family, neighbors literally fear dying in the streets.”[[85]](#endnote-85)

The power that the movement wields is diffuse yet linked, physically distanced while generating intimacy. According to Johnette Elzie, social media plays a significant role in being able to co-opt these interstitial sites between rupture and capture: “Thankfully for this generation, instead of waiting for a letter in the mail from Malcolm X, we have social media to drive this movement and get the truth out to millions of people, live.”[[86]](#endnote-86) Insisting on a group-centered model of leadership, the tools that these women and their allies use directly facilitate that goal: “The new tools of technology - particularly social media and especially Twitter - have facilitated the emergence of just such a bottom-up insurgency led by ordinary people, and have displaced the top-down approach of old guard civil rights organizations.”[[87]](#endnote-87) Engaging in such leadership, of encouraging a strong people that they do not need strong leaders, can have its setbacks.[[88]](#endnote-88) An overemphasis on strength can lead ordinary men and women to push their double- or multiple-consciousness selves to a breaking point. Du Bois understood the process of double-consciousness as constant measurement of the self against the dominant world. “For ordinary men and women, such inner turmoil can destroy their motivation to seek better lives, and it can lead to a variety of social ills. For black leaders … it is crippling.”[[89]](#endnote-89) Also, an overemphasis on strength can result in the demonization of those who succumb to the pressures that the neoliberal state unleashes.

Some suggest the hashtag in the wake of the back-to-back deaths of Sandra Bland and 18-year-old Kindra Chapman[[90]](#endnote-90) reads “like a last will and testament. … Please take care of my parents for me, please use this picture of me, please start a protest in my name and don’t stop until you get justice.”[[91]](#endnote-91) Some within the black community on social media call the hashtag insensitive and see it as closing the door on a real conversation about mental health.[[92]](#endnote-92) Others express concern with its coupling with a proclamation that “I did not commit suicide” as it may reinforce “the strong, resilient, Black woman narrative.”[[93]](#endnote-93) Finally, there are those attentive to this concern about mental health stigmatization, but also do not want to rule out suicide as potential reclamation. Ray(nise) Cange reads the initial dash-cam video of Bland’s arrest as “a violent, racist, and trauma-producing encounter with the police.”

I refuse to dismiss the idea that she may have committed suicide. … The shifting of suicide from a position of weakness is why I want us to not take suicide off the table and to recognize the power within that action, if she did commit suicide. Sandra, from the beginning, refused to give up her power. And in that jail cell suicide may have been a form of resistance and an astounding statement of self-love. A statement saying I will not give you the power to kill me and I love myself enough to not endure you killing me slowly.[[94]](#endnote-94)

Taken together, I find that the abolitionist practice and the declarations of #IfIDieInPoliceCustody are powerful acts of self-disclosure that provide a theory of resistance to and a potential overcoming of anti-Black racism. They combine an emphasis of negotiating the strangeness that is all too common for those living in the borderlands with a rethinking of the radical potential of double/multiple-consciousness. I also find hash-tagging a practice aimed at reorienting the space of those who do not yet have double/multiple-consciousness so that they may be inspired to engage in self-reflexivity. An example of this is the Prairie View City Council’s vote to rename University Drive, the road where Bland was arrested, as Sandy Bland Parkway. Michael Moore, alumnus of Prairie View A&M University, lays out its potential in his overall evaluation of the bill: “When police officers stop any of our students … they’ll always be able to write that name, Sandra Bland, just to remind them, their consciousness, that, ‘hey, I can’t treat this person bad,’ or do any unlawful things to the students.”[[95]](#endnote-95)

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The Civil Rights era of the mid-20th century may remain the standard case of comparison whenever a racial consciousness is stirred. But the current moment rejects this impulse: “Core activists of the Black Lives Matter movement have been quick to remind us that this current wave of protest 'is not your grandma's civil rights movement.’”[[96]](#endnote-96) By centering black human dignity, BLM extends back to the global debates over slavery at the time of the American founding. Activists also intimate the mid-19th century when contextualizing contemporary acts of racism: “Since the abolition of slavery, the United States has never been on a steady incline of racial justice and harmony.”[[97]](#endnote-97) By linking together the narratives of Sandra Bland to Caroline LeCount, I suggest the current civil rights moment should be understood as the third Reconstruction. This suggestion aligns with both George Lipsitz's analysis of the uprising in Ferguson[[98]](#endnote-98) and Eric Foner’s claim that Reconstruction remains “America's unfinished revolution.”[[99]](#endnote-99) Originating from black women activists, this hashtag expresses their very particular skepticism towards the criminal justice system. I am not implying that it does not aptly apply to, or is not used by, black men and others targeted by the police. Rather its intersectional sensibility re-centers the problem of white skin privilege and its operationalization of gender in discussions of race.[[100]](#endnote-100) An unfolding archive of living testimonials, #IfIDieInPoliceCustody displays the always already politically informed, yet simultaneously personal, dismissal of black women’s interactions with police both in the official accounts and by the black community in addressing police force. In summation, these young, black, female, queer activists are calling us towards an alternative horizon for American democracy by reclaiming elements of abolitionism that appear to have been lost to the Nadir - black women's political centrality and their contributions to abolitionist thought and practice.

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1. The law prohibited any segregation including designations or assigned seats according to race. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Founded in 1837, the Institute for Colored Youth (ICY) provided a classical education to young African Americans in Philadelphia. Its curriculum included advanced mathematics and sciences, English, philosophy, various social sciences, as well as classical languages. In 1902 the Institute was relocated outside the city into Delaware County and changed its name to Cheyney University. There it continues as the oldest historically black college in the United States. For more information on the ICY see Charlene Conyers, *A Living Legend: The History of Cheyney University, 1837-1951* (Philadelphia: Cheyney University Press, 1990). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. For various interpretations of Caroline LeCount’s incident, see Philip S. Foner, “The Battle to End Discrimination Against Negroes on Philadelphia Streetcars: (Part II) The Victory,” *Pennsylvania History* 40 (1973): 355-379; Harry C. Silcox, “Nineteenth-Century Philadelphia Black Militant: Octavius V. Catto (1839-1871),” in *African Americans in Pennsylvania: Shifting Historical Perspectives*, ed. Joe William Trotter, Jr. and Eric Ledell Smith (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University, 1997), 198-219; and, Andrew Diemer, “Reconstructing Philadelphia: African Americans and Politics in the Post-Civil War North,” *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 83 (2009): 29-58. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
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5. K.K. Rebecca Lai, Haeyoun Park, Larry Buchanan, and Wilson Andrews, “Assessing the Legality of Sandra Bland’s Arrest,” *The New York Times*, July 22, 2015. http://nyti.ms/1KhBpgI. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Abby Ohlheiser and Abby Phillip, “‘I will light you up!’: Texas officer threatened Sandra Bland with Taser during traffic stop,” *The Washington Post*, July 22, 2015. http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2015/07/21/much-too-early-to-call-jail-cell-hanging-death-of-sandra-bland-suicide-da-says/. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Corky Siemaszko, “Sandra Bland’s family accuses Texas Trooper Brian Encinia of ‘Wanton Conduct” in Wrongful Death Lawsuit,” *New York Daily News,* August 4, 2015. http://www.nydailynews.com/news/national/sandra-bland-family-suing-texas-trooper-brian-encinia-article-1.2314215. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
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10. W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk,* ed.David W. Blight and Robert Gooding-Williams (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 1997), 34. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Linda Faye Williams, *The Constraint of Race: Legacies of White Skin Privilege in America* (University Park, Pa.: Penn State University Press, 2003), 368. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Nadia Prupis, “FBI Joins Investigation Into ‘Unfathomable’ Death of Sandra Bland,” *Common Dreams,* July 17, 2015. http://www.commondreams.org/news/2015/07/17/fbi-joins-investigation-unfathomable-death-sandra-bland. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. W.E.B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860-1880* (New York: Free Press, 1998), 700. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. E. Francis White, *Dark Continent of Our Bodies: Black Feminism and the Politics of Respectability* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001), 14. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Coined by Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham in her historical analysis of the women’s movement and its intersection with the institutionalization of the black church, the politics of respectability acts as a self-policing mechanism within the black community to “earn their people a measure of esteem from white America” by striving “to win the black lower class’s psychological allegiance to temperance, industriousness, thrift, refined manners, and Victorian sexual morals.” Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Boston: Harvard College Press, 1993), 14. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Angela Davis, “Reflections on Black Woman’s Role in the Community of Slaves,” *The Massachusetts Review* 13 (1972): 81-100; Adrienne Davis, “Slavery and the Roots of Sexual Harassment,” in *Directions in Sexual Harassment*, ed. Catherine MacKinnon and Reva B. Seigel (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 457-477. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
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18. Joy James, *Transcending the Talented Tenth: Black Leaders and American Intellectuals* (New York: Routledge, 1997). [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Deborah J. King, “Multiple Jeopardy, Multiple Consciousness: The Context of a Black Feminist Ideology,” *Signs,* 14 (1988): 42-72; James, *Transcending the Talented Tenth,* 1997; Jasmine Farrah Griffin, “Black Feminists and Du Bois: Respectability, Protection, and beyond,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 568 (2000): 28-40. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk*, 38. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk*, 70. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk*, 100. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Griffin, “Black Feminists and Du Bois,” 34. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. In his seminal work *Democracy in America*, Alexis de Tocqueville argued that democratic nations differ from aristocratic ones particularly when it comes to mobility. This distinguishing factor implies that the laws of descent, otherwise known as hereditary rights, do not tie them down. It is this comparison that de Tocqueville theorizes a connection between social mobility and democratic stability. This argument extends to a hypothetical claim: if the wealthy classes are at risk to become middle class in the near future, then they would rationally choose to include the middle class in the political process. Put differently, they would avoid excluding poorer classes from political participation. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. Gerald Bevan (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 494. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Cristina Beltrán, “No Papers, No Fear: DREAM Activism, New Social Media, and the Queering of Immigrant Rights,” in *Contemporary Latina/o Media,* ed. Arlene Dávila and Yiedy Rivero (New York: NYU Press, 2014), 247. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Beltrán, “No Papers, No Fear,” 249-252. BLM originated by the culmination of activist, emotional, economic, and political labors of queer black women who were already out and proud. See Alicia Garza, “A Herstory of the #BlackLivesMatter Movement,” *The Feminist Wire*, October 7, 2014. http://www.thefeministwire.com/2014/10/blacklivesmatter-2/. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Roderick Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004); Grace Kyungwon Hong, “Existentially Surplus: Women of Color Feminism and the New Crises of Capitalism,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 18 (2011): 87-106. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. Evelyn M. Simien, “Race, Gender, and Linked Fate,” *Journal of Black Studies*, 35 (2005): 529-550. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Adrienne Davis, “‘Don’t Let Nobody Bother Yo’ Principle’: The Sexual Economy of American Slavery” in *Still Brave: The Evolution of Black Women’s Studies*, ed. Stanlie M. James, Frances Smith Foster, and Beverly Guy-Sheftall (New York: The Feminist Press at CUNY, 2009), 215-239. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. Joel Olson, *The Abolition of White Democracy (*Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004); Jennet Kirkpatrick, *Uncivil Disobedience: Studies in Violence and Democratic Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008). [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. Angela Y. Davis, *The Meaning of Freedom: And Other Difficult Dialogues* (San Francisco: City Lights Press, 2012), 114. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. Williams, *The Constraint of Race*, 33. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Philadelphia Negro* (New York: Cosimo, 2007). [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. Williams, *The Constraint of Race*, 2003. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. Douglas R. Egerton, *The Wars of Reconstruction: The Brief, Violent History of America’s Most Progressive Era* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2014). [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. Angela Y. Davis and Eduardo Mendieta, *Abolition Democracy: Beyond Prison, Torture and Empire* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2005); Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California (*Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007); Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: New Press, 2012). [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. Williams, *The Constraint of Race*, 2003; Ange-Marie Hancock, *The Politics of Disgust: The Public Identity of the Welfare Queen* (New York: New York University Press, 2004). [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. The first person to head the Institute of Colored Youth (ICY) was Charles L. Reason. A native of New York City and graduate of the McGrawville College in New York, he contributed to all the anti-slavery publications as well as the Anglo-African Magazine that began in New York in 1859. His female counterpart and head of the Girls’ Department at ICY, Grace M. Mapps, was a founding member of the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society (PFASS) and a graduate of McGrawville College as well. Unlike other Anti-Slavery and Abolitionist Societies, PFASS did not disband after emancipation or at the conclusion of the Civil War. They continued their abolitionism till the passage of the 15th Amendment in 1870, well into the Reconstruction years. [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. Fanny Jackson Coppin, *Reminiscences of School Life, and Hints of Teaching* (New York: G. K. Hall & Co, 1995), 14. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. Caroline LeCount graduated under Coppin’s tenure. [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. Angela Davis, *The Meaning of Freedom*, 115. [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. Judith Giesberg, *Army at Home: Women and the Civil War on the Northern Home Front* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 94. [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
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44. Harper, “We Are all Bound up Together,” 219. [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
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