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Art as Protest: How Creative Activism Shaped “Black Lives Matter” in Richmond, Virginia

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ABSTRACT

Unrest spurred by the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement in the United States has flowed throughout the city of Richmond, Virginia. Unique forms of protest have proliferated across the city, encompassing several artistic tactics such as graffiti art, oral storytelling, graphic design, and movement art. This paper will explore the effectiveness of art as protest by analyzing its impacts on several foundational aspects of social movements. Combining my personal observations, scholarly literature, and research on other social movements, I have developed my own findings regarding the use of art in Richmond’s Black Lives Matter movement. I posit that the use of art has functioned as an additive support to the movement rather than detracting from its success because of its pervasive nature across several foundational elements of movement-building.

INTRODUCTION

Since the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement in Summer 2020, protests have spread rapidly across the United States. The movement regained momentum after the police murder of George Floyd, a Black man in Minneapolis (Hill, Tiefenthaler, Triebert, Jordan, Willis, Stein, 2020). This killing alongside that of many other members of the Black community ignited large-scale protests amidst a dangerous pandemic. Thousands flooded the streets out of anger and impatience with a justice system that has failed their communities and taken away the lives of their loved ones. Home to a majority of Black and Brown residents (Richmond, VA | Data USA, n.d.), Richmond, Virginia is one of many cities that has proudly shown its support for the BLM movement.

While the COVID-19 pandemic pushed many protesters to restrict their activism to a purely online platform, others continued to express their grievances through different creative outlets such as graffiti art, music, and digital technology art. These alternative forms of protest that extend beyond traditional methods such as boycotts, sit-ins, and in-person demonstrations may hold some merit in the success of protests as opposed to or in collaboration with traditional methods. This paper explores the question of how the use of art as a protest strategy has shaped various elements of the Black Lives Matter movement in Richmond, Virginia. I was able to spend the Summer of 2020 in Richmond and to be witness to the explosive Black Lives Matter protests that took over the city. Thus, through a mix of my own observations, scholarly literature, and research on other social movements, I have developed my own findings regarding the use of art in Richmond’s Black Lives Matter movement. I posit that the use of art has functioned as an additive support to the movement rather than detracting from its success because of its pervasive nature across several foundational elements of movement-building.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

Mission and Goals

At its core, the mission of the umbrella Black Lives Matter movement is to preserve Black lives by addressing police brutality, supporting Black communities, and dismantling systemic and institutional racism in an intersectional manner. In his dissertation titled, “Pictures Are Worth a Thousand Words: An Analysis of Visual Framing in Civil Rights and Black Lives Matter Protest Photography,” Marsh conducts an analysis of photography that compares the Black Lives Matter movement to the Civil Rights Movement. His work falls in line with the common assertion that the BLM movement has been a weak contender in the game of “respectability politics” as compared to the activists of the Civil Rights Movement who worked out of the Black church (Clayton, 2018). However, because the BLM mission is an intersectional one (Black Lives Matter, n.d.), the rejection of respectability politics in the powerful photography of BLM activists only lends support to the movement’s mission. In its push for respectability, the Civil Rights Movement, on the other hand, did not align with an intersectional mission as male and religious figures dominated the visuals of the movement (Clayton, 2018).

Marsh’s argument of BLM photography pursuing a more assertive strategy rings true in the case of Richmond this past summer. While still in support of the larger movement’s mission, the Richmond protestors also pushed for more local change as a part...
of their goals. Two of these goals were removing Confederate statues and addressing the lack of transparency in the Richmond Police Department. While several statues were removed (Schneider, 2020) and some progress was made to pass a Civilian Review Board that would increase police accountability in the city (Rokett & Suarez, 2020), the largest and most popular confederate statue of General Robert E. Lee remains standing in the newly named Marcus-David Peters Circle. Protestors have long sought to remove this statue, and their defiance has been depicted by photographer Christopher “Puma” Smith whose artwork invokes the words of Marsh as revealing a more rebellious image of the BLM activists (Boot, 2020). Smith wants his photography to highlight the “demands” that Richmond protesters have for the local government as he places them in front of the Lee statue. This assertive goal stands in slight contrast to the relatively passive requests made by the activists of the Civil Rights Movement of documenting oppression; yet stands squarely aligned with the mission of the BLM movement as it was intended.

Issue Framing

While the protest outlet of photography served a helpful purpose in upholding the movement’s goals, artwork also has been shown to play a significant role in eliciting positive framing of the movement and creating new frames of knowledge-building. In contrast to mainstream newspapers that can demonstrate a more negative framing of the BLM movement (Marsh, 2018), Black media outlets and activists themselves can use creative outlets to construct a positive framing of the movement strong enough to attract more members. This was demonstrated in the city of Hong Kong where activists protested against the Chinese government by utilizing artistic work as “marketing tactics” and drawing global attention to their cause (Green, Patsiaouras, Veneti, 2018).

Similarly, activists in Richmond have been able to draw positive national attention to their own demands through the usage of the Lee monument as a site of reclamation. Not only is the statue now unrecognizable because of all of the artwork, slogans, and digital projections that cover it, but the circle that the statue sits in also now functions as a common area and safe space for all protesters and community members. Figure 1 shows the extent to which the monument was covered in graffiti and protest art. The wide range of colors, art styles, and images spray-painted onto the monument is reflective of only a fraction of the city’s artists. Viewing the chaotic scene of the monument with its overlapping images may overwhelm the spectator in a way that is symbolic of the anger and demands claimed by the city's Black residents. It is argued to be one of the most influential spots of protest art since World War II because of this framing of protest as reclamation and transformation (Force, Hass, Lescaze, Miller, 2020). This powerful framing could not have been made possible without the imagery spurred by the protest art covering the circle. Thus, through this reframing of protest in the context of reclaiming spaces, protest artwork has functioned in a strongly beneficial manner in Richmond.

In addition to creating a positive framing of the movement, the use of art in protest can contribute to forming novel frames of knowledge around notions of collectivity and rebellion. In his dissertation titled “Rearticulating the Social: Spatial Practices, Collective Subjects, and Oaxaca’s Art of Protest,” Ivan Arenas explores the use of artwork in protests across Oaxaca, Mexico. He finds that Oaxacans were able to utilize artwork to build “alternative conceptions of ethical communities and a collective subject that bypasses state-based frameworks as the necessary horizon of Oaxaca’s future” (Arenas, 2011, p. 3). This framing of a collective as opposed to the isolation of the oppressed individual was pursued through collaborative forms of art-making and workshops.

Breaking apart the state-proposed frameworks and reimagining new visions of community-building have also been key strategies of the BLM movement. In her article, “Black Protest on the Streets: Visual Activism and the Aesthetic Politics of Black Lives Matter,” Nicole Schneider discusses the role of art and other visual protest practices in the movement. She demonstrates that “the artistic and aesthetic practices of protest and activism...use their artistic configuration to break through old and long-established frames of knowledge and recognition and present that which would have otherwise remained invisible” (Schneider, 2017, p. 23). More specifically, she points out several BLM installations, signs, and imagery that “make sense of the un/livable and the un/imaginable” (Schneider, 2017, p. 23). Similar to the Oaxacan rejection of state-based frameworks, through art, the BLM protests have been able to create new frames of knowledge and understanding around collectivity and abolition that may have been previously inconceivable.

At the Marcus-David Peters Circle in Richmond, this collective move towards a rejection of state-based framing and a reimagin-
ing of the movement as communal care and healing was especially prevalent. I was able to visit the circle that contained the decorated Lee statue during the day, late at night, and in the afternoon. During each of my trips, the area was packed with people and while graffiti art glaringly stood out on the statue, what captured my attention the most was the DJ booth set up where music was always playing, sometimes even live music. As people danced, lounged, and played games, that space was not only reclaimed but re-envisioned as a safe space beyond the reach of the state. The music served as a continuous reminder of healing and unity in that space, creating a frame of protection against the police lurking on the outskirts of the circle. The music also helped keep everyone energized and hopeful that in unity, anything is possible. Thus, this form of musical art at the circle was able to instill in me the awakened “frames of knowledge and recognition” that Schneider mentioned in her article (Schneider, 2017, p. 23). Seeing fresh forms of care and joy that took root, in part due to musical influence at the Marcus-David Peters circle, I saw the movement as being able to reimagine new realities.

**Mobilization Strategies**

In addition to bolstering the framing of the movement, artwork has also been able to amplify the mobilization power of the Black Lives Matter movement in Richmond. In her article, “Black Lives Matter: The Emotional and Racial Dynamics of the George Floyd Protest Graffiti,” Mary Louise Cappelli focuses her analysis on the use of graffiti art in shaping emotional responses to the killing of George Floyd, but specifically argues that the visual artwork has functioned as a “political call to arms to collapse structural racism in America” (Cappelli, 2020, p. 323). The artwork thus served as a mobilization tactic due to its invoking of emotions across the United States. The role of emotions in shaping protest cannot be underestimated as emotions are an important part of creating collective identity and affective bonds between protesters, ultimately strengthening the movement (Jasper, 1998). Digital art was also often on display as a projection on the Robert E. Lee statue in Marcus-David Peters Circle. Figure 2 depicts the image of Senator John Lewis projected onto the base of the statue, squarely underneath the “BLM” image projected on the general’s statue itself. Through the use of digital technology, artists were able to portray the real image of a powerful civil rights leader underneath the “Black Lives Matter” acronym. While the image of Senator Lewis is certainly a tribute to his monumental work during the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s and early 70s, this positioning of his photo underneath the “BLM” image effectively creates a linkage between Senator Lewis’ historic civil rights advocacy and the modern movement for Black lives. The impact left by this image on its viewers is one of hope in the continuation of a freedom movement as people will continue to draw from the teachings of Senator Lewis far into the future.

**Figure 2:** This photograph of the Lee monument was taken on July 17, 2020, two days after the death of John Lewis, a respected leader of the Civil Rights Movement and former senator of the United States Senate. I took this photo in the middle of the street while police surrounded the area.

In addition to digital art, movement art has also been present in Richmond. Two Black ballerinas who have gained national attention for their photograph in front of the Lee statue, illustrate the similarities that they have seen between dance and the movement (Curran, 2020). One of the ballerinas, Ava Holloway, explicitly cites the parallels “between the demands of the art form and the burden racism creates for people of color” and how dance, instead, makes her feel powerful (Rodriguez, 2020). Because of the unique but empowering emotions generated by the art form and by the photography used to capture it, this image stemming from Richmond was able to receive national attention and thus, was able to contribute to a broader mobilization of folks by making them feel connected to and join the movement.

**Formation of Collective Identity**

In Richmond, artwork was also pivotal to generating the emotional responses necessary for mass mobilization within the Black Lives Matter movement. For example, Terry Kilby is a digital artist who traveled to Richmond in order to capture the Lee statue that was covered in graffiti art. By using digital technology, he was able to capture and “immortalize” the statue, making it forever stand as the “beacon of hope” that he describes it as (Rodriguez, 2020). This emotion was captured through digital illustration, and even if the actual graffiti were to be removed from the statue, the digital element would remain and continue to elicit emotional responses from its viewers.
cause and also to each other. Scholar Donatella della Porta argues that “social movements construct collective identities through the development of a common interpretation of reality. They construct frames about themselves and their enemies, and provide diagnosing and prognosis for social and political problems and solutions” (della Porta, 2018, p. 719). Ivan Arenas demonstrates how artwork lends itself to the “development of a common interpretation of reality” in the case of the Oaxacan residents who used artistic expression to foster “communal practices that gave rise to alternative models of human flourishing” (Arenas, 2011, p. 2). By creating these new models of living that are rid of suffering, Oaxacans’ artistic collaboration effectively created bonds among their residents and developed a sense of commonality necessary to move forward with their movement against an oppressive government.

Scattered throughout the city of Richmond are beautiful murals painted by the city’s residents. One mural, created by artists Jowarnise and Ian Hess, depicted a Black woman alongside Marcus-David Peters, a man tragically killed by police during a mental health emergency in 2018 (WTVR, 2020). In an interview, Jowarnise described the symbolism in the piece as representing the “heritage, interconnectedness, and history of struggles and triumphs that have shaped our cultural identity” in order to help viewers understand their “shared history” and “to foster compassion and mutual validation” (Moreno, 2020). From this description, the notion of building and maintaining a collective identity is evident. By emphasizing shared struggles and histories, Richmond’s artists want to engage in a community-building rooted in mutual understanding. This collective purpose that flows through the artist works of Richmond’s protestors consequently contributes to the strength of the movement as a whole.

Institutionalization

Another factor critical to the long-lasting success of a movement is the institutionalization that follows a period of rapid mobilization. As argued by Mark and Paul Engler in their book This is an Uprising: How Nonviolent Revolt is shaping the Twenty-First Century, “when mass mobilizations, established organizations, and alternative communities see themselves as complementary, they can create a movement ecosystem that allows diverse approaches to promoting change to flourish” (Engler & Engler, 2016, p. 262). It is imperative that mass mobilizations such as that of Black Lives Matter rely on other organizing traditions in order to institutionalize and create permanent change. In fact, Emma Dorland argues in her dissertation, “Creative Nonviolent Action: Leveraging the Intersections of Art, Protest and Information and Communications Technology for Social Change,” that art and technology as protest can function as a method to make movements more durable in the long run. She specifically claims that “combining creative mediums, nonviolent direct action, and new technologies in social movements has the power to sustain broader public participation in the project of establishing social justice and peace today” (Dorland, 2015, p. ii). Thus, while the BLM movement is primarily recognized for its work on the ground, the multitude of artistic influences and technological usages deployed alongside that direct action can potentially lead to the institutionalization of the movement’s values of social justice.

I posit that the process of institutionalization for the BLM movement has already begun in Richmond in part due to the aid of creative outlets. As discussions about police accountability transpired across the city, the city council began exploring potential options to address the city residents’ grievances. Through the art of storytelling, these grievances could be clearly voiced. The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) of Virginia is one of the largest civil liberties organizations to be based in Richmond and also one of the largest platforms to voice the people’s opinions. For example, the ACLU was in collaboration with other local organizations to hold multiple town halls to address the issue of police brutality and the spread of COVID-19 in prisons.

A primary feature of these popular town halls were the stories told by the people directly impacted by the justice system, such as formerly incarcerated individuals. Storytelling as an art form was not only able to capture the attention of structural organizations in the region that consequently shifted their attention to the BLM movement, but was also able to captivate Virginian legislators and city council members who held many sessions over the summer of 2020 to address these grievances. Thus, with the help of the local storytellers, Richmond organizations and politicians were able to digest the issues brought to light by the BLM movement and to work on materializing their demands into permanent fixtures (such as a police oversight board) and laws.

THE MISUSE OF PROTEST ART

In part due to the diverse forms of protest art created and displayed in the city of Richmond, many of the city’s residents have unified in allegiance to the Black Lives Matter movement and its mission. Although this paper focuses on the positive effects of protest art and its function in movement-building, there have been instances where artists and organizations have appropriated protest art for self-serving purposes that may detract from the movement. I believe that while these instances of performative and ill-meaning acts of artistic alliances do occur, they are not designed with the intent of serving as protest art, and consequently, do not reverse the positive effects of movement-building that typically sprout from protest art.

Some artists, associated with the Movement for Black Lives, have chosen to depict their artwork in exaggerated forms that romanticize the violence and hardship that Black people face. In her article, “Black Bodies, White Cubes: The Problem with Contemporary Art’s Appropriation of Race,” Taylor Renee Aldridge argues that “artists have made systemic racism look sexy; galleries have made it desirable for collectors” (Aldridge and Aldridge 2016). In an effort to popularize their artwork, artists may portray violence towards Black lives and destruction of Black lives in a way that diminishes their real impact in the world. However, artists who engage in this process are likely not creating artwork for the purpose of protest, but rather for the purpose of viewer satisfaction and consumption. While some of this artwork does unintentionally contribute to the larger goals of a movement, other pieces may not have the primary intent of advancing movement-building, but rather of obtaining viewer consumption. Artists may just want others to view their art, even if that entails misconstruing the
real reality behind the art. Because of this differing purpose that does not fit within the broader movement’s mission, these pieces of artwork should not qualify as protest art, and thus, should not detract from the processes of movement-building that other intent-based protest art can illicit.

Similarly, artists and organizations may want their artwork consumed for reasons pertaining to financial profiting. Aldridge describes her own apprehensions about some of the artists responding to the Black Lives Matter movement: “I wonder if artists… truly are concerned about black lives, or if they simply recognize the financial and critical benefits that go along with creating work around these subjects” (Aldridge and Aldridge 2016). Organizations also appear to be profiting off of artistic activism through their own means. For example, Katherine Timpf reported on the case of Urban Outfitters’ response to the Women’s Rights movement in her article, “Apparently, ‘Activist Appropriation’ Is a Thing Now” (Timpf, 2017). Urban Outfitters released a T-shirt with the slogan “burn your bra” on the front. By appropriating this symbol of the Women’s Rights movement and selling it for profit, Urban Outfitters also appears to be misconstruing the goals of the movement by selling its symbols for corporate gain. In these instances, despite drawing attention to the movement in question, artwork may not be directly contributing to the acts of movement-building because of its selfish motives. Throughout my paper, all of the forms of Richmond city art discussed were pieces of public art that do not require money to view or promote. While the artwork may ultimately generate profit for the artists, they were not intended to perform that function and thus can continue to strengthen the BLM movement.

CONCLUSION

The use of art in protest not only strengthens the foundational pillars necessary for a successful movement, but also ultimately serves as a tactic that movements can deploy. As argued by Austin Hoffman in his article, “Black Lives Matter: Pain, Protest, and Representation,” the BLM movement was able to conjure “activism that gives communities in pain new and creative outlets for objectifying and validating the lived experiences of racism” (Timpf, 2017). Deployed as a tool by the BLM movement, art as protest has been helpful in actualizing and bringing representation to the struggles and hardships of the Black community. Shedding light on these issues was one of the key goals of the movement and art functioned as a tactic that could achieve that goal.

Thus, art as protest has overall been an effective tool that has led to the ongoing successes of the Black Lives Matter movement. Creative outlets have shaped many of the elements that constitute a social movement such as its mission and goals, mobilization strategies, collective identity formation, issue framing, institutionalization, and general tactics. Through dance, graffiti, music, technology, storytelling, and photography, these mediums have left a very positive effect on the movement-building elements of Black Lives Matter in Richmond, Virginia. However, the movement is not over yet, and more research will need to be done in future years in order to measure the true success of the movement and what extent of that success can be attributed to the artistic Richmond community.

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Anaheed Mobaraki, a native of the great state of Maryland, is a senior political science major in Pauli Murray. Mobaraki’s research was inspired by her work this past summer at the ACLU of Virginia in Richmond, where she witnessed the rich culture and protest art associated with the Black Lives Matter movement first-hand. Her work led her to question how this protest art played a role in the formation and success of Richmond’s protests. Additionally, she was fascinated by the varying forms of art as well: there was digital art, more standard art, and graffiti—she took some photos herself of the artwork, including a photo of the infamous Robert E. Lee statue that circulated across various news agencies. Because she was able to experience the art in real time, and was able to take some of the photos herself, she got to make the research experience intensely personal. Undoubtedly, her writing focuses on artwork as explored through the written word, a fascinating process in which she was glad she could take part.

Beginning in her sophomore year, Mobaraki began volunteering with the Yale Undergraduate Prison Project (YUPP), tutoring students at a correctional facility 30 minutes outside of Yale. At the time, she did not know too much about the criminal justice system. However, after immersing herself directly in criminal justice work, she was able to break down all of the barriers, biases, and stereotypes she ever had about the system. This experience served as a launchpad for her; she became interested in police and prison abolition, abolition literature, and criminal justice reform. Despite her passion for teaching, the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly thwarted in-person tutoring opportunities, yet Anaheed has found a way to continue her criminal justice work by joining an organization entitled Mourning Our Losses. Born during the pandemic, this organization memorializes all the lives lost to coronavirus in American jails, prisons, and correctional facilities. She has been spending her time writing memorials and has been tracking and researching all of the names across four states and all I.C.E. detention centers, working to humanize a population that has been severely neglected yet brought to life during the pandemic in America.

As a first-generation college student, coming to Yale and being thrown into the intimidating academic environment was frightening. Yet, Mobaraki cannot stress enough the importance of reaching out to your personal librarian. After reaching out to her personal librarian her first semester four years ago, she learned how to find articles and manage citation resources through Zotero. Lastly, working through trial and error is sometimes the best way to approach research: start broad, but do not expect to end broad. Find the happy medium, narrowing down the scope, and work with your professor throughout the process. Staying confident, trying your best, and remaining dedicated—these three key components are essential to any research project.

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