

FORUM

The Black Fantastic in International Relations

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Abstract

In 2016, British investigative journalist Simon Rogers created a map/timeline of Twitter hashtags associated with Black Lives Matter. The map (which no longer exists) indirectly shows both the intensity of Black Lives Matter protests and their geographic scope. Within the United States, we see not only protest activity in metropolitan areas with large black population percentages, but also protest activity in metropolitan areas with few (if any) African Americans. Further, we see protests not just in the United States but throughout the world. The 2020 George Floyd murder arguably spurred more protests against police violence within the United States and around the world than any other moment. We understand these protests as part of a broader decolonial project that seeks to eradicate racialised violence. How does this project develop? In examining Black Lives Matter as a movement, most have either focused on domestic activity within the United States or on instances of international activity, but few have attempted to theorise its spread. I suggest that any approach that focuses solely or primarily on technological advances or on the work of activists misses an essential and under-examined element – US Black popular culture.

Keywords: Black Lives Matter; Black politics; pop culture; racial politics

In 2016, British investigative journalist Simon Rogers created a map/timeline of Twitter hashtags associated with Black Lives Matter. The map (which as of July 2023 can no longer be found on the Internet) indirectly shows both the intensity of Black Lives Matter protests and their geographic scope. Within the United States, we see protest activity not only in metropolitan areas with large African American population percentages, but also in metropolitan areas with few (if any) African Americans. Further we see protests not just in the United States but throughout the world. The 2020 George Floyd murder arguably spurred more protests against police violence within the United States and around the world than any other moment. We understand these protests as part of a broader decolonial project that seeks to eradicate racialised violence. How does this project develop? In examining Black Lives Matter as a movement, most have either focused on domestic activity within the United States or on instances of international activity, but few have attempted to theorise its spread. I suggest that any approach that focuses solely or primarily on technological advances or on the work of activists misses an essential and under-examined element – US Black popular culture. We know that popular culture shapes perceptions of the international order, as well as ideas about what should be done in instances of international instability. Further, we know that state identities are not simply state constructions – that is, one doesn't think of oneself as an 'American' solely through state census processes – but are also partial byproducts of popular

culture. However, while the literature talks about pop culture writ large as a way to understand international politics, very rarely do they interrogate the specific role of Black popular culture.¹

In this paper, I attempt to do so.

The paper proceeds as follows. I first present a brief overview of the Black Lives Matter movement, articulating its key contributions – drawing attention to police brutality and structural racism and enfolded the counter-productive into the Black body politic. I then briefly examine the literature on the role popular culture is posited to play in international relations and in Black American politics more generally. I then turn to an extended consideration of ways US Black popular culture serves as a critical resource that generates a counter-hegemonic interpretation of policing, one that both affects activists and is affected by them. As Black popular culture is not simply circulated within the United States but is circulated transnationally, it becomes a vehicle through which international understandings of and responses to racialised violence are generated.

Black Lives Matter

As the movement is still relatively new, the literature wrestling with Black Lives Matter is nascent. There is general agreement about the history – most argue that the movement began in response to George Zimmerman's acquittal of the murder of Trayvon Martin.² There is also general agreement about what the movement stands for. Theoretically, the hashtag encapsulated both a normative desire – that Black lives *should* matter (even though, based on state practices – particularly state police practices – they didn't seem to) – and a descriptive statement, that Black lives *did* matter, even if only to Black people. Further, as the movement often focused on working-class victims (predominantly Black men, which to a certain extent mirrors the disproportionate rate at which Black men are victimised by police actions) with weak connections to the economy *and* is led disproportionately by queer women, it describes a desire to enfold and recognise populations usually kept outside of the boundaries of Blackness.³ Particularly in the United States, where Blacks in the South were disfranchised from the end of the 19th century to the mid-1960s, Black elites attempted to gain citizenship rights by getting Black populations to adhere to mainstream norms and values, a strategy of *respectability* politics.⁴ By claiming that figures such as Eric Garner (who was engaged in the illegal practice of selling individual cigarettes when he was murdered) were worth supporting and fighting for, the movement expresses an explicitly anti-respectability politics.⁵

Although there are critics who posit that the movement's lack of an anti-capitalist focus is damning,⁶ there is general agreement about the movement's results. Politically, the movement generated several electoral victories, sending activists into public office. It also generated local, state, and

¹Robert A. Saunders, '(Profitable) imaginaries of Black power: The popular and political geographies of Black Panther', *Political Geography*, 69 (2019), pp. 139–49.

²Megan Ming Francis and Leah Wright-Rigueur, 'Black Lives Matter in historical perspective', *Annual Review of Law and Social Science*, 17 (2021), pp. 441–58; Alicia Garza, 'A herstory of the #BlackLivesMatter movement by Alicia Garza', *The Feminist Wire* (7 October 2014); Barbara Ransby, *Making All Black Lives Matter: Reimagining Freedom in the Twenty-First Century* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018); Deva R. Woodly, *Reckoning: Black Lives Matter and the Democratic Necessity of Social Movements* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022).

³Cathy J. Cohen, *The Boundaries of Blackness: AIDS and the Breakdown of Black Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

⁴Hazel V. Carby, 'Policing the Black woman's body in an urban context', *Critical Inquiry*, 18 (1992), pp. 738–55; Elizabeth B. Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880–1920* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

⁵Lester K. Spence, *Knocking the Hustle: Against the Neoliberal Turn in Black Politics* (New York City: Punctum, 2015); Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation* (New York: Haymarket Press, 2016).

⁶Cedric Johnson, 'The Panthers can't save us now', *Catalyst*, 1 (2017), pp. 56–85; Cedric Johnson, 'Coming to terms with actually-existing Black life: A response to Mia White and Kim Moody', *New Politics*, (2019), Available at: <https://newpol.org/coming-to-terms-with-actually-existing-black-life/>; Adolph Reed Jr., 'Antiracism: A neoliberal alternative to a left', *Dialectical Anthropology*, 42 (2018), pp. 105–15; Adolph Reed Jr., 'How racial disparity does not help make sense of patterns of police violence', Nonsite.org, 16 September 2016.

federal legislation designed to rein in police spending. It further forced the federal government to investigate a few large police departments. Indirectly, it led to trials of a number of police officers and brought more attention to police violence more broadly.⁷ Further, as racism was viewed as a fundamental cause of police violence, it indirectly led to an interrogation of racism more broadly.

One of the key aspects that made the movement possible was technological advances.⁸ Advances in social media technology made it possible to inexpensively and almost instantaneously communicate messages to tens of thousands of people across thousands of miles. Advances in computing technology – the rise of the smartphone specifically – made inexpensive high-quality video recordings possible. The first advances in technology made it possible for the reflections of two activists to become a mobilising tool. The second then made it possible to connect discrete instances of state-sponsored/sanctioned violence to the growing movement. Movements such as Occupy Wall Street, the Arab Spring, and Black Lives Matter do not happen without these advances. Social media platforms facilitate information vital to protest development, as well as the exchange of emotional content that generates the intensity required to develop and sustain movements.⁹ However these advances in and of themselves do not explain one dynamic essential to Black Lives Matter specifically – its spread across the United States and the world in areas without significant numbers of Black citizens/denizens. Simply because it is *possible* to communicate with large numbers of people across the world (or across the United States) does not necessarily mean that such communication would generate the type of protests that we have seen.

I argue that one element of the transnational movement that has gone relatively uninterrogated is Black popular culture. US Black sports figures not only took symbolic actions (here US football player Colin Kaepernick's decision to kneel rather than stand during the performance of the US national anthem stands out) but engaged in work stoppages (both the NBA and the WNBA as well as Major League Baseball postponed games due to player action, and US tennis player Naomi Osaka cancelled her appearance in a major tennis tournament).¹⁰ These individuals used their platform to express support for the movement and its tenets and in doing so increased its legitimacy both domestically and internationally. Further, even before this we see one specific form of popular culture consistently articulate a critique of police action and support for its disproportionately Black, male, and working-class victims: hip hop.

International Relations and Black pop culture

In a seminal 2009 article Kyle Grayson, Matt Davies, and Simon Philpott carved out a new research agenda within International Relations, arguing that popular culture represents a critical but under-examined element of world politics.¹¹ While institutional arrangements, interests, decision-making bureaucracies, and various state elites remain important in examining the relationships between state, market, and civil society, popular culture can often serve as a vehicle through which these relationships are articulated as well as a vehicle through which these relationships can be contested and/or disrupted. Along these lines, they argue that more attention should be paid to the various and sundry ways that pop culture represents and constitutes politics. Following up on this, scholars have articulated a range of themes, from recognising pop culture as the product of a particular

⁷Woodly, *Reckoning*.

⁸Marc L. Hill, "'Thank you, Black Twitter': State violence, digital counterpublics, and pedagogies of resistance', *Urban Education*, 53 (2018), pp. 286–302.

⁹John T. Jost, Pablo Barberá, Richard Bonneau, et al., 'How social media facilitates political protest: Information, motivation, and social networks', *Political Psychology*, 39 (2018), pp. 85–118.

¹⁰Lester K. Spence, 'The NBA wildcat strike is how a revolution starts', *Mother Jones*, 19 August 2020.

¹¹Kyle Grayson, Matt Davies, and Simon Philpott, 'Pop goes IR? Researching the popular culture–world politics continuum', *Politics*, 29 (2009), pp. 155–63.

type of increasingly global political economy, to studying the popular as a site for mobilisation, to examining its representational aspects.¹²

This line of research is intellectually and politically fruitful, as it helps us understand the thinking behind Ronald Reagan's 1983 articulation of his Strategic Defense Initiative as 'Star Wars' (even though the initiative itself had little to do with the film), as well as the Bush administration's reliance on the character Jack Bauer (of US television show *24* fame) to both develop and defend its counter-terrorism policy.¹³ Popular culture can serve as a vehicle through which broader publics understand international phenomena, it can serve as a site for certain types of mobilisation, and inasmuch as it is an international commodity, it is both shaped by and shapes political economy. But there are gaps, and I will focus on three. The first is its focus on the visual and relatedly the textual as opposed to the aural.¹⁴ The second is its relative inattention to the role of race and racial politics.¹⁵ The third is the relative absence of pop culture figures as elites capable of producing politics themselves. The consequence of the first is that we ignore other possible means of transmission, production, and consumption of geopolitical conceptions, and further that in ignoring other potential means we further reify an optic regime. The consequence of the second is that we double down on long-standing Eurocentric imaginings by locating agency and power primarily if not solely in the West (articulated racially as 'white'). The consequence of the third is that we miss a range of elites who have the capacity to significantly shape international attitudes and politics.

I would suggest that to a certain extent the sonic gap is *not* a gap that comes from the relative lack of scholarly attention paid to sound, but rather a gap that comes from not recognising pre-existing work. For example, Marilyn Franklin's work explicitly examining the sound politics of International Relations was published before the attempts to carve out a research agenda,¹⁶ and in it we see a range of careful attempts to examine the role of music. I would also suggest that the body of work that examines the racial politics of popular culture (and the international politics of sport) is extensive (and too long to list here). As we can conceive of Popular Culture in World Politics as an attempt to integrate a range of fields then, I would suggest that there are two fields that can bear further integration: the growing field of sonic studies and the field of Black studies. Below, I draw on the work of two scholars, Errol Henderson and Richard Iton, in order to trace a few potential lines of inquiry that help us think through the relationship between Black pop culture and Black Lives Matter domestically and internationally.

Normative and descriptive assessments of Black popular culture and politics

Although as I note above the research that examines the relationship between racial politics and pop culture is extensive, two recent works stand out in particular in examining the relationship between pop culture and Black politics specifically, Richard Iton's 2008 *In Search of the Black Fantastic* and Errol Henderson's 2019 *The Revolution Will Not Be Theorized*. While the two seek to answer two different questions (what *is* the relationship between Black popular culture and politics? What *should* be the relationship between Black pop culture and politics?), they both suggest

¹²Federica Caso and Caitlin Hamilton, *Popular Culture and World Politics: Theories, Methods, Pedagogies* (Bristol: E-International Relations Publishing, 2015); K. Grayson, 'Popular geopolitics and popular culture in world politics', in R. A. Saunders and V. Strukov (eds), *Popular Geopolitics: Plotting an Evolving Interdiscipline* (New York: Routledge, 2018), pp. 43–62; Calvert W. Jones and Celia Paris, 'It's the end of the world and they know it: How dystopian fiction shapes political attitudes', *Perspectives on Politics*, 16 (2018), pp. 969–89; Rhys Crilley, 'Where we at? New directions for research on popular culture and world politics', *International Studies Review*, 23 (2020), pp. 164–80; Saunders and Strukov (eds), *Popular Geopolitics*; Jutta Weldes and Chris Rowley, Available at: {<https://www.e-ir.info/publication/popular-culture-and-world-politics/>}, 'So, how does popular culture relate to world politics?', in *Popular Culture and World Politics: Theories, Methods, Pedagogies* (2015).

¹³Elsbeth Van Veen, 'Interrogating 24: Making sense of us counter-terrorism in the global war on terrorism', *New Political Science*, 31 (2009), pp. 361–84; Weldes and Rowley, 'So, how does popular culture relate to world politics?'

¹⁴Saunders and Strukov (eds), *Popular Geopolitics*.

¹⁵Crilley, 'Where we at?'

¹⁶Marianne I. Franklin, *Resounding International Relations: On Music, Culture, and Politics* (New York: Springer, 2005).

that the unique history of African Americans made culture a specifically political space for the articulation and generation of domestic and international politics. They make three sets of claims.

As African Americans were either explicitly disfranchised (in the American South through Jim Crow laws) or implicitly disfranchised (in the American North largely through rendering white populations incapable of voting for non-white candidates) for much of the twentieth century, the capacity they did have to make durable changes in American politics were politically limited. However, the cultural terrain was a different animal. American popular culture not only relied disproportionately on African American talent, many of the genres associated with American popular culture were created by African Americans.¹⁷ As Iton notes this led to very specific relationships between 'extra-state mobilization ... state-focused protest organizations such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) ... and the media of religiosity and popular culture'.¹⁸ In part because Blacks were disfranchised from political participation and hence unable to elect political representation, Black artists themselves often acted in a political capacity, using their artistic platform to speak out against racial discrimination. In the Civil Rights/Black Power era, artists such as John Coltrane and Nina Simone used Black popular music to articulate visceral critiques of racist state violence in works like 'Alabama' and 'Mississippi Goddamn' respectively, and figures such as Harry Belafonte and Sidney Poitier used their resources to directly aid the Civil Rights Movement. Further, there is a significant institutional element here, as in specific moments Black cultural institutions have served to organise Black political capacity in inflection points such as the US Civil War.¹⁹

Though as I note both are particularly interested in African American politics, they suggest that the work Black popular culture performed was not only domestic but transnational in nature. As race was not simply politically constructed domestically but transnationally,²⁰ US Blacks tended to understand and construct their circumstances as linked to black populations across the globe. As Black popular culture genres like jazz circulate, politics often circulate through them. The United States used jazz and artists such as Louis Armstrong and Dizzy Gillespie to contest Communist claims of American hypocrisy and develop ties in the growing Third World. In turn, both artists used these opportunities to push the United States on domestic issues.²¹ In this instance, we see both Black cultural production itself functioning to spread ideas and ideals about American democracy and Black artists acting as ambassadors (for the US government) on the one hand and as informal political representatives (for African American constituencies) on the other. And this dynamic is multidirectional. As the Third World asserts itself (in instances through the actions of Black elites educated in historically Black colleges and universities), Black US artists shift artistically and politically – beat poet Amiri Baraka (née Leroi Jones) develops and tests theories of cultural revolution in Newark, New Jersey after protesting the murder of Amílcar Cabral and in 1972 is one of the leaders of the National Black Political Assembly (the first post-civil rights era attempt to bring together African American elected officials and African American political activists for the purpose of creating a unified African American political agenda).²² In this latter instance, the content of his poetry changes, and then his own political behaviour changes.

Finally, recognising that the cultural arena itself was shaped by political economy, they suggest that the specific political content was overdetermined by the institutional and technological

¹⁷Harold Cruse, *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* (New York: Morrow, 1967), p. 594.

¹⁸Richard Iton, *In Search of the Black Fantastic: Politics and Popular Culture in the Post-Civil Rights Era* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 4.

¹⁹Errol A. Henderson, *The Revolution Will Not Be Theorized: Cultural Revolution in the Black Power Era* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2019).

²⁰Debra Thompson, *The Schematic State: Race, Transnationalism, and the Politics of the Census* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

²¹Iton, *In Search of the Black Fantastic*; Harold Cruse, *Rebellion or Revolution?* (New York: Morrow, 1968), p. 272; Harold Cruse, *Plural but Equal: A Critical Study of Blacks and Minorities and America's Plural Society* (New York: William Morrow, 1987), p. 420.

²²Henderson, *The Revolution Will Not Be Theorized*; Iton, *In Search of the Black Fantastic*.

arrangements that dictated how popular culture was produced and circulated. For Iton, the technological shift that made the visual more important in Black popular culture and also increased the number of avenues through which Black popular culture could circulate (here the development of cable television stands out) both generates changes in Black popular culture and also renders it more fraught in important ways because it became increasingly public (that is, available to populations that were not African American). Henderson, relying on the work of Harold Cruse, suggested that the lack of ownership of the means of production had significant consequences for the revolutionary potential of Black popular culture.²³ Inasmuch as the cultural apparatus became a more critical aspect of the nation's economy, the economic benefits of cultural production would accrue increasingly to Black communities themselves (as opposed to the white owners of the means of cultural production), and owning the means of production would likely create the cultural shift in Black and white attitudes alike that would generate the conditions for revolution.

These three aspects speak to the core themes identified by Popular Culture and World Politics (PCWP) and popular geopolitics scholars. PCWP and popular geopolitics scholars believe that pop culture represents a core site of political production, and we see this in *Black Fantastic and Revolution* (and by extension in the work on Black popular culture and politics more broadly). Black popular culture serves as a powerful vehicle of political production and political critique. PCWP and popular geopolitics scholars are interested in the ways that various political actors use pop culture to generate political support, and we see this in the work on the politics of Black popular culture. Finally, PCWP and geopolitics scholars are attentive to the role political economy plays in these dynamics, and we see this in the work on Black popular culture as well. But given the unique history of African Americans, we see much more of a focus on artists and culture workers themselves, and much more of a focus on the sonic. How might we use these insights to reflect upon Black Lives Matter organising?

As Henderson published *Revolution* in 2019, he was able to examine Black Lives Matter protests up to but not including the George Floyd protests of 2020 (unfortunately, Richard Iton passed away in 2013). He suggested that advances in social media technology that enabled Black Lives Matter make a Crusean strategy of Black cultural revolution far more possible. He notes that Black Lives Matter activism has generated a shift in cultural production (hip hop and sports in particular) that works as a force multiplier. However, in part because he was interested in US dynamics specifically, he did not focus on the particular role Black popular culture and Black Lives Matter activism plays in shifting international politics as opposed to domestic US politics.

Hip hop and the neoliberal turn

Scholars and activists alike have investigated the role neoliberalisation plays in the contemporary moment. Most situate its beginnings in the early seventies, and in the United States the successful enforcement of austerity on New York City looms large.²⁴ It is not a coincidence that most historians also locate the beginnings of hip hop in the Bronx in 1972. While President Ford did not metaphorically tell New York City to 'drop dead' (in response to pleas from administrators to provide federal funds to deal with municipal debt) until 1975, Daniel Patrick Moynihan (then counsellor to President Richard Nixon) had suggested a policy of 'benign neglect' on race in 1970 that had already begun to shape the policy that would decimate the Bronx, the borough most associated with hip hop's development.²⁵ If the core elements of what we now know as hip hop (MCing, breakdancing, DJing, and graffiti) come together in the mid-seventies in New

²³Henderson, *The Revolution Will Not Be Theorized*.

²⁴Kim Phillips-Fein, *Fear City: New York's Fiscal Crisis and the Rise of Austerity Politics* (New York: Metropolitan Books, Henry HOH and Company, 2017); William K. Tabb, *The Long Default: New York City and the Urban Fiscal Crisis* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1982), p. 154.

²⁵Deborah Wallace and Rodrick Wallace, *A Plague on Your Houses: How New York Was Burned Down and National Public Health Crumbled* (New York: Verso, 1998).

York, the core policy elements of what we associate with neoliberalism (reduced labour rights, a reduction in the ability to collect taxes, a reduction in social service provision, an increase in privatisation, and an increase in punitive approaches to crime) come together in the same space at around the same time.

Early scholarship on hip hop posited it as a direct response to the neoliberal turn and suggested that the generation of Black youth growing up under and with it were shaped politically by consuming it. Further they suggested a unique politics associated with it.²⁶ Hip-hop artists seek to 'represent' and in so doing make their realist representations reflect and stand in for African American life writ large. In my own work I found empirical support for these claims.²⁷ Realist examinations of urban life constituted a significant element of rap and hip hop produced during the nineties and into the 21st century, with a *descriptive* realist component that attempted to draw the listener/viewer into a world depicted without filter (or critique) and an *argumentative* realist component that, while drawing the listener/viewer in, provides a critique of that selfsame world. While in complicated ways I found that rap and hip hop tended to reproduce the neoliberal turn in Black politics rather than contest it, the one critical exception to this complicated rendering was in its approach to the police and police violence. NWA's (Niggaz With Attitudes) 'Fuck Tha Police' and Ice T's 'Cop Killer' were the important records here, clearly articulating how police tend to function in working-class communities; however, they were by no means the only ones. Indeed, both aurally and visually (as rap and hip hop began to circulate through music videos and through film and television) we see rap and hip hop serve as perhaps the one consistent space in which we see a rich critique of police violence. By way of comparison, the 1993 National Black Politics Study, one of the most important surveys of Black American attitudes conducted in the early nineties, contained only one question examining the police (asking respondents whether police were an important means of stopping gang violence *or* too much like another gang themselves to stop gang violence – note that both focus on *gang* violence rather than police violence itself).²⁸

Now when hip hop first develops, it is part of 'the black counterpublic';²⁹ and it functions both as a vehicle of popular entertainment (to be sure there is variation here – even though graffiti is a critical component of hip hop it does not circulate in quite the same way as rap does as it is not commodified in the same way) and as a vehicle of intra-racial political communication and critique. However hip hop circulates, not only through music but also through music videos, movies and television, fashion, and sports, it becomes far more public. First-person realist narratives create an affinity between the listener and the artist. With critical exceptions, the individuals harmed through violent encounters either with police or with individuals acting

²⁶Todd Boyd, 'Check yo self, before you wreck yo self: Variations on a political theme in rap music and popular culture', in The Black Public Sphere Collective (ed.), *The Black Public Sphere* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), pp. 293–316; Todd Boyd, *The New H.N.I.C. (Head Niggas in Charge): The Death of Civil Rights and the Reign of Hip Hop* (New York: New York University Press, 2002); Michael Dawson, 'Dis beat disrupts: Rap, ideology, and political attitudes', in Marc Lamont (ed.), *The Cultural Territories of Race* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), pp. 318–42; Murray Forman, *The Hood Comes First: Race, Space, and Place in Rap and Hip-Hop* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2002); Errol A. Henderson, 'Black nationalism and rap music', *Journal of Black Studies*, 26 (1996), pp. 308–39; James D. Johnson, Mike S. Adams, and Leslie Ashburn, 'Differential gender effects of exposure to rap music on African American adolescents' acceptance of teen dating violence', *Sex Roles*, 33 (1995), pp. 597–605; Imani Perry, *Prophets of the Hood: Politics and Poetics in Hip Hop* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004); Eithne Quinn, *Nuthin' but a 'G' Thang: The Culture and Commerce of Gangsta Rap* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005); S. Craig Watkins, *Hip Hop Matters: Politics, Pop Culture, and the Struggle for the Soul of a Movement* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2005), p. 295.

²⁷Lester K. Spence, *Stare in the Darkness: The Limits of Hip-Hop and Black Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

²⁸Michael Dawson, Ronald Brown, James S. Jackson, and Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research, 'National Black Politics Study, 1993', Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research [distributor], Ann Arbor, MI, 1998.

²⁹Black Public Sphere Collective (ed.), *The Black Public Sphere*, p. 350; Joanna Brooks, 'The early American public sphere and the emergence of a Black print counterpublic', *William & Mary Quarterly*, 62 (2005), pp. 67–92; Catherine Squires, 'Rethinking the Black public sphere: An alternative vocabulary for multiple public spheres', *Communication Theory*, 12 (2002), pp. 446–68.

like police, were – as early hip-hop MCs represent themselves – Black and working-class men. The more these images (and the ideas associated with them) circulate, the more individuals outside of communities like Compton, California can sympathise with them. Further even as standard narratives focus on ‘crime scripts’ that reproduce ideas that police *solve* rather than *produce* crime³⁰ and as television police procedurals (which have for decades constituted the highest-rated television shows in America) tend to overemphasise police professionalism and underemphasise police violence,³¹ it was arguably hip hop that consistently articulated a counter-hegemonic concept of policing. Further, although its gender politics are incredibly complicated, it is hip hop that particularly in its early decades articulated what could be called an anti-respectability politics, a politics that I suggest Black Lives Matter activists drew upon in their organising.

This increased the degree to which black populations themselves were prone to understand the tragic deaths of Eric Garner and Michael Brown as well as that of Trayvon Martin as linked to one another *and* linked to their own lives (even President Obama noted that what happened to Martin could have happened to his own children if he had had boys rather than girls), hip hop worked to prime non-Black audiences to think in similar ways. When activists used social media to mobilise populations, the populations they tended to mobilise were populations already most likely to receive, accept, and respond favourably to the anti-policing argument.

But what explains the international dynamic?

Hip-hop serves to reproduce ideas about urban space during the neoliberal turn. This reproduction has political consequences organisationally and attitudinally. But with the growing way that populations and culture travels across borders, particularly within and through metropolitan areas such as New York, Paris, and Tokyo, hip hop now circulates globally. And with its circulation a few different things happen. People are exposed to the ideas embedded in hip hop. These ideas communicate notions of race, space, and time that are uniquely American. But these notions have the capacity to then be translated and ‘glocalised.’³² The early literature on hip hop and rap in Eastern Europe,³³ England,³⁴ Southern Europe,³⁵ Australia,³⁶ Japan,³⁷ and Cuba³⁸ focused on how hip hop shaped processes of local identity formation. However, I suggest that we can understand hip hop not only as a vehicle by which youth develop their own identities but also as a vehicle of transnational political production. To an extent, particularly because hip hop is understood as a Black American export, as an art form that was largely created by and for Black working-class youth, marginalised populations have used it to engage in political critique.

³⁰Frank D. Gilliam Jr. and Shanto Iyengar, ‘Prime suspects: The influence of local television news on the viewing public,’ *American Journal of Political Science*, 44 (2000), pp. 560–73; Nicholas A. Valentino, ‘Crime news and the priming of racial attitudes during evaluations of the president,’ *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 63 (1999), pp. 293–320.

³¹Kathleen M. Donovan and Charles F. Klahm, ‘The role of entertainment media in perceptions of police use of force,’ *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, 42 (2015), pp. 1261–81.

³²Roland Robertson, ‘Glocalization: Time-space and homogeneity-heterogeneity,’ in Miiie Featherstone, Scott Lash, and Roland Robertson (eds), *Global Modernities* (London: Sage, 1995), pp. 25–44; Erik Swyngedouw, ‘Globalisation or “glocalisation”? Networks, territories and rescaling,’ *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 17 (2004), pp. 25–48.

³³Andy Bennett, ‘Hip hop am main: The localization of rap music and hip hop culture,’ *Media, Culture & Society*, 21 (1999), pp. 77–91; Dennison Bertram, ‘Czech hip Republic hop,’ *New Presence: The Prague Journal of Central European Affairs*, 5 (2003), pp. 42–43.

³⁴Andy Bennett, ‘Rappin’ on the Tyne: White hip hop culture in Northeast England – an ethnographic study,’ *The Sociological Review*, 47 (1999), pp. 1–24.

³⁵Marcella Filippa, ‘Popular song and musical cultures,’ in David Forgacs and Robert Lumley (eds), *Italian Cultural Studies* (New York: Oxford University, 1996), pp. 327–43.

³⁶Tony Mitchell, *Popular Music and Local Identity: Rock, Pop, and Rap in Europe and Oceania* (London: Leicester University Press, 1996).

³⁷Noriko Manabe, ‘Globalization and Japanese creativity: Adaptation of Japanese language to rap,’ *Ethnomusicology*, 50 (2006), pp. 1–36.

³⁸Sujatha Fernandes, *Cuba Represent! Cuban Arts, State Power, and the Making of New Revolutionary Cultures* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006).

The beginnings of rap music in France reveal the power of American media circulation through a variety of domestic and international routes. Fab Freddy included a French rap track as the B-side of a 12" recording he released in the United States in 1979. Later that same year Chagrin d'Amour released an album in France that French artists today largely consider to be the first French rap album. During the same general period, Afrika Bambaataa introduced rap and breakdancing to French youth by establishing a branch of the Zulu Nation in a Parisian *banlieue*.³⁹ French rap was largely an underground phenomenon during its early years, with very little airplay on the radio and little to no coverage on television.

The first French response to rap was threefold, with state officials recognising it, French cultural conservatives demeaning it, and French consumers supporting it. The Ministry of Culture under Jack Lang recognised both rap and graffiti. This did not increase its consumption but served as a symbolic gesture. French conservatives on the other hand argued against this move, noting that recognising rap, graffiti, and other more popular forms of culture in effect rendered the term 'culture' meaningless. But French consumers supported the art form, and by 1989 French rap was so popular within the country that French artists were able to release an all-French rap anthology (*Rapattitudes*).⁴⁰ By the early 1990s, not only had rap become one of the most popular forms of music within France (particularly among French youth) but like its American counterpart, its production and circulation had become infused with an aggressive political critique.

One of the first political institutions to come under critique was the French police. In an article comparing the repression of hip hop in France and in the United States, Prévós cites Ministère AMER's 'Sacrifice de poulets' ('Sacrifice of Chickens' – Prévós notes that 'chickens' operates in France the way that 'pig' does in the United States vis à vis the police) as one example.⁴¹ Ministère AMER was one of the more prominent French rap groups of the early nineties, their name being an acronym (A.M.E.R. stands for 'Action Musique et Rap' or 'Action Music and Rap') that alludes to combining political action and hip hop. There are three aspects of this particular track that are important. The first is that thematically it shares a great deal with Ice T's 'Cop Killer', not only in its trenchant critique of the police – who operated with regard to immigrant suburban youth in similar ways as their American counterparts – but also in its prescription (hence the term 'sacrifice').

The second is that this track's production was also designed to aid in the circulation of another cultural production that dealt with immigrant youth in French *banlieues* – the French film *La Haine* (*The Hate*).⁴² The third is the political response it engendered. Although the track and the album met with critical acclaim, members of the police union viewed the track to be an incitement to attack the police. Again, this is similar to the way that 'Cop Killer' and 'Fuck Tha Police' and the artists associated with them were treated by American law enforcement. But in the French case speech *outside* of the bounds of cultural production urging attacks on the police is *not* protected. The song 'Sacrifice de poulets' can call for all manner of attacks on the police with no sanction – but making comments outside of the confines of the recording studio (or concert performance) is another matter. Ministère AMER made a number of critical comments allegedly calling for youth to defend themselves against the police, and these comments were used by the police union to

³⁹ Alain-Philippe Durand, *Black, Blanc, Beur: Rap Music and Hip-Hop Culture in the Francophone World* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2002).

⁴⁰ André J. M. Prévós, 'The evolution of French rap music and hip hop culture in the 1980s and 1990s', *The French Review*, 5 (1996), pp. 713–25.

⁴¹ André J. M. Prévós, 'Hip-hop, rap, and repression in France and the United States', *Popular Music & Society*, 22 (1998), pp. 67–84 (p. 67).

⁴² Just as the records that I deal with here engage in cross-Atlantic dialogue with American rap, the movie *La Haine* also engages in a cross-Atlantic dialogue with films such as *Boyz in the Hood* and *Menace II Society* among others. Erin Schroeder, 'A multicultural conversation: *La Haine*, *Rai*, and *Menace II Society*', *Camera Obscura*, 16 (2001), pp. 143–79, Dominique Bluher, 'Hip-Hop Cinema in France', pp. 77–97.

prosecute the group, who were later found guilty of having called for the killing of police officers and of insulting them and were condemned to pay over FF330,000 (approximately \$59,000).⁴³

The group Supreme NTM (NTM is an acronym for 'Nique Ta Mère' or 'Fuck Your Mother') also has a history of combining social action and hip hop using its music to engage in critiques of the police and other aspects of the French state and French civil society on the one hand and actually engaging in political activity on the other. Songs like 'Qui paiera les dégâts' ('Who Will Pay for the Damages'), which deals with the penalties associated with the French abandonment of (immigrant) youth, and 'Police', both taken from the 1993 album *J'appuie sur la gâchette* (*I Squeeze the Trigger*) set the stage for much of the more aggressive French rap that followed. When the ultra-right political party Front National were able to elect a number of mayors to cities with large North African immigrant populations on anti-immigrant (and anti-pop culture) platforms fuelled by anxiety, former Minister of Culture Jack Lang along with a number of opposing political forces organised a concert at which Supreme NTM performed. Between tracks the group allegedly referred to the police as fascists. In response to their presence in general, and to the language they used to refer to police *between* performances, they too were punished by the French penal system.⁴⁴

Black Lives Matter activists within the United States were able to reorient how US Black and non-black populations alike thought about police and the disproportionately Black victims of police violence. Arguably, they did so by drawing upon ideas of police and policing generated in part by Black popular culture in general and by hip hop in particular. As hip hop circulates internationally we see youth increasingly use it to not only articulate their identity but also to articulate a critique of state-sanctioned police violence. Just as we can attribute the spread of domestic Black Lives Matter protests in places with little to no black populations to the spread of Black popular culture, I suggest we can attribute a part of the expansion of Black Lives Matter protests internationally to its spread as well.

Conclusion

The PCWP/popular geopolitics literature has shifted how we think about international relations, has shifted the types of questions we ask, and has fundamentally shifted where International Relations scholars turn to for answers. However, it has largely left the terrain occupied by scholars of Black popular culture and politics untouched. On the other hand, while scholars of (US) Black popular culture and politics have long understood that the popular is an important site of political production and contestation and have recognised Black politics as a transnational project, they have under-examined the degree to which the contemporary moment indelibly shaped by Black Lives Matter is not simply a domestic project but a transnational one. In this short paper, I sought to examine the fundamental way Black popular culture made possible the intervention made by Black Lives Matter activists. It did so by priming activists to understand policing as a structural act of violence. It did so by forging intra-racial ties between Blacks of highly disparate wealth differentials, ties that generated international work stoppages that increased the reach and depth of engagement with the issue of racialised violence. It did so by providing Black Lives Matter activists with resources they could use to independently fund political action. And because in many ways Black popular culture (hip hop in particular) has become synonymous with American popular culture, Americans of all backgrounds could see themselves in people like George Floyd and Michael Brown in ways that they could not decades ago, and this led to protest activity not only in places with high black population percentages but also in places with no black population to speak of.

Activists on the other side of the Atlantic responded in kind because they too saw themselves in George Floyd. The policing dynamic that wracks America was always already transnational inasmuch as many of the strategies police in the United States use come from transnational sources,

⁴³Prévos, 'Hip-hop, rap, and repression', p. 72.

⁴⁴Prévos, 'Hip-hop, rap, and repression', p. 73.

and in the last decade of the twentieth century nations like France used American police strategies to deal with their own marginalised populations. However, this translation was made possible both because of elite-level action – police units borrowing American policing strategies and tactics at the behest of state actors – and because of action at the level of Black popular culture. As hip hop travelled across the Atlantic, it provided local marginalised youth with a ready-made language to understand and connect US policing activity to issues they faced. And as sports figures and other celebrities began to speak out against racism and engage in work stoppages, it provided sports figures across the world with an opportunity to do so.

With this said, I will close with a set of thoughts that point to the possibility of yet another research agenda.

I have noted above that race is a transnational idea. However, just as there are nations with racial projects like the United States, there are nations with dissimilar racial projects. Technically, as France does not collect racial statistics and is forbidden by law from doing so, France is a colour-blind society.⁴⁵ In the late 1990s, French scholars Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc Wacquant accused several US scholars (Michael Hanchard most prominent among them) of imposing US racial categories on the Brazil case, and in so doing participating in a peculiar instance of US cultural imperialism.⁴⁶ This accusation generated several responses, including one from Hanchard himself, who suggested that Bourdieu and Wacquant had in fact misrecognised the degree to which transnational Black politics itself elides easy attempts to cordon populations off each other by dint of their membership in different nation-states.

In their view, national populations are aligned by territorial, cultural, and state fixity, and so Brazilian and US citizens in general, and Afro-Brazilian and US African Americans in particular, are divided according to the aforementioned coordinates. It is impossible, under their framework, to identify and read cultural and ideological distinctions within the United States or Brazil, or the possibility that cross-cutting cleavages, overlapping interests, ideological or cultural commonalities could traverse boundaries of nation, 'national culture and state.'⁴⁷

While I think Hanchard's critique of Bourdieu and Wacquant is correct – both scholars did ignore French colonialism and underestimated the agency of Brazilian scholars – through Derek Robbins,⁴⁸ I understand Bourdieu and Wacquant's broader project as a political attempt to create a transnational coterie of intellectuals powerful enough to ideationally contest globalisation. The specific critique they levy against Hanchard and other US scholars is one designed to call attention to the possibility that specific groups of intellectuals may – through their connection to powerful national and transnational institutions – overdetermine transnational political actions and trajectories. In this instance, while Black Lives Matter activists have caused us to focus on racialised violence broadly, it is worth ferreting out the degree to which the specific understandings of racialised violence engendered by the US case and extending outwards are understandings that accurately reflect the manifestations of violence in other instances.

One of the reasons Errol Henderson, himself an African American International Relations scholar, focused primarily on the United States was because while he believes white supremacy to be a core component of international relations, he also believes that the experiences of African American populations are unique enough that it did not make political or empirical sense for

⁴⁵Erik Bleich, *Race Politics in Britain and France: Ideas and Policymaking since the 1960s* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

⁴⁶Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc Wacquant, 'On the cunning of imperialist reason', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 16 (1999), pp. 41–58.

⁴⁷Michael Hanchard, 'Acts of misrecognition: Transnational Black politics, anti-imperialism and the ethnocentrism of Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc Wacquant', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 20 (2003), pp. 5–29 (p. 6).

⁴⁸Derek Robbins, 'Postscript: On the cunning of imperialist reason' – some contextual notes', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 20 (2003), pp. 71–8.

African Americans to base their cultural revolutionary project on the dynamics of other regions. Newly independent African states, while providing strategic opportunities for transnational cooperation, were so different from the United States that attempting either to understand African American experiences as like (if not the same as) African ones (through, for instance, understanding Blacks in the US as an ‘internal colony’) or to create a political project based on these understandings did not make much sense. By taking understandings of racialised violence from the United States and simply porting them into contexts with different racial technologies, it is possible that Black Lives Matter activists abroad may be making a similar type of intellectual and political error.

Further, as I note above, one of the central purposes of Black Lives Matter is to create conditions in which all Black lives do in fact matter. The phrase ‘Black Lives Matter’ here acts normatively as an attempt to actively produce conditions in which Black lives are treated the same as non-Black ones. In the domestic US sphere, this makes a great deal of sense inasmuch as Black lives are not treated the same as white ones, even given significant transformations in the American state as the result of the US Civil Rights Movement. Looking at other nations with similar racial technologies it is also clear that black populations simply are not valued to the same degree that non-Black ones are. Taking even a relatively dissimilar case like Brazil – the subject of Hanchard’s work and Bourdieu and Wacquant’s critique – we see that Blackness itself is a clear demarcating space distinguishing those who are at the bottom of every important social indicator from those who are at the top. Further, we see Blackness used as a critical organising tool – in fact in stark contradistinction to Hanchard’s own work, which focuses on intellectual elites, we see it used by Black working-class populations.⁴⁹ However if we are to consider Black Lives Matter as a transnational project, it bears asking the question, why are the primary protests generated transnationally generated by acts of violence against Black working-class men in the United States? If racialised violence really is an international condition, there is on the surface of it no clear reason why we would expect state violence perpetrated against African Americans to consistently serve as the vehicle for transnational activism, if we do not take Black American transnational power into effect. Indeed, as Krystal Strong notes, one of the most important developments in Africa was the explosion of youth-led protests in Nigeria and South Africa, protests that received little if any media coverage.⁵⁰ If all Black lives really do matter, what about those lives?

Finally, and relatedly, I noted above the powerful critique levied largely by Black Marxist scholars that Black Lives Matter movements were largely inattentive to anti-capitalist critiques, as they were far more likely to see police violence as instances of anti-Black racism than capitalism. While I believe these critiques get something incredibly wrong here – Occupy Wall Street and Black Lives Matter in tandem have significantly shifted our discourse away from the neoliberal turn in ways that none of us would have predicted two decades ago – they are correct in noting that whatever intra-racial solidarity that Black Lives Matter has generated domestically is overdetermined by the interests of black populations with far more access to capital and resources than the populations most likely to be victimised by police violence. If we take that dynamic and apply it more broadly, it is possible that what we are witnessing is not simply the attempt to change the world in a way that Black Lives Matter, in a way that makes racialised violence less likely to happen; but we are witnessing an attempt to build a new Black transnational project that articulates a specific set of interests and a specific way of viewing race and anti-Blackness and using that to create a Black agenda that benefits itself at the exclusion of other populations.

⁴⁹ Jaime A. Alves, ‘From necropolis to blackpolis: Necropolitical governance and Black spatial praxis in São Paulo, Brazil’, *Antipode*, 46 (2014), pp. 323–39; Keisha-Khan Y. Perry, *Black Women against the Land Grab: The Fight for Racial Justice in Brazil* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press) (2013).

⁵⁰ Krystal Strong, ‘Do African lives matter to Black Lives Matter? Youth uprisings and the borders of solidarity’, *Urban Education*, 53 (2017), pp. 265–85.

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