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From Standoff to Foundations: On Black Lives Matter and All Lives Matter

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In this essay, Ashley Atkins argues that the current framing surrounding public understanding of “Black Lives Matter” presents a false dilemma and a misunderstanding of both the political analyses and aims of those who use the phrase. In this review, I will give a synopsis of her main arguments, relevant sub-arguments, and implications. My main conclusion is this: the paper provides a strong account of Black politics that need not define themselves in relation to whiteness. That said, points where the paper is under-theorized present opportunities to build out from a strong foundation.

“I Don’t See Color”

To begin, Atkins presents existing accounts of an interpretive standoff, between whether “Black Lives Matter” is taken to mean “Black Lives Matter, *too*” or “*Only* Black Lives Matter.” Existing scholarship, which accepts this framing, argues that ignorance toward the plight of Black people is due to colorblindness, the view that race ought to be irrelevant in the distribution of opportunities or that we currently do not live in a racially unjust society to begin with. Writers such as Michelle Alexander (2010) or Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2014) argue that a searching analysis of colorblindness is a necessary condition to understanding how racism operates in our current moment.

Let us call this the colorblindness view of racism (which I will call colorblindness from here on out). If one accepts the colorblindness construction, an apparent benefit is that it explains the debate surrounding “Black Lives Matter.” Those who accept colorblindness think “Black Lives Matter” to be exclusive, i.e. *only* Black lives matter. Those who accept “Black Lives Matter” intend the phrase to be inclusive, i.e. that Black lives matter, *too*.

Atkins argues that both these interpretations fall well short; she contends that colorblindness is not necessary to an understanding of the phrase “Black Lives Matter” in its fullest sense. As Atkins argues, “[we] are to think that either those who say ‘Black Lives Matter’ are affirming the value of non-black lives or they are rejecting the value of those lives, but [the phrase] need not be understood as doing either.”¹

Black Lives Matter exists outside this false dilemma. Black Lives Matter, on her view, does three things: It exposes white systems of value/power; it identifies whiteness as a locus of domination; it argues that colorblindness misrepresents the way in which Black Lives Matter resists white supremacy. Thus, a colorblindness analysis cannot account the misrepresentations of “Black Lives Matter.”

The Power to Matter

Atkins does not stop here, however. She claims that Black Lives Matter, far from aiming to be palatable to white people, is a phrase that stems from and positively affirms its own, resistant epistemology. And in building her case, history is her guide. She draws from the work of Stokely Carmichael, particularly his work to register Black voters in Lowndes

¹ Atkins, 4.

County, Alabama. For Carmichael, the phrase “Black Power” was created specifically in opposition to white supremacy and to notions of inclusion that, to him, did not call whiteness into question.

“Black Power” meant meaningful participation in politics such that Black people could use the vote and build capacity in Lowndes County. Like the name implies, “Black Power” sought to expose whiteness and white people as having power over Black People; thus, the anti-racist goal was not to secure freedom or a fleeting notion of justice for Black people, but power.

Moreover, “Black Power” was created by Black people for Black people. Thus, neither the phrase nor its use was meant for white people, and to the extent that it caused discomfort among liberal white people of the time, such discomfort is indicative of 1) how they understand (white) power to operate and 2) a subsequent fear of violent reprisal from Black people.²

Atkins uses this example to ground her claim that colorblindness cannot contribute to understanding the anti-racist thrust of “Black Lives Matter.” The existing construction of the debate ignores that “Black Lives Matter” is meaningful because it highlights how white lives have mattered in the Western world, and how White lives mattering requires that Black lives do not. Thus, the dissolution of whiteness as a system of domination is a necessary condition for Black liberation.

As Atkins maintains, the words “Black Lives Matter”

do not merely convey a need to prioritize, highlight, or foreground the vulnerability of [Black people], leaving aside all question of how it is that white lives are valued. Nor against color-blind approaches, does the provocation lie in the invocation of blackness, but in the implication that there is (already) a racialized system of value in place, that excludes in virtue of being a locus of domination.³

Both analogy and *reductio ad absurdum* frame Atkins’s conclusion. It is power, not value, that puts domination into focus. According to Atkins, to assert that “Black Lives Matter” is not to say that Black lives ought to be valued as much as white lives, just as to assert Black Power is not to say that it ought to be valued as much as white power. Black Power and Black Lives Matter are similar in that they exist in resistance to whiteness; moreover, it is resistant to ostensibly anti-racist programs that support, to paraphrase Carmichael, inclusion into white spaces. The problem between how these anti-racist phrases are received and what they in fact articulate, reflects a interpretive chasm that, for Atkins, rises to the status of an interpretive injustice.

² Such a fear of violent reprisal by white people has a long history. See Thomas Jefferson’s Notes on the State of Virginia, book XIV.

³ Atkins, 9.

Interpretive Injustice

The conception of interpretive injustice that Atkins uses builds on work by Luvell Anderson (2014), but more foundationally, that of Miranda Fricker (2007). Fricker, in her book *Epistemic Injustice: Ethics and the Power of Knowing*, develops an account of hermeneutical injustice as part of epistemic injustice more generally. In Atkins's words, Fricker's account of hermeneutical injustice is defined as "Involv[ing] the discriminatory restriction of access to resources that would aid a social group to articulate their social experience."⁴ Moreover, both Anderson's and Fricker's accounts "are concerned with barriers to the articulation of experiences that are in their interests to articulate, though, too often, not in the interests of those who are powerfully positioned to have articulated."⁵

Atkins does not focus on finding something wrong with Fricker's account so much as finding that Fricker's account does not necessarily apply to Atkins's main argument here. Black people, on Atkins's account, are not cognitively disabled in ways that those in Fricker's central cases are taken to be.

Far from being a cognitive disablement, "Black Lives Matter" represents a unique knowledge of the social world, including the unequal distribution of resources that allow people to make sense of their social experience. This claim is reminiscent of work by Charles Mills, in particular his essay "Alternative Epistemologies," examines the possibilities of resistant, oppositional modes of thought. He writes,

This, then, is the central idea that has to be defended if the project of alternative epistemologies is to get off the ground: That *social causation can be epistemologically beneficial*. The next step is to clarify precisely what social characteristic is supposed to produce this superior insight. There are three main candidates, which are not always detangled from one another: the oppression subordinate groups suffer, their potentially universal character, and their differential experience.⁶

That social causation can be beneficial in finding new modes of knowledge is to not say that it always does. The implication of how Atkins and Mills conceive of oppression is that such a conception is, of necessity, complex. Mills puts it well when he conceives "of an oppression so structured that epistemically enlightening experiences result from it."⁷

It is here that I will highlight an important part of Atkins's critique of Fricker. Fricker's central case of interpretive injustice alleges that part of the injustice Carmita Wood suffered, before there was the concept of sexual harassment, was due to a lack of a collective understanding. That is, the fact that the collective understanding did not have a concept of sexual harassment negatively affected how Wood herself made sense of her experience.

⁴ Atkins, 12. The central case Fricker, and thus, Atkins focuses on is that of Carmita Wood, whose story is introduced in Brownmiller (1990).

⁵ Atkins, 12.

⁶ Mills (1998), 26. Emphasis mine.

⁷ Mills (1998), 28.

For “Black Power” and “Black Lives Matter,” Atkins argues that Fricker’s analysis does not hold. Lack of a collective understanding does not indicate a lack of understanding on the part of Black people. To wit, the Carmichael example shows “Black Power” as a phrase with a particular, forceful meaning within the Black people of Lowndes County (or for Black people in America at the time, more generally). For “Black Lives Matter” in the current moment, to say that “Black Lives Matter” is to affirm Black lives to Black lives.

There Remains Much to Be Done

Having given a synopsis of Atkins’s argument, there are parts of Atkins’s analysis that are particularly insightful but undertheorized, and I want to focus on them here. Midway through her paper, Atkins asks the following question: “Might it not...be possible, under conditions of injustice, to recognize the humanity of others and yet fail to value those lives as one should?”⁸

Atkins asks this question in her critique of the false choice present in existing debates about how “Black Lives Matter” should be interpreted. And to appreciate the significance of this question, and discuss what the implications are for this paper out in the world, I want to introduce two authors to help flesh out the question: Kate Manne and David Schraub.

In her book, philosopher Kate Manne (2017) argues that misogyny, which she defines as the (oftentimes) violent enforcement against women of patriarchal norms and ideals, paradoxically does not rely on dehumanizing women. On the contrary, misogyny requires that women be humanized in particular roles; when women fail to fulfill those roles in the service of men, women suffer violence on account of it. Though this is a very reduced version of Manne’s argument, I argue that the definition is sufficient to shed light on Atkins’s question here. I read “All Lives Matter” as including the humanity of Black lives, but affirming those lives only insofar as they are existing in certain roles.

Sports provide ample example of this phenomenon, when mediated through race. Consider conservative firebrand Laura Ingraham telling LeBron James to “shut up and dribble.” It would not be accurate to say that Ingraham is dehumanizing James; it is more accurate to see it as emphasizing James’s humanity only to the extent that it tracks with his role as a basketball player. In another example, the blackballing of National Football League (NFL) player Colin Kaepernick, in the context of the collusion suit he leveled against the league, gains significance insofar as he is seen to have flouted his role as viewed by the NFL owners.⁹ It was in this context that Houston Texans owner Robert McNair made comments that allowing a predominantly Black player base to protest police brutality is to have “the inmates [...] running the prison.”¹⁰

⁸ Atkins, 10.

⁹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/08/sports/kaepernick-collusion.html>

¹⁰ <https://www.si.com/nfl/2018/04/05/texans-bob-mcnair-inmates-comment>

Not just limited to role-restriction, contemporary racism also inheres in *only* regarding Black people as human. David Schraub’s illuminating essay “Racism as Subjectification” provides us with a way to view racism as taking the humanity of its targets as given, but gives them nothing more. In contrast to the well known concept “objectification,” whereby someone is reduced to a means as if they were a tool, Schraub defines subjectification as occurring “when a person who has been accorded subject-status is not recognized to possess any objective worth.”¹¹

Wanting to be of use—wanting to *matter*—is an important part of how people view themselves, and to be subjectified is to be stripped of an important avenue to a healthy self-image. “All Lives Matter” hinges on recognizing people as human beings, but implied in its assertion is the idea that a focus on Black lives is not only unnecessary, but counterproductive. A more robust notion, which “All Lives Matter” rejects, asserts that people demand more than mere recognition as subjects. To be human is to be useful in any project, and capable of creating their own epistemologies without external (read, white) validation.

Paying the Costs

Atkins’ philosophical contribution, while important, comes with a cost. Let us go back to the “Black Lives Matter, *too*” and “*Only* Black Lives Matter” debate. I read both positions as diagnostic positions, i.e. they attempt to capture where Black people exist relative to white lived. “Black Lives Matter,” to meet its responsibility as a resistant framework, must be affirmative, first and foremost. “Black Lives Matter” being primarily a resistant framework is incompatible with it being a primarily diagnostic tool.

This is not to say that “Black Lives Matter”’s resistant interpretation is categorically unable to do some diagnostic work. To wit, the phrase does not exist in a vacuum, and reactions to it, much like those to “Black Power,” could tell us a lot about race in our world. Nevertheless, to diagnose the totality of race politics, or even to present a thesis on whiteness, does not strike me as the job of “Black Lives Matter.” All this being said, the resistant epistemology “Black Lives Matter” provides for Black people, I argue, would make it more likely to develop critical diagnoses of whiteness.

To sum up: when we look at contemporary racism and what it means for Black lives to matter in this world, “Black Lives Matter” aims to break the chains that whiteness has imposed on blackness. These chains may exist in the roles Black people are seen as only fit for; they may also exist in willfully ignoring blackness as anything more than subject status. As Atkins has shown so well, white people need to understand that though “Black Lives Matter” is not meant for them, any notion of “social justice,” broadly construed cannot be achieved unless Black lives actually do matter.

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¹¹ Schraub (2018), 5

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