

R.I.P. SHIRTS OR SHIRTS OF THE MOVEMENT

READING THE DEATH PARAPHERNALIA OF BLACK LIVES

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R.I.P. (rest in peace) shirts, also known as memorial shirts, are significantly visible pieces in the Movement for Black Lives (M4BL).¹ While the use of a hashtag is becoming an increasingly popular mode within the movement to memorialize individuals slain unjustly by police, these shirts, which are wearable memorials, are ever-present in the movement as well. Some people call them “protest shirts” because of their presence at M4BL protests. I believe calling them protest shirts is not a fully accurate portrayal, however, because this label means these shirts are only standing *against* something and not also *for* something. Whether displaying the name or face of the deceased person, or a quotation from a famous ancestor like Martin Luther King, Jr., these shirts exert great power. In fact, many people ask how these memorial shirts can simultaneously evoke joy and pain. Just as some see wearing a memorial shirt as a way to honor the memory of a person no longer physically with us, others view it as a trigger that reignites the trauma associated with the person’s death. Hence, the study of memorial shirts necessarily includes an analysis of death, trauma, justice, and spirituality (including hope and healing). Answering the question “What is the story of #blacklivesmatter?” is no small feat, but a piece of the answer lies in what these shirts represent. I argue that the memorial shirts, or what I call the “shirts of the movement,” operate as a form of visual life writing; the shirts collectively (in reference to the larger movement) and individually (in reference to the deceased person) tell a story. I discuss how shirts of the movement preserve memories *and* call for action. More specifically, I contend that these shirts are not only symbols of grief, expressions of empathy, and coping mechanisms but are also a public stance against racial injustice and anti-Black racial terror.

In this article, I aim to add to the growing discourses on M4BL and Black grief experiences. A great deal of research on grief within the context of the

United States focuses on white Americans, and substantial studies on the various ways in which Blacks deal with grief continue to be lacking.² Concerning the need for study of the shirts, I draw on the scholarship of Dessirae Boulware who explains the necessity to learn more about coping strategies: “Grief research is essential to better facilitate African Americans through the grief process and prevent negative bereavement outcomes, such as Prolonged Grief Disorder (PGD) . . . and a lower quality of life” (2). Also, Paul C. Rosenblatt discusses the importance of studying grief among Blacks, noting the effect on quality of life. He argues that professionals, including psychologists, counselors, doctors, and clergy, need to be aware of the information (xix). With this in mind, this essay first considers my use of life writing criticism and theory to “read” the shirts of the movement. After providing this theoretical background, I offer a brief history of Black mourning practices before discussing the specific history of memorial shirts. Information on the origins of memorial shirts, surprisingly, tends to be scarce and scattered. By considering historical antecedents, I seek to elucidate the significance of the shirts of the movement and express how they represent visual, public grief narratives associated with Blacks. I then describe my methodology of examining memorial shirts for Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner, and Mike Brown. The analysis of the individual shirts leads to a discussion of the collective story of the shirts, calling attention to systemic injustices present within the US and provoking action to obliterate them during this contemporary iteration of US Black freedom struggles. Recognizing that simple changes to existing policies already in place are insufficient, “A Vision for Black Lives: Policy Demands for Black Power, Freedom and Justice” boldly declares, “And so we seek not reform but transformation” (The Movement for Black Lives, *A Vision*).³ Ultimately, this article adds to the scholarship on Black grief in general and the history of memorial shirts specifically as the shirts continue to play a prominent role in M4BL.

VISUAL LIFE WRITING & BLACK MOURNING PRACTICES

To better understand the compelling visual culture displayed at movement protests and marches via memorial shirts, I explore what employing the lens of life writing theory has to offer. Several scholars note that several types of life writing exist and that life writing includes written and visual formats, with photography being a popular example of the latter. Many studies on life writing and photography focus on the role of photos within autobiographies and analyze how the photographs complement, supplement, or verify the written text. However, some life writing scholars assert that photographs are examples of life writing in themselves. For instance, Timothy Dow Adams examines photographic life stories, and explains, “a number of photographic

self-portraits and portraits also serve as life stories, sometimes with the addition of text, sometimes standing alone” (“Photography” 711). Using such explorations as a foundation, I extend the analysis of photography to a reading of the memorial shirts as a form of visual life writing. Memorial shirts are visuals that tell the story of a life, particularly a slain life. The shirts inform viewers of details about the person and lead them to analyze circumstances of the person’s life, including the reasons the person is no longer alive. Moreover, the act of reading memorial shirts weds visual life writing and Black mourning practices and ritual traditions. Ronald K. Barrett, a scholar of thanatology, particularly among people of African descent, explains how different races and cultural groups mourn differently and that many Blacks “engage in a number of rituals and traditions to honor the dead” (“Sociocultural” 89). Like Karla F. C. Holloway in her study *Passed On: African American Mourning Stories* (174–75), Barrett asserts that the funeral is a primary ritual; its high importance has roots in African funeral traditions (“Sociocultural” 92).

While funerals have been a longstanding way of memorializing a deceased person in Black communities, I want to address other memorialization practices that are deemed significant as well and can act as coping mechanisms. Roadside memorials and other temporary memorials near the public space where someone was murdered at the hands of the police have become commonplace. In some Black communities, it is not uncommon to see people with tattoos naming a deceased loved one (Torres and García-Hernández 207), the birth and death dates of a deceased person on a car’s rear window, or a mural on the side of a house or building referencing a deceased person (Duck 40–41). Such memorials allow for continuing bonds between the deceased person and their loved ones and help keep the person’s memory alive. Oftentimes, the words “rest in peace” or the acronym R.I.P.—which has also come to mean “rest in power”—accompany these memorials, which is a connection to another coping mechanism among Blacks: spiritual beliefs and practices.

While Black grief experiences are not uniform and the manner in which a person dies can affect the grief process, spirituality is a common coping mechanism among many Blacks. Consequently, references to prayer, God, or a higher source of power usually accompany statements and press conferences delivered by the family and friends of those slain. The phrase “rest in peace” signifies spirituality (an afterlife) and can bring hope or a sense of relief that the deceased person is free from suffering and in a better place than Earth. Several scholars, including Barrett, Holloway, Rosenblatt, and Boulware, reveal that Blacks turn to spiritual or religious practices as a source of help and strength during times of mourning. They are able to find solace and a sense

of healing from the emotional pain by turning to and seeking a higher source of power. While many believe in an afterlife, some also believe the deceased person watches over them and even assists them (Barrett, "Death and Dying" 794). In other words, the person is absent physically, but the person's spirit is among the living. Like physical memorials, spirituality serves as a coping mechanism, and memorial shirts have become a part of Black communities' coping strategies. Scholars like Barrett, who study memorial traditions among different groups of people, stress that it is important to study and know the different ways people handle grief for various reasons, including social and emotional health reasons. However, I also think it is important for all people to know the significance of the shirts because perhaps then the practice of wearing memorial shirts will not be viewed as deviant, particularly by groups unfamiliar with such expressions. Besides the political dimension of shirts of the movement, this lack of understanding could be another reason for the animosity that is sometimes directed toward these shirts and the people who wear them.

A SEARCH FOR GENEALOGY: THE HISTORY OF MEMORIAL SHIRTS

The idea of specifically designed T-shirts making sociopolitical statements is not unique to M4BL, as anthropologist Lauren Adover reveals. She notes certain "shirts have become a uniform" (45) at an annual festival celebrated in Cape Coast, Ghana, commenting on local politics. In the United States, antecedents of the shirts of the movement have a class-based history, specifically a poor and working-class history. Inner cities, even before the onset of M4BL, are locations where the practice of wearing memorial shirts has been common, especially over the past couple of decades. Holloway, in an interview with National Public Radio (NPR), states that the shirts originated with California gangs of Black and Latino youth (Siler), though this claim is disputed. Several newspaper articles from cities across the US with publication dates ranging from 2003 to 2016 suggest that the shirts came from the West Coast, the East Coast, and southern locations around the late 1980s and early 1990s.⁴ The use of popular phrases such as "In Loving Memory" and "The Good Die Young" sometimes accompany images of the deceased person on the shirts along with the birth and death dates of the deceased (Shreve). These descriptions resemble M4BL shirts today, but birth and death dates of slain individuals are not as common on shirts of the movement. Most of the articles indicate that the shirts appear after the death of a minority person (usually Black) to violence, especially gun violence among community members. A few days after Trayvon's death in 2012, CNN released an article about New

Orleans entitled, “RIP Tees: In Murder City, A Market for Wearable Memorials.”

It is not surprising that a poor and working-class urban cultural practice (especially among youth) has entered the mainstream, given the fact that this phenomenon has happened with other media, including rap and hip-hop music. Some people even view the shirts as a hip-hop generation mode of memorialization, since some rap and hip-hop artists reference the memorial shirts in their songs: for instance, Desloc Piccalo’s “T-Shirt (Picture on a T-Shirt),” Master P’s “I Miss My Homies,” and C-Murder’s “Down for My Niggas.” News writers note the various reasons people decide to create shirts for their deceased loved one, including keeping the person’s memory alive as well as joining a trend, particularly among young people of color (though people of all ages wear them).⁵ In one article, Barrett explains, “For the survivors, R.I.P. shirts are a form of grief recovery . . . but also an empowering way to protest the perceived anonymity of urban violence. Those who wear the shirts want to ensure their friends are not just another statistic from the ‘hood’” (May). In essence, the shirts hold deep personal meaning for those who wear them. Tashel Bordere, a scholar who works in youth development and culture, explains how people represent parts of culture via symbols, including memorial shirts (“Social Justice” 10). She elaborates further on young people’s ideas about the shirts and the significance to them: “In my work with adolescents who wear memorial T-shirts honoring their cared-about persons, I have inquired, ‘What do you wish people to understand about your t-shirt? Tell me about the significance of the t-shirt for you’” (“Not Gonna Be” 78). Young people can experience a range of emotions concerning traumatic incidents, including sadness and shock. The shirts are not simply fashion choices among Black youth, as the title of a 2006 article from *The Afro-American* in Baltimore, Maryland, misleadingly suggests: “Urban Fashion: The New Style of Mourning.” They are popular across age groups and gender identities, though some see the shirts as an avenue that allows masculine grieving practices in public space when there is often little room for those practices in a society that is not always receptive to a wide diversity of men’s emotions.

Class politics must be part of the discussion of memorial shirts, just as M4BL articulates in its platform vision: “There can be no liberation for all Black people if we do not center and fight for those who have been marginalized” (Movement, *A Vision*), where marginalized people include immigrant and LGBTQIA communities. The shirts are a way some poor and working-class Blacks have paid respect to a deceased loved one. Barrett provides findings from his research that conclude “lower class Blacks are more likely to follow traditional practices than affluent Blacks” (“Death and Dying” 794) when

it comes to the deaths of family and friends. This research, in my opinion, counters the stereotypes of poor and working-class Blacks (many of whom are the focal points of M4BL protests) as nihilistic, aimless, and lacking morals and values. Such stereotypes make it easy for others to devalue Black lives. Not coincidentally, Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner, and Mike Brown were all from inner-city areas; Marc Lamont Hill, in his discussion of police killings, expresses that people should not be so quick to claim that race was the reason they were killed. While also noting the very real plausibility that the individuals would be alive today if they were not Black, Hill writes, “They were killed because they belong to a disposable *class* for which one of the strongest correlates is being Black” (28, emphasis added). I would add gender here to communicate that the intersectionality of these individuals’ race, class, and gender was certainly at play, as there are specific stereotypes associated with Black men.

THE COST OF A LIFE: SHIRT PRICES AND MORAL VALUES

Just as some rap and hip-hop artists express that music is a way for them to cope with the daily trauma being faced in their communities, my discussion of memorial shirts illuminates the sartorial politics of enduring anti-Black racial terror. Cotton—the material substance of the shirts—is an important part of the discussion. The mention of cotton, especially the act of picking cotton, evokes the painful memory and sensitive topic of the brutal US history of enslavement. Cotton was associated directly with the commodification of thousands of enslaved Blacks in several states; the profitability of cotton fueled the expansion of the institution (Franklin and Moss, *From Slavery* 100–01). Ancestral acknowledgment in a discussion of cotton-made shirts is necessary, as many within the M4BL had ancestors who were forced to pick cotton and other raw materials on plantations for the benefit of their white masters. The US prison industrial complex acts as a modern-day form of enslavement. A case in point: inmates at the Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola, which has a majority Black population, are forced to pick cotton to make garments and other products for Prison Enterprises, the business arm of the prison (Prison Enterprises). No matter how we broach the topic, cotton can lead into contentious territory.

Aside from life insurance policies and funeral home businesses that have created generational wealth from Black death, the selling of these cotton memorial shirts creates a profit, and a large market exists for them. Not everyone at demonstrations across the nation purchases memorial shirts via campaigns with a known history. Some purchase them online, which makes me wonder who profits from the shirts and who are the people and companies that have

received money for the shirts. Ethical issues are at play with memorial shirts (McNair 2), and I question if the money for the shirts always goes to Black communities or causes that support eliminating injustices. Some see the memorial shirt business as exploitative and another form of commodifying Black death and grief. Some activists have pushed back against families who attempt to trademark the name and image of their deceased family member as well. In response, families often explain that they are not trying to profit; rather, their aim is to protect the legacy of their loved one. Depending on the sellers and their mission, the prices of the shirts range from under ten dollars on Amazon.com to nearly seventy dollars from certain companies. Like memorial tattoos, the shirts are ubiquitous, and people have not allowed prices to stop them from owning one, even if it means creating a homemade version. Sometimes, an obvious local context or a certain stylization (for example, color, font, spray paint, and airbrush) and imaging are evident. For instance, at a booth at a flea market in Miami, customers bring their own cotton shirts to get a design on one side for seventeen dollars or both sides for twenty-two dollars (Green). They can purchase a predesigned background or create an original design (Powell). Hank Willis Thomas is the photographer of the R.I.P. shirt pictures from the Miami flea market featured in Powell's article. The same photographs appear in Thomas's book *Pitch Blackness* (74–81). In addition, Liberated People, a design company founded in 2012 by actor and activist Gbenga Akinnagbe, sells the "Our Son Trayvon" hoodie sweatshirt for sixty-five to sixty-nine dollars with 15 percent of the proceeds going to the Trayvon Martin Foundation. Several celebrities, including Tracie Ellis Ross, Regina King, and Kerry Washington, have aided the mission by wearing the hoodie and posting pictures of themselves in it, along with a mention of Liberated People, on social media. The Trayvon Martin Foundation sells its own shirt as well—for fifteen dollars, however. Similar to Akinnagbe, Randi Gloss, founder of GLOSSRAGS, calls her work "wearable activism" and, of the unjustly slain, she believes they are more than worthy of having "a wearable memorial of their lives on a t-shirt" (Johnson). In response to critics who accuse her of profiting from tragedies, Gloss says "she feels she can do more to raise awareness" by selling the shirts (Roberts). Moreover, I want to emphasize that memorial shirts do not have an expiration date to be worn, so the long-term utility of the shirts is not the focus here. A person's legacy simply does not fade, no matter how many times we wash the shirts.

Despite the manufacturer, many wearers see the shirts as making a statement and representing an element of tribute, joy, and creativity. They represent the performative power of clothes, as Blacks have long used fashion as both a resistance and resilience practice. Many Black foremothers and fathers

in the 1950s and 1960s, for instance, were conscious of their choice in attire during the US civil rights movement, as historian Tanisha C. Ford confirms in her research on Black women and style. In a discussion of women in the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), Ford writes, “the SNCC uniform [jeans, denim skirts, bib-and-brace overalls] must be seen as more than simply adornment to cover the body; it was a cultural-political tool used to create community and to represent SNCC’s progressive vision for a new American democracy” (68). These Black women were determined to see a better future, just as many Black people are today. Ford describes their uniform or style of dress as a “skin,” and while their uniform was practical and represented a break with middle-class respectability politics, it also “carried historical, political, and cultural significance” (76). Similarly, the memorial shirts continue a tradition of protest and suggest historical as well as contemporary social, cultural, and political matters. People wear the shirts as skins, and the shirts are a uniform that make a statement against anti-Black racism and injustice.

THREE STORIES AS TOLD BY SHIRTS

Aside from the “Black Lives Matter” shirts that are ever-present at movement protests, rallies, and marches, various other shirts have been appearing at M4BL public events, calling for an end to racialized state violence. Examples of other memorial shirts appearing at demonstrations include shirts that read “Stop Killing Us,” “Am I Next?,” and shirts listing the names of the deceased. At the 2005 funeral of the Crips gang cofounder Stanley “Tookie” Williams after he was executed by lethal injection at San Quentin State Prison, some attendees wore shirts that read on the back: “Fuck the Terminator There is a heaven for a G” (Soqui). The shirts had a small image of Williams and California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger, who refused to grant clemency for Williams despite his renunciation of gang life and advocacy for anti-gang violence via the books he wrote during his imprisonment. I categorize these as memorial shirts as well. Protest shirts such as those that read “I Am a Man” or “We March, Y’all Mad/We Die, Y’all Silent” and signs that match either the memorial or protest shirts are present, too. My focus here is to illuminate the stories of memorial shirts that center on the deaths of three black males: Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner, and Mike Brown. I recognize that for each of the individuals under discussion in this article, hundreds of others’ stories will likely never reach a mass audience. Highlighting Martin, Garner, and Brown is in no way intended to value their lives more than others. Still, I recognize that by drawing attention to these three, I, too, can be accused of being someone who is heartless enough to think she can determine “which

lives are ‘grievable,’” to use the words of political scientist David McIvor, who evokes Judith Butler (21). Furthermore, I am cognizant that “public acts of memorialization are always selective” as well as political (20). Black women and girls, in particular, and their stories of state-sanctioned violence do not garner much attention at all.⁶

The factors that determined my selection process for memorial shirts to analyze in this article include how shirts focused on a specific individual, the occurrence of immediate large-scale protests occurring after the death or trial’s conclusion, the number of protests, and the amount of national and international media coverage. For each individual, I discuss the circumstances surrounding his death, how the shirts are directly linked to a significant factor related to his death, and the role celebrities (including actors, singers, rappers, professional athletes, and political figures) played in bringing attention to his death. Ultimately, I convey how the memorial shirts are “narratives of memorialization” (McIvor 20) that help shape the discourse surrounding the individual’s death and his place within M4BL.

On February 26, 2012, seventeen-year-old Trayvon Martin took his last breath of life in Sanford, Florida, after vigilante George Zimmerman shot him while Trayvon was walking back home from the nearby 7-Eleven with a bag of Skittles and an AriZona Iced Tea. Zimmerman assumed Trayvon was a criminal and pursued him, which ultimately ended with Zimmerman shooting Trayvon during their physical altercation. Without a doubt, Trayvon’s death sparked a new movement. Many people watched the trial unfold on television and gave emotional outbursts upon hearing the not-guilty verdict. The emotional outbursts made me think of the reactions many Americans gave to the also racially charged 1995 O. J. Simpson verdict. When President Obama stated, after the acquittal of Zimmerman, that Trayvon Martin could have been his son, or himself thirty-five years ago, the nation could not ignore the primacy of Martin’s death and the circumstances surrounding it (“Remarks”).

The death of Trayvon produced protests and marches where participants wore various shirts united by a common image—Trayvon’s hoodie. Like many others, Sybrina Fulton and Tracy Martin, Trayvon’s mother and father, proudly wore different variations of shirts in memory of Trayvon at various events across the nation. I will focus on two of the variations. During a march for peace, the parents wore one shirt that boldly announced the “I am Trayvon” chant, a chant that had become popular at public events for Trayvon.⁷ The shirt is green with a white square in front. Inside of the square is an image of Trayvon colored in brown wearing a hoodie. Along the left side appears an illustration of a brown hand holding up the index and middle fingers to

symbolize the peace sign. Next to the hand is an image of a purple and pinkish-colored heart with Trayvon's name written on beach sand in the inside. At the very bottom of the square, underneath the larger black, bold print of "I am Trayvon" are the words "Day of Remembrance Peace Walk" in white letters and a different font. The faded background of the square has rays (similar to sunrays), different images of Trayvon (including ones with him wearing a hoodie), and signs about Trayvon. While the signs are not fully visible, viewers can make out that one has "Trayvon Martin" on it, another has a mention of "2 Million Want Justice for Trayvon," and another has "#Millionhoodies March 21 NY," referencing the march that took place in 2012 in New York City a month after he died.⁸ While the shirt is creative and visually appealing, its purpose extends far beyond a fashion statement.

A reading of the shirt as a life writing text elicits several messages that work together to deliver specifics about how Trayvon's life was cut short. Upon Trayvon's death, quite a few images circulated in the media, but the iconic black-and-white photo of him wearing a hoodie and staring into the camera lens stood out the most for many people because Trayvon was wearing a hoodie on the day he was killed. This image is replicated in the center of Trayvon's parents' shirts discussed above, and this shirt's overall design is also on the banner the foundation uses at various marches and events, including at the 2018 Day of Remembrance event. By using this image, the shirt evokes a reminder of the dangerous force of stereotypes, which was a significant factor in relation to Trayvon's death, and provokes a call to action (the background image of a protest) to end discrimination. Some believe that Zimmerman, like many others who see (young) Black men in hoodies, assumed Trayvon was a burglar or planning some type of illegal behavior. By centering this image, the shirt boldly confronts this stereotype so as to dismantle it. Outrage is an emotion many people feel when recognizing that, quite potentially, something as insignificant as an article of clothing helped lead to Trayvon's death. Years after Trayvon's death, outcries continue regarding the fact that wearing a hoodie (especially when it is raining) does not mean the person is a criminal.

"End the War on Black People," one policy demand of M4BL, directly addresses stereotyping and racial profiling; one tenet of the policy specifically targets ending the criminalization of Black youth. M4BL offers model legislation called "Trayvon's Law" that not only calls for an end to racial profiling but also an end to the school-to-prison pipeline and the Stand Your Ground law.⁹ The choice to extend the focus beyond profiling clearly communicates that M4BL is not only about police killings; it is about combatting all forms of state-sanctioned violence. Indeed, Alicia Garza clarifies, "Black Lives Matter is a unique contribution that goes beyond extrajudicial killings of Black

people by police and vigilantes.” The shirt uses the now-symbolic image of Trayvon wearing a hoodie to affirm the importance of combating not just one but all forms of violence.

Aside from its political focus, this shirt also conveys a story of love, respect, and honor for Trayvon, demonstrating the complexity of any form of life writing. The parents have noted that Trayvon wanted to attend either the University of Miami or Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University, two universities with orange and green colors that Trayvon adored (Burch and Isensee). The shirt’s use of these colors shows not only careful attention to detail, but also the parents’ involvement in Trayvon’s life and concern about his future aspirations. The heart image with Trayvon’s name further illustrates his parents’ love for their son. Community allies are represented and acknowledged on the shirt as well via the images of various signs community members created and held up at Trayvon rallies across the nation.



Figure 1. Photographer Kawai Matthews took this picture for the Unite One Million People for Change campaign. It features actress Meagan Good. Reproduced with permission by Kawai Matthews (KawaiMatthews.com).

Moreover, community allies in support of Trayvon extended far beyond everyday citizens to include celebrities whose presence and involvement ultimately brought about more visibility to Trayvon and the many injustices at work on US soil. After the acquittal of Trayvon's killer in July 2013, Jason Lee, who is the founder of the I Am Ready Foundation, launched a campaign titled Unite One Million People for Change. This campaign raised funds for his foundation and the Trayvon Martin Foundation by selling shirts with the hashtag #ForTrayvon to support justice and peace programs for youth. This memorial shirt campaign is one of many examples in which celebrities expressed their support in public by wearing the shirt to draw attention to the cause.¹⁰ Many celebrities were involved in the campaign, such as Ledisi, Vanessa Bell Calloway, Eva Marcille, Kym Whitley, and Omari Hardwick, and figure 1 features actress Meagan Good in the shirt. The shirt depicts the hoodie image covered by three large red, white, and blue horizontal stripes, symbolizing the US. The bottom displays the campaign's #ForTrayvon hashtag, which was a way to circulate information about how to become involved via social media. Many agree that people's social media posts, including those of celebrities, helped energize rather than detract from M4BL. Public relations scholar Linda Hon outlined the wide use of social media around the campaign for justice for Trayvon and was able to develop a theoretical model of digital social advocacy. Additionally, various celebrities wore variations of the Trayvon hoodie shirt at award ceremonies and out in other public spaces. They also posted selfies and pictures of themselves wearing a hoodie on social media. In 2013, *Ebony* magazine released an issue with four different covers of Black male celebrities, including Dwayne Wade, Spike Lee, and Boris Kodjoe, along with their sons, all wearing gray hoodies. Celebrities, like many others, felt this cause superseded any potential backlashes, and they had no problems with wearing a visual narrative of Trayvon's life.

On July 17, 2014, Eric Garner pleaded with the words "I can't breathe" eleven times before ultimately being choked to death by police officers in Staten Island, New York. He was being apprehended for illegally selling loose cigarettes. Video footage of the arrest went viral; many people were baffled by the behavior of Garner and the police involved with his arrest.¹¹ Some people criticized Garner for verbally resisting arrest while others charged that the officers should not have physically taken Garner down because he had no weapon and was not physically threatening them. While watching the video, I, like others, noticed that five officers participated in pinning Garner to the ground; it was quite an unsettling incident to view. When a grand jury decided in early December 2014 not to indict Daniel Pantaleo, the officer who put Garner in a chokehold, massive protests erupted across the nation. Not only

did the video footage of Garner repeatedly telling the officers that he could not breathe play a role in the outrage, but also thousands of people already were outraged by other police officers' ability to kill unarmed Black people with impunity. Just one week earlier, a Ferguson grand jury decided not to indict Officer Darren Wilson in Mike Brown's death.

Garner's death led many people to wear the now-iconic shirts that spell out his final words, "I can't breathe."¹² The increase in the variety of forms demonstrations took matched the level of fury people experienced; there were rallies, marches, road blockings, and the symbolic die-ins. Directly linked to Garner's cause of death, the black shirt with the white letters reading "I Can't Breathe" in all caps (and usually in Comic Sans font) was present at nearly all of these gatherings.¹³ While the shirt has no major artistry or excessive creativity, it operates as a form of life writing by offering a blunt, straightforward story about a Black man's life and how it ended. Clearly, many wearing the shirt felt it did not need any grand inventiveness. If a person cannot breathe, he will die. Period. The shirt conveys sympathy and empathy for Garner despite not having an image of him or any other details from his life. The words alone are clear enough. Still, behind these words are a story worth far more than the T-shirt on which the words are printed.

Although the shirt clearly tells a story about police behavior, I want to underscore how it also draws connections to other systemic failures around healthcare and employment. As a life writing text, the shirt offers a broad, yet specific, account. The shirt makes viewers seek details beyond what happened that day on the sidewalk, including the reasons forty-three-year-old Garner was selling loosies (loose cigarettes). Garner, a father of six, needed money like everyone else, but securing and keeping employment are not easy pursuits for a number of Blacks in the US for a variety of factors. Garner had health challenges, particularly asthma, sleep apnea, and diabetes, that impeded his everyday livelihood and ability to continue working in the city's parks department, according to several news outlets. Garner was far larger than the average person, weighing well over three hundred pounds and standing more than six feet tall. Many of those in the majority US population do not see Blacks the way they see themselves or other groups—in fact, many see Blacks (especially Black men) as "scary" whether large, small, young, or old—and Garner fit the big and therefore scary, dangerous Black man stereotype. Many believe officers use this stereotype to mask their belief that there is no value in Black lives. In the video of Garner's death, the initial footage shows that Garner was clearly larger than the officers, but it is not clear why fears were not allayed once he was on the ground with them all pinning him down. While some tried to claim the cause of Garner's death was related to his health rather than

the officer's hold on his neck, the official autopsy confirmed his death was a result of the chokehold.¹⁴ Moreover, placing the blame on Garner for his own death by invoking his health conditions is appalling, despite the reality that it is unlikely that Garner was able to access top-of-the-line healthcare if he had to sell loosies (even if occasionally) to make money.

Not coincidentally, lack of health care as well as unemployment are issues that the M4BL platform specifically tackles. M4BL's economic justice and reparations policy demands underscore the need for state and federal job programs and the failure of the private sector to employ Blacks at the needed scale. M4BL also calls for a shift in funds from policing to other areas like employment programs. As the "Invest-Divest" policy demand reads: "A reallocation of funds at the federal, state and local level from policing and incarceration (JAG, COPS, VOCA) to long-term safety strategies such as education, local restorative justice services, and employment programs" (Movement, *A Vision*). Garner suffered from health issues that universal health care, another tenet of the "Invest-Divest" policy demand, could have helped alleviate. A healthy Garner with a well-paying, stable job would not have needed to sell loosies. A lack of health care along with stereotypes of Black men's criminality and disability came together to help create a fatal end for Garner.

While everyday citizens and other celebrities wore the "I Can't Breathe" T-shirt, NBA players also drew a lot of media attention for wearing these cotton visuals of Garner's life, which brought awareness to Garner and the larger issue of continuing racial inequalities. Several notable NBA stars, like LeBron James, Kyrie Irving, and Derrick Rose, wore the shirt during warm-ups. Irving stated to reporters about their involvement, "it's really important to us that we stand up for a cause, especially this one. It hits close to home and means a lot to me" (Strauss and Scott). The NBA players garnered so much attention compared to others wearing the T-shirts because as famous athletes they already have a captive audience that the average person does not.

A few days after the grand jury's decision, pictures displaying Jay-Z posing at a game with Brooklyn Nets and Cleveland Cavaliers basketball players wearing the shirts made waves in social and news media. Without a doubt, these images sparked plenty of buzz, good and bad. What stood out to me was how other basketball players (male and female) across the nation at different levels began to follow suit and make a statement that declared they, too, were opposed to what was occurring in cities across the country. Courageously, college and high school basketball players began wearing the shirt. The institutions' censure or support of their students, in turn, made it to local and sometimes national news stations. While star athletes' bodies often become billboards of sorts, usually for shoes or sports gear, these athletes used their

power not to be or to serve commodities but rather to claim their own value and the value of Black people who are being dehumanized and subjected to violence. Unless they lived in a hole, people across the US became extremely aware of the state of unrest sweeping the nation.

The outbreak of protests after the death of Michael (Mike) Brown were among the most unforgettable for me. Even though Garner was killed before Mike Brown, the large-scale protests (where military tanks were present) around Mike Brown's case began earlier because the Ferguson grand jury decided its case a week before Garner's case was decided in New York. On August 9, 2014, eighteen-year-old Mike Brown died by the gun of Officer Darren Wilson. How the dispute occurred is clouded with speculations because no clear, convincing video or audio associated with their one-on-one interactions, as in the cases previously discussed, exists. Supposedly, Mike was jaywalking and Wilson told him, with the use of profanity, to get on the sidewalk. Mike had recently stolen cigarillos from a convenience store, which factored into why some people were reluctant to view his case as they viewed Trayvon's, who was one year younger than Mike. Still, Mike is another slain young Black man; he had just graduated from high school.



Figure 2. This photograph is from the October 11, 2014 rally in St. Louis, Missouri. Reprinted by permission of Reuters/Shannon Stapleton.

The variations of shirts that scores of people wore and still wear in honor of Mike directly relate to a supposed action he made before being killed: raising his hands, signifying “don’t shoot.” Hence, the variations of the shirts have some reference to the now popular chant, “Hands up, don’t shoot.” Some other shirt variations read only “Don’t Shoot” and some have hand prints to signify upraised hands. Figure 2 offers a variation with the full chant or slogan in capital white letters and an exclamation point. At demonstrations, people wearing such shirts will usually raise their hands at some point, reaffirming the shirt’s plea. Like the Garner shirt, this popular memorial shirt variation is straightforward with no elaborate artistry. The white letters are displayed on a black shirt. Still, the shirt clearly evokes the memory of Mike and represents a sincere way to pay him respect.

Truth and memory, which are important subjects in analyses of life writing, are significant and quite controversial in Mike’s case. Despite the questioned veracity of the “hands up, don’t shoot” claim, the shirts in honor of Mike tell an important story, especially about the treatment and objectification of Mike and many others like him. Some witnesses who stated they saw Mike with his hands raised later changed their stories, and details of the investigation seemingly disprove that Mike had his hands up. Yet, by knowingly wearing these shirts in the face of speculations about the truthfulness of the claim, people confirm the belief that there are critical issues needing immediate solutions. The blatant dehumanization of Blacks by some law enforcement agents and other authority figures is one such catastrophic matter. Thus, the shirt also delivers a message about the wearers’ own vulnerability and resistance to the violence that could befall them.

I find it beyond preposterous, as many others did, that Mike’s body lay for over four hours on the pavement. Did none of those investigating the matter think his life worthy of being respected? Many protesters would respond with a resounding “no.” Hill, in his analysis of the case, writes, “Michael Brown was treated as if he was not entitled to the most basic elements of democratic citizenship, not to mention human decency. He was treated as if he was not a person, much less an American. He was disposable” (10). Indeed, some would argue he was treated like an object.

The message of the “Hands Up, Don’t Shoot” shirt also addresses the presumed guilty-until-proven-innocent stereotype wielded against Blacks in general and young Black men specifically. Like Garner, Mike was not a petite person. Though he was nowhere near the size of Garner, he was over six feet tall and weighed a little under three hundred pounds. A Black man that size, despite being only eighteen years old, is a walking threat in the eyes of many; immediately putting their hands up and pleading not to be shot is something

some Black men feel they must do when in the presence of police. Officer Wilson's testimony that Mike seemed to be running through the gunshots is bewildering to me. The many videos of police killings have become a spectacle and source of entertainment for some people. Some see them as a variation of reality TV. Many others, like myself, find the videos quite traumatizing. Black people are human and want their humanity respected. They are not humans with magical or super powers like animated characters in movies, and it is not asking too much to want people being paid to protect them to understand this reality.

Consequently, one of the major policy demands for M4BL focuses on "community" control of local, state, and federal law-enforcement entities. The M4BL website expresses the need for assurance that "communities most harmed by destructive policing have the power to hire and fire officers, [and] determine disciplinary action" (Movement, *A Vision*). Alongside control over policing, the policy demand stresses the desire for more control, specifically by parents, community members, and students, over school matters like curriculum choices and school boards. While Mike graduated from high school, he attended a predominantly Black school that provided an extremely poor quality of education (Hill 2).

The large amount of attention to Mike's case and the performative power of memorial shirts representing Mike, including among celebrities, was apparent via US television. While John Legend wore a variation of the "Don't Shoot" shirt to the 2015 Grammy Awards, Beyoncé and Pharrell included the hands-up gesture in their performances. Award-winning screenwriter, director, and producer Ava Duvernay along with the cast of the movie *Selma* posed in "I Can't Breathe" shirts with their hands raised upward, calling attention to Mike Brown and Eric Garner. From Grammy performers to congressional members to entire movie casts, the "hands up, don't shoot" gesture has been on full display. Without a doubt, the memorial shirts of the movement are speaking loudly and clearly.

ENOUGH IS ENOUGH: UNITED SHIRTS OF AMERICA

A popular poster at demonstrations reads, "Enough Is Enough," and I believe that, collectively, the memorial shirts for Martin, Garner, and Brown exclaim this line of thought without apology. While these shirts individually give voice to the stories of three Black individuals, they also act as a griot spouting the stories of the larger collective of Blacks (and other people of color), including those unknown and deemed invisible. Not only do these shirts pay homage to lost lives, they also powerfully demand a transformation to systems of oppression for those alive in the US. In essence, the shirts of the

movement assert that enough is enough with the deeply ingrained injustices within our criminal justice, employment, housing, educational, and health systems. Structural racism must end.

Undeniably, memorial shirts tell the story of a continued legacy of racism in the US. In his *Harvard Law Review* article published days before he left office, former President Obama confronts the history of race and bias throughout the nation's criminal justice system in particular. His assertions are not surprising to many US citizens who have long been aware of such matters. In fact, what is being made more publicly visible, for both US citizens and international communities, are realities that Black people have been living for decades. From chattel slavery to Jim Crow segregation to the current prison industrial complex (associated with the poor quality of schooling in minority communities), the US has been revealing its feelings about Black lives for quite a while. Modern-day technology, which plays a role in the dissemination of the memorial shirts and the cases to which they refer, has helped expose this information to those who were ignorant or in denial about the continuities.

Further, a long history of devastating situations has caused the distrust of the police in Black communities, and people around the world are aware and watching. The United Nations has weighed in on US politics to rebuke the US for its treatment of Blacks. In 2016, human rights expert Ricardo A. Sunga III from the Philippines, who chairs the United Nations Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent, released a statement on the United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner website, about conditions Blacks in the US face:

Excessive use of force by the police against African Americans in the United States is a regular occurrence. African Americans are reportedly shot at more than twice the rate of white people.

The Working Group is monitoring the situation and has repeatedly expressed its concern to the United States Government about police killings of African Americans and called for justice. The Working Group is convinced that the root of the problem lies in the lack of accountability for perpetrators of such killings despite the evidence.

The killings also demonstrate a high level of structural and institutional racism. The United States is far from recognizing the same rights for all its citizens. Existing measures to address racist crimes motivated by prejudice are insufficient and have failed to stop the killings.

It is time, now, for the US Government to strongly assert that Black lives matter and prevent any further killings as a matter of national priority. (United Nations, "USA/ People of African Descent")¹⁵

Sunga's denunciation of the behavior of the US is a stinging criticism. Many people call the US the "World's Policeman," but what can be done if the policeman needs to arrest and lock himself up?

Additionally, the M4BL shirts provoke action for change so that the present dreadful circumstances for Black people improve. In her article about South African women's creation of T-shirts in the 1990s to publicize the violence women face in their societies, Kimberly Miller posits that the shirts express trauma and memory publicly and establish a "counternarrative to the overwhelmingly patriarchal and hostile public discourse that currently surrounds violence against women in South Africa" (255). While the shirts of the movement are similar in that they certainly induce trauma and exhibit a counternarrative to the "liberty-and-justice-for-all" claim of the US, they are part of a larger M4BL agenda to bring real, positive change, and people are forcefully working to manifest the change. The vision of M4BL is cognizant of the need for a multifront tackle: "We recognize that not all of our collective needs and visions can be translated into policy, but we understand that policy change is one of many tactics necessary to move us towards the world we envision" (Movement, *A Vision*). Such an admission helps keep the fervor and possibilities ablaze.

Hope (and its audacity) is critical to confronting the prevailing injustices. Supporting one another in well-doing serves an empowering role. I found it affirming and ironic that a man wearing a variation of a Trayvon Martin shirt had to escort Alton Sterling's son from the press conference podium when the teenager began sobbing next to his mother who was reading her statement.¹⁶ Black people are a people of strength and resistance with a strong legacy of overcoming, and mutual support certainly has been central to the resilience and healing. Though it seems like history is repeating itself because images of today mimic those of protests from the US civil rights movement, we must be encouraged.

Truthfully, the current state of affairs concerning the disregard for far too many Black lives has been traumatizing and terrorizing for me in many ways, but the memorial shirts are a reminder that we all have a part to play. On the backs of the people wearing them, memorial shirts are walking, living life writing texts. While some people sport them to express joy and celebration of the lives of the victims before they were taken, others wear them to take a stand and for their representations as visual grief narratives. To my knowledge, shirts for Sandra Bland were not wildly popular in the same way as those discussed here, and I have already mentioned the lack of attention Black women and girls receive.¹⁷ Yet Sandra's death affected me subconsciously, and it was a while before I recognized it. A year after her death in July

2015, I noticed that I would quickly jump to put on my turn signal whenever in a turning lane. One day, it finally dawned on me that I was thinking about Sandra's case each time. I was wearing my grief invisibly, which manifested every time I touched my turn signal. Given my response to these events, to which I have been only a distant observer because I did not personally know those slain, I can only imagine the level of trauma people closely affected by police killings experience every time they hear of a new incident; I imagine every new tragedy reawakens their pain and trauma. While memorial shirts are inevitably linked to painful circumstances, they are also an affirmation of a lost life and a call to action against inequality. Ultimately, I believe bringing an end to systemic injustices will serve all US citizens, and I look forward to the day when embracing "Black lives matter" is not political, but rather a statement about which all people can agree.

NOTES

1. The word "Black" within M4BL and this article refers to people of African descent.
2. I use terms like "grief" and "mourning" interchangeably in this paper.
3. The M4BL website outlines six overarching and interconnected policy demands: ending the war on Black people, reparations, invest-divest, economic justice, community control, and political power.
4. The newspaper articles come from cities such as Baltimore, Maryland; San Francisco, California; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; Daytona, Florida; and Washington, DC. Bates mentions the shirts come from both coasts; she talks with author Jen Shreve, who states this information. May's article states the shirts originated in New Orleans and mentions other possible origins: "Others trace R.I.P. roots farther, to West Africa and the Caribbean, where mourners often wear head scarves or handkerchiefs with the deceased's likeness on them, said psychologist Ronald Barrett, a professor at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles who has written extensively on African American funeral practices."
5. What also grabbed my attention about many of the articles were the descriptions they offered about the culture around the shirts. Some writers even note how the shirts are used as bragging rights that those wearing it were close to someone popular (Sparks). Personally, it was a horrific family tragedy that led me to this study of memorial shirts. After the death of my teenage relatives in Miami, Florida, some family members and I scrutinized several social media accounts. We found heartbreaking jokes by Miami teenagers that expressed such shirts were like a badge of honor. One youngster was bragging about having a shirt made for him after he dies and even joked that no one would make a shirt for certain people. See Holloway's chapter three for more on death of children, their perceptions of death, and fascination with gangs, and her chapter four for information on gang funerals and the need for security at funerals.
6. Women and girls, especially Black women and girls, are deemed invisible in many public spheres, which helped spark the #SayHerName campaign. See Crenshaw et al.

7. Many photographs of this particular shirt were taken at the one-year anniversary march of Trayvon's death in February 2013, before the July 2013 acquittal of Zimmerman. A variation of this shirt that some people wore included only the capitalized words "I AM TRAYVON" on a plain shirt, usually black or gray. See Lombardi for one example of a photograph from CBS. Actor and singer Jamie Foxx appears in the photograph and he is an outspoken advocate who made appearances at several Trayvon events wearing many different shirt variations (with the same hoodie image).
8. The march was in response to an online petition Trayvon's parents created to solicit one million signatures to bring forth a criminal investigation against the vigilante Zimmerman, according to *Time Magazine*. *Time's* article also notes the turnout was closer to a thousand, rather than a million. Additionally, there is an organization of the same name calling for an end to injustices against Blacks (J. Miller).
9. The M4BL tenet reads: "An immediate end to the criminalization and dehumanization of Black youth across all areas of society including, but not limited to; our nation's justice and education systems, social service agencies, and media and pop culture. This includes an end to zero-tolerance school policies and arrests of students, the removal of police from schools, and the reallocation of funds from police and punitive school discipline practices to restorative services" (Movement, "End").
10. The website for this campaign is not active currently. The website URL had been <http://fortrayvon.org/>.
11. I call Eric Garner by "Garner" throughout the paper while I call Michael (Mike) and Trayvon by their first names because these are the names by which people commonly refer to them. This may be so because of Garner's age.
12. Garner also stated, "It stops today," and shirts with these words are common in New York, which shows a difference in the local/regional versus national focus of his final words.
13. Some social media posts and articles from select sites on the internet criticized the Comic Sans font choice on the shirts, as some feel the font does not emit a sense of seriousness.
14. There was much attention on the legality of the chokehold and its use in this case. While it was banned from the New York Police Department in 1993, some NYPD officers continue to use it. Ultimately, the City of New York ended up paying Garner's family nearly six million dollars (see Hill 36–38).
15. The same office also made a list of preliminary recommendations for the US (United Nations, "Statement to the Media").
16. Louisiana police officers shot and killed Alton Sterling, who was selling CDs, in July 2016. His wife, Quinyetta McMillan, read a statement at a press conference shortly after his death, and their fifteen-year-old son, Cameron Sterling, accompanied her.
17. In July 2015, Sandra Bland was pulled over and verbally abused by a Texas officer after failing to use her turn signal when switching lanes. After being arrested, she allegedly committed suicide in her jail cell. I, like many others, do not fully believe the suicide story. See Brittney Cooper's article in *Salon*, "This is America's Religion of Violence: The Impunity of Police Violence & the Destruction of Sandra Bland." Bland's family reached a \$1.9 million settlement in a wrongful death lawsuit with Waller County and the Texas Department of Public Safety in September 2016.

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