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# Seizing the Stage

Social Performances from Mao Zedong to  
Martin Luther King Jr., and Black Lives Matter Today

*Jeffrey C. Alexander*



Social protest should not be conceptualized instrumentally, as a process that depends only upon social networks and material resources. Such factors provide the boundary conditions for symbolic action, but they determine neither its content nor its outcomes. In order to seize power, one must first seize the social stage (see Eyerman 2006).

Seizing the stage, producing social dramas, and projecting them successfully to audiences—these are difficult and contingent cultural accomplishments, even for those who possess top-down, authoritarian control. For great power to be perceived as legitimate, equally great performances need be sustained. As producers and directors, dictators try to create ideologically saturated public performances. Massive show trials, such as those Stalin produced in the 1930s, display orchestrated confessions, which are reported by journalists and distributed in recordings and films. Tightly choreographed, ritual-like, mythopoeic, leader-affirming convocations are aesthetically reconstructed as electrifying and projected by filmmakers to millions of potential audience members beyond the immediate event. The Nazis' 1934 Nuremberg rally, for exam-

ple, with its tens of thousands of Nazi worshippers in attendance, was reconstructed and amped up by Leni Riefenstahl in her *Triumph of the Will* (1935).

To the degree that political regimes, authoritarian or democratic, allow power to be more easily challenged, to that same degree seizing the social stage becomes still more difficult. In more pluralistic social situations, the elements required for a social protest to project a powerful performance that connects with audiences, become separated from one another (see Alexander 2004). To refuse these elements, protest performances must be artfully assembled from scratch, from the bottom up. Supplication and inspiration, authentic and heartfelt dramas of sacrifice, become central. The mediation of extra-performative conditions—interpretive, material, and demographic resources—becomes significant as well.

The African American civil rights movement was a decades-long social drama. It narrated and visualized chronic social suffering, and punctuated this story with episodes of acute and wrenching social tension. If Martin Luther King Jr. is now considered by many to be the greatest American of the 20th century (see Branch 1988), it is not only because he was a political leader and moral visionary; he was also an extraordinary dramatist. King seized the public stage more effectively than any figure in modern American history. He coached his African American followers in nonviolent tactics and choreographed their protests so provocatively that the movement's actions consistently generated violent and repressive responses, which King used in turn to shape public resistance. King's dramas of sacrifice and redemption were splashed across America's television screens and headlined in newspapers. Northern whites identified with the movement's sacrifice, and experienced catharsis when the black masses triumphed. Such powerful public dramaturgy inverted state power, and iterations of its nonviolent dramatizations against anti-civil violence have continued through to the present day.



Figure 2. Crowds surrounding the Reflecting Pool, during the 1963 March on Washington, DC. (Photo by Warren K. Leffler; courtesy of Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, US News & World Report Magazine Collection)

Figure 1. (facing page) Black protesters kneeling before city hall, Birmingham, Alabama, 1963. (Glasshouse Images / Alamy Stock Photo)

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## A Note on Social Performance Theory

Since the early 2000s, cultural sociologists have been developing theoretical understandings and empirical applications of social performance theory. This approach challenges the economic understanding of action developed by Karl Marx as well as the action-theoretical approach that Max Weber initiated and Talcott Parsons continued (see Weber [1922] 1978; Parsons 1937). Performance theory has roots in the later work of Émile Durkheim (Alexander and Smith 2005), in the aesthetic turn of Clifford Geertz (Alexander, Smith, and Norton 2011), the drama theory of Victor Turner (Edles 1998; Smith and Howe 2015), and contemporary performance studies as initiated by Richard Schechner ([2002] 2013). In addition to conceptualizing this macrosociological model of social performance, “cultural pragmatics” has been employed to explore a wide variety of empirical situations, from presidential campaigns (Alexander 2010; Mast 2012; Alexander and Jaworsky 2014) and the Arab Spring (Alexander 2011b) to terrorism and Bacon’s Rebellion (Reed 2013) and the Iraq War (Alexander 2011a); from South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation process (Goodman 2016) to native people’s demands for social justice (Woods 2016). Social performance theory can illuminate the art of protest during China’s communist revolution, the mid-20th-century American civil rights movement, and the mostly African American protest against police violence in American cities today.

## Revolutionary Protest in 20th-Century China

Revolutionary social movements tell the world that their eventual triumph is inevitable, and radical theorists conceptualize this necessity as determined by the unstoppable force of material interest. It’s a very different story inside revolutionary movements, however. They are dramaturgical engines. Let Marx pretend the revolution responds merely to objective interest, depicting workers as protoscientists following rational, instrumental plans. Lenin knew better. Attacking the fallacy of economism, Lenin ([1902] 1966) put ideology at the center of revolutionary mobilization, organizing Bolshevism as an active, pragmatic, top-down party in the service of socialist ideas. Antonio Gramsci (1959) dubbed the Communist Party the “modern prince,” taking his cue from Machiavelli. In 1917, when Lenin’s revolution succeeded, Gramsci created a double-entendre banner headline, “Revolution against *Capital*,” in *Avanti*, the Italian revolutionary newspaper he edited, ironically suggesting that Marx’s scientific theory could never have predicted it. Gramsci knew that the revolution in Russia had succeeded not because of the laws of capital but because of the dramaturgical powers of the Bolshevik party.

### *The Textual Background and Its Limits*

In their radical reinterpretation of Maoist strategy in the decades preceding the Chinese revolution, *Revolutionary Discourse in Mao’s Republic*, David Apter and Tony Saich transformed this line of cultural Marxist thinking into a poststructuralist frame. Moving away from a reductionist, ratiocinative conception of ideology toward a Geertzian, thickly semiotic one, they conceptualize the revolutionary organizer as a storyteller, “an agent with a special ability to lift the burden of storytelling from the shoulders of the individual by enabling that person to share it with others [...so that] the property of the story becomes the property of the discourse community” (1994:75). The storyteller-in-chief of the Chinese revolution, Mao Zedong, culled “myths, stories, texts, and logical prescriptions” from Chinese and Western traditions, pulling “out of the terrible circumstances and conditions of life prevailing in China” the vision of a “utopic republic” (xi). With this vision, Mao “was able to refract and generate a field of force, at the epicenter of which he becomes a teacher” (298).

Apter and Saich are forcefully antimaterialist and anti-“rational actor,” but their culturalizing account of revolutionary process doesn’t go nearly far enough. Their political discourse analysis presents the Chinese revolution as an “exegetical creation.” But seeing such an extraordinary event merely as an “express embodiment of a structure of ideas” (xv) ignores the performative challenges that must be met in real time, the complex process of acting out ideas and getting an

audience to believe them. “For stories to be shared with others,” Apter and Saich acknowledge, “people must want to listen” (75), but conceptualizing just how to get folks to want to listen is the thing. To suggest simply “words themselves became performatives” (75) keeps us in the dark, inside J.L. Austin’s (1962) narrowly linguistic black box, where performativity is achieved by speaking itself. The dramaturgical process that sets the stage, the directing process that organizes a *mise-en-scène*, the skillful creativity of actors or the lack thereof, the organizational and symbolic challenge of creating the appearance of a seamless fusion between audience, actors, and animating script—all this remains to be conceived. Clearly, Mao had the ability of “communicating to listeners a feeling of privileged access to the interpretive wisdom of a mind in motion” (85), but the communicating process, the feeling of privileged access, even the attribution of wisdom—all need attention.

Apter and Saich offer a tantalizing glimpse into the black box of dramaturgy when they situate Mao’s storytelling inside the caves of Yan’an, where the Chinese communist movement went into hiding after their “Long March” to escape the ruling Guomindang party in 1937–38:

Narrating the stories and writing the texts, [Mao] makes himself part of the process. Everything associated with his person also becomes significant—the long hair, the long fingers, the baggy clothes, the earthy expressions, the fact that he scratches himself with the same fingers that hold the brush. [Mao] was very careful to arrange himself to project just the image he wanted. (1994:301)

In the end, however, Yan’an is portrayed simply as “a semiotic space” and Mao as a leader “in sole possession of an inversionary discourse capable of generating public support,” an “interior system of codes, symbols, and icon” that proved “capable [of] unifying a diverse community” (69). But was discourse itself sufficient to unify a fragmented and demoralized community? What actually transpired in the caves of Yan’an? What allowed the ideological revivification process to unfold successfully? “Using metaphors and metonymies Mao creates a code,” Apter and Saich argue, “that enables the narrative to endow gestures, acts, dress, dwelling and above all language and literacy with the power of signifiers” (99). But much more must also have been involved—creative, unscripted gestures and movements, props and staging, official and dissenting interpretations, unresponsive and silent audiences but also cries of delight.

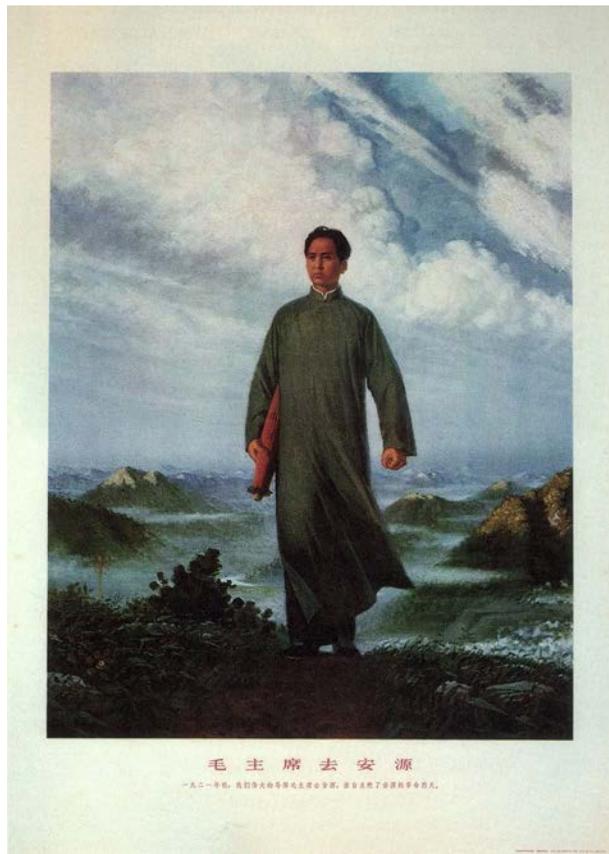


Figure 3. *Chairman Mao going to Anyuan, 1968. Artist: Lin Chunhua. Reproduced an estimated 900 million times, this depiction of Mao visiting Anyuan as a young man in the 1920s was to become an icon of the Cultural Revolution. (Heritage Image Partnership Ltd / Alamy Stock Photo)*

That “an individual has become assimilated into a discursive community” (182) is certainly a useful indicator of cultural-pragmatic success, but what exactly does it measure? What we need to know is *how* the fusion between speaker and audience is actually accomplished. It is not enough to suggest “a person has absorbed and internalized the ritual” (182). How a contingent and labile performance comes to be *regarded* as an absorptive, repetitive, and solidarizing ritual is what’s empirically and heuristically at stake. For texts to be internalized performance must be felicitous. Apter and Saich note “the revolutionaries’ claim that both the [Marxist] dialectic and the system of [Maoist] ideas were always there, an enduring authenticity waiting to be perceived” (xv). Claims of authenticity, however, must be dramatically redeemed.

Authenticity is not something already there, waiting to be perceived; it is an attribution made by an inspired audience. Performance is more than a matter of “people poring over the text, interpreting their experiences, and expressing themselves in public utterances that bound addresser and addressee” (224). Binding speaker and audiences is the ambition of performances. Apter and Saich make reference to such terms as “simulacrum” and “spectacle” (130–31; 388 n.31) to identify acts of persuasive ideological speech, but these concepts finesse the detailed texture of social performance; they do not explain them.

### *Performance in Theory and Action*

Only after performance studies began to open up the black box of discourse theory, conceptualizing the space between signifier and signified, were scholarly investigations into the Chinese revolution able to begin to make things right. “Although the ‘cultural turn’ in the social sciences has been underway for over a generation,” Elizabeth Perry writes in *Anyuan*, her “path-breaking” study (Ho 2015), “it is often conducted as discourse analysis in which writings, speeches, films, festivals, and other communicative materials are treated [...] as disembodied texts” (2012:5). What such an approach leaves “unanswered,” she argues, “is the question of how the revolutionaries managed to introduce such radically new messages and methods in ways that resonated with their target audience” (4). Conceptualizing this process as “cultural positioning,” Perry insists that it requires “active effort,” that it “hinges as much upon the skills of the messenger as on the substance and syntax of the message itself” (5).<sup>1</sup>

In the early 1920s, the south central Chinese mining town of Anyuan provided the scene of the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) first great organizing success. Mao Zedong visited Anyuan shortly after the Party’s founding. When he arrived “carrying a Hunan umbrella made of oiled paper and dressed in a long blue Mandarin gown of the sort worn by teachers,” Perry recounts, it “left a deep impression upon the workers” (2012:48–51). Still, Mao’s wardrobe was out of kilter with his avowedly revolutionary script. The long blue Mandarin gown projected the “sight of a privileged intellectual,” a character embodying “the Confucian separation between mental and manual labor” rather than somebody “anxious to interact with lowly coal miners.” In contrast with his off-key clothing, the spoken language of the character Mao

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1. Despite these clear signals, neither Perry nor the other scholars whose work I employ in this section draw their arguments from the performative turn. In *Anyuan*, Perry presents her principal theoretical term, “cultural positioning,” as indicating Chinese revolutionary efforts to instantiate Marxist ideology inside more traditional forms of Chinese culture, and in an earlier, also widely noted effort, Perry (2002) deployed the acultural sociological concept of “emotion work” to describe a historical intervention that was equally performative in its framing. In the same manner, both Yung-fa Chen and Feiyu Sun—whose writings I employ below to further elaborate a performative approach—describe their own contributions as “show[ing] the importance of the psychological dimensions in CCP policy” (Chen 1986:100) and in terms of “the traditions of both classical psychoanalysis and phenomenology—Sigmund Freud, Herbert Marcuse, Hannah Arendt, Michel Foucault, and Paul Ricoeur” (Sun 2013:5). The theoretical movement I am here tracing from poststructural to performatively oriented cultural analysis, in other words, is my own interpretation of the framework that has informed these recent studies, not those of the authors’ cited.

performed was a much better fit. “Thanks to his rural upbringing and colloquial dialect,” Perry records, Mao “was able to converse easily with the workers—most of whom shared his Hunan origins.” Regarding the wardrobe malfunction, Mao proved a quick study. After only a week of immersion, he had restructured his character’s outfit to fit more seamlessly into the local scene: “By week’s end, he had shed his scholar’s gown in favor of a pair of trousers, which were more suitable for forays down into the mining pits” (2012:48–51).<sup>2</sup>

In November 1921, after completing this scouting mission, Mao sent his young communist protégé Li Lisan to Anyuan to begin the hard work of actually organizing a local labor movement. Whereas Mao had draped his character in the modest clothing of revolutionary asceticism, Li saw things differently. He “sashayed ostentatiously around the grimy coal mining town of Anyuan, dressed either in a long Mandarin gown or in stylish Western coat and tie, in a fashion designed to attract attention” (Perry 2012:61). Yet, Li’s “flamboyant manner” proved as “captivating to ordinary workers” as Mao’s more restrained demeanor. One costuming detail of Li’s was particularly noted—“the shiny metal badge that (acquired in France) he sported on his chest.” The badge “generated persistent rumors of Li Lisan’s invulnerability to swords and bullets,” Perry tells us, adding the communist organizer “did nothing to dispel them” (61). The material accouterment had a performative function, connecting Li’s possibly foreign-seeming ideology to a widely beloved Chinese folktale. The shiny badge seemed to take “a cue from Elder Brother dragon heads whose authority rested upon their reputation for supernatural powers,” Perry explains. By deploying this prop, “Li Lisan actively encouraged the belief that he enjoyed the magical protection of ‘five foreign countries’ bestowed during his travels abroad” (61).

Li did more, however, than just dress the part. He contrived to script his organizing efforts inside the dramatic forms of traditional Hunan ritual.

To stir up greater interest in the workers’ club, Li decided that the night school should host a lion dance at the time of the annual Lantern Festival [...], an occasion when the local elite sponsored exhibitions by martial arts masters, who displayed their skills and thereby attracted new disciplines in the course of performing spirited lion dances. One of Li’s new recruits to the workers’ club, a highly adept performer by the name of You Congnai, was persuaded to take the lead. You was a low-level chieftain in the Red Gang whose martial arts skills were second to none. He dutifully donned a resplendent lion’s costume, tailor-made for this occasion by local artisans, and—to the loud accompaniment of cymbals and firecrackers—gamely pranced from the coal mine to the railway station, stopping along the way at the general headquarters of the company, the chamber of commerce, St. James Episcopal Church, the Hunan and Hubei native-place associations, and the homes of the gang chieftains to pay his respects. As intended, the performance attracted a huge and appreciative crowd, which followed the sprightly dancer back to the workers’ club to learn how to enlist as his disciples. Contrary to popular expectation,

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2. Two decades later, in Mao’s *Talks at the Yanan Forum on Literature and Art*, he may have been recalling this wardrobe shift when he insisted that, in order to “ensure that literature and art fit well into the whole revolutionary machine,” CCP artists needed to be more responsive to “the problem of audience” (Mao 1942:3). “Since the audience for our literature and art consists of workers, peasants and soldiers and of their cadres,” Mao suggested, “the problem arises of understanding them and knowing them well” (3). Addressing the disconnect between cultural elites and masses, Mao asserted that “the thoughts and feelings of our writers and artists should be *fused* with those of the masses,” advising that “to achieve this fusion, they should conscientiously learn the language of the masses” (4; emphasis added). But “if you want the masses to understand you,” Mao warned, you must “undergo a long process of tempering” (4). “Here I might mention the experience of how my own feelings changed. I began life as a student [and] felt that intellectuals were the only clean people [and] workers and peasants were dirty. [...W]earing the clothes of other intellectuals[,] I would not put on clothes belonging to a worker [...] But after I became a revolutionary and lived with workers [I] fundamentally changed” (4).

however, the martial arts master announced to the assembled audience we should no longer study martial arts. Instead, we should all study diligently at the night school. Anyone interested in studying, come with us. (Perry 2012:59–60)

It soon became clear that the communists had something altogether different from traditional pedagogy—whether of the Confucian literary (*wen*) or the martial arts (*wu*) variety. As lion dancer You Congnai put it to the throngs of would-be disciples, “Our teacher’s home is in Liling [Li Lisan’s native county, just across the provincial border in Hunan], but the ancestral founder of our school lives far, far away. To find him one must cross the seven seas. He’s now more than a hundred years old and his name is Teacher Ma [Marx], a bearded grandpa” (Perry 2012:60). Li Lisan’s imaginative recruitment drive resulted in a large influx of new members to the workers’ club.

While the now widely subscribed Anyuan workers’ club sponsored courses, Li Lisan quickly realized that “ideologically orthodox articles and lectures [...] were not always the best way to capture the workers’ attention, especially when it came to the younger workers, who comprised a large percentage of the unskilled labor force at the coal mine.” Organizers were “directed toward inventing livelier forms of cultural communication” (Perry 2012:95). Six decades later, the head of the CCP’s entertainment department in Anyuan during those early years explained its performative ambition.

We often organized younger workers in the workers’ club through singing, dramatic performances, cultural studies, and various recreational activities [...] The renovated Anyuan workers’ club had just been opened, and every week we held evening gatherings and staged plays there. Our plays had no set scripts but were self-written and self-performed. [...] The content included opposing the exploitation of workers by capitalists, overcoming imperialism, and defeating warlordism. [...] These plays drew large audiences, not only workers but also peasants from the surrounding areas. (in Perry 2012:95)

The department chief’s claim that “the propaganda effects” of such performative efforts “were very good” is confirmed by the memories of an elderly worker who, having witnessed the entertainment as a 10-year-old child, recalled the vivid atmosphere of the live performances.

The entertainment department [of the Anyuan workers’ club] organized the young people to produce and perform “civilized plays” [*wen ming xil*]. Whenever these were staged, the main hall of the club was packed. Gas lamps were lit. Many of the plays reflected the laboring life of the workers in the mine pits. I remember one night watching a new play inside the club about the terrible treatment of workers under the leather ships of the capitalists. It also showed how the Bearded Marx had engaged in revolutionary activity, and how the Russian working class had taken up arms to struggle against the capitalists. The plot of this drama deeply moved us all. I admired the working class for its fearless spirit of struggle [and] hope[d] that one day we too would be able to take up guns and struggle against the capitalists in the mine. (95–96)

In addition to such explicitly theatrical performances, the Anyuan workers’ club organized the writing and staging of 31 “costume lectures,” described by Perry as “a hybrid form of didactic entertainment that was part drama and part lecture” (96). “With moralistic titles such as ‘The Road to Awakening,’ ‘The Evils of Prostitution and Gambling,’ ‘The Patriotic Bandit,’ and ‘Our Victory,’” Perry writes, “the costume lectures were presented in evening performances in the workers’ club auditorium to enthusiastic audiences numbering a thousand or more” (96). Local opera had long been popular among Chinese villagers, and the theatre and costume-lecture formats became widely deployed as CCP organizing efforts spread from such industrial cities as Anyuan to the countryside. As one worker recalled, every Sunday “the head of the workers’ club [...] led us to nearby villages to perform” (96).

Whenever we arrived someplace, the band members would beat drums and play trumpets and flutes to attract a crowd. Then we would perform a program after which there would be a lecture [that] was warmly welcomed by the peasants. (96–97)

American journalist Edgar Snow argued, “there was no more powerful weapon of propaganda in the Communist movement than the Reds’ dramatic troupes” (Snow [1938] 2007:123–24; in Perry 2012:113). Snow observed that “when the Reds occupied new areas, it was the Red Theater that calmed the fears of the people, gave them rudimentary ideas of the Red program, and dispensed great quantities of revolutionary thoughts, to win the people’s confidence” (Snow [1938] 2007:124; in Perry 2012:113). A self-proclaimed cheerleader for the Chinese revolution, Snow in his account gives the misleading impression of easy performative success. Making use of internal party documents, the historian Yung-fa Chen argues to the contrary that the Chinese peasantry was a tough audience to crack. Centuries of Confucian teaching gave peasants “a tolerance for poverty and injustice that amounted to unquestioning devotion to harmony and passivity” (1986:173). The peasants were conservative; they would have to be convinced to become revolutionaries.

As Feiyu Sun demonstrates in his 2013 *Social Suffering and Political Confession*, it was this reluctant, withholding quality of peasant-audiences that triggered the CCP’s “speaking bitterness” campaign.<sup>3</sup> The strategy began with the Fang Pin Wen Ku method—which translates as “to visit poor families, to inquire of their sufferings” (Sun 2013:35ff). CCP work teams entered peasant villages with what Sun calls the “experience technique” in hand. They visited poor families, asking probing questions about their personal lives. This was not purely a matter of unconstrained call and response; symbolic violence was involved, and the threat of physical violence never lay far behind.

In order to avoid the perceived and real existential danger of being classified as reactionaries, the villagers had to present the work team with a personal narrative of their suffering as poor or hired peasants. If this narrative depiction of their personal suffering and oppression was convincing enough to overcome the mandatory skepticism of the work team and cadres, they would be rewarded with the “good peasant” classification. (36)

Ostensibly, such visits were about ideology, pedagogical exercises aimed at restructuring cognition. “It was the professed aim of this dialogue,” Sun writes, “to teach the peasants how to reflect upon and interpret their circumstances and identity in a ready-made narrative language which the political ideology of the CCP provided” (37).

The deeper ambition of Fang Pin Wen Ku, however, was dramaturgical; it aimed to induce the experience of “speaking bitterness,” or *suku*. According to official documents, *suku* referred to sharing “an oral personal history about being persecuted by class enemies [...] for the purpose of inspiring class hatred in the listeners [and] reaffirming one’s own class standing” (Chen 1952:331; in Sun 2013:2). Sun himself provides a more elaborate, decidedly dramaturgical definition.

*Suku* is the practice of confessing individual suffering in a political context and in a collective public forum. In Chinese, the term *Suku* means to tell of one’s suffering, or to pour out one’s bitterness, in public. *Su* means to tell, to speak, to pour out, or to confess, while the term *Ku* means bitterness, pain, and suffering. (Sun 2013:2)

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3. Sun’s ability to document the CCP’s culturally pragmatic strategy depends on access to unpublished, intraparty documents, which are much more open about performative efforts and obstacles than the rah-rah documents the CCP issued for public consumption. Chen contrasts the internal and external documents explicitly (1986:xix). Perry also relies primarily on previously unpublished sources.

One party organizer described suku as “the blasting fuse of the mass *Fanshen* movement” (46). In the CCP’s immense land reform campaign, “fanshen” (literally “turning over”) referred to a complex organizational effort that moved peasants from tolerant fatalism to angry activism.

In *Fanshen: A Documentary of Revolution in a Chinese Village*, William Hinton’s monumental, ideologically suffused, rose-colored reconstruction of the land reform campaign in Long Bow village in 1948, he documents the fearful recalcitrance of peasants to take aggressive action against landlords, and party cadres’ determined efforts to retrain them. It is instructive to see how Hinton implicitly employs a performative approach to fanshen in the chapter devoted to CCP efforts to ferreting out property owners who had collaborated with Japanese occupiers—despite Hinton’s insistence that he is merely recording what transpired in a realistic, documentarian way. As Hinton describes it:

T’ien-ming called all the active young cadres and militiamen of Long Bow together and announced to them the policy of the county government, which was to confront all enemy collaborators and their backers at public meetings, expose their crimes, and turn them over to the county authorities for punishment. [...] The young men agreed to conduct a public meeting of the whole population the very next day. And so it was that Kuo Te-yu, running dog of the landlords, informer, torturer, grafter, and enemy stooge, found himself standing before a crowd of several hundred stolid peasants whom he had betrayed. [...] As the silent crowd contracted toward the spot where the accused man stood, T’ien-ming stepped forward. “Comrades, countrymen. [...] This is our chance. Remember how we were oppressed. The traitors seized our property and kicked us. [...] Let us speak out the bitter memories of the past. Let us see that the blood debt is repaid” [...]. The peasants were listening to every word but gave no sign as to how they felt. [...] No one moved and no one spoke. “Come now, who has evidence against this man?” Again there was silence. Kuei-ts’ai, the new vice-chairman of the village, found it intolerable. He jumped up, struck Kuo Te-yu on the jaw with the flat of his hand. “Tell the meeting how much you stole,” he demanded. The blow jarred the ragged crowd. It was as if an electric spark had tensed every muscle. Not in living memory had any peasant ever struck an official. A gasp, involuntary and barely audible, came from the people and above it a clear sharp “Ah” from an old man’s throat. [...] But] the people in the square [still] waited, fascinated, as if watching a play. They did not realize that in order for the plot to unfold they themselves had to mount the stage and speak out what was on their minds. ([1966] 2008:112–14)

At the core of fanshen was suku, one of the Chinese revolution’s most original and compelling social-cum-cultural inventions. In the course of village visits, party cadres located people whom they considered “exemplary narrators,” proceeding to train them in emotionally arousing and confession-inducing storytelling techniques. With this well-rehearsed cast of political actors in hand, mass meetings were organized to let “suffering draw out suffering” (55). “An exemplary speaker during a *Suku* meeting would first touch the listeners emotionally,” Sun explains, “to make them empathize with the *Suku* speaker’s feelings—to feel sad listening to a story of misery and hardship and to feel hatred and outrage toward the speaker’s persecutors and exploiters” (2013:56). A handbook distributed by the CCP’s People’s Liberation Army in 1947, entitled *Suku and Revenge: Suku Education’s Experience and Method*, offers detailed advice to CCP organizers about writing the script, setting the stage, preparing the audience, and gaining dramatic effect.

All the people listening should feel and share in the suffering till everybody cries bitterly [...] From suffering to pain, and from pain to hatred. The more suffering, the more pain, the more pain, the more hatred, and the more hatred the more powerful [...] Use tasks such as preparing the *Suku* setting, organizing memorial ceremonies, preparing forms for recording revenge [...] Create an atmosphere of suffering that is persuasive. [...] The fol-

lowing message of political consciousness should be instilled: The poor, all under the heavens, are all suffering; and the poor in this world are all one big family; we are brothers and sisters, and we should unite together to save ourselves, to abolish the roots of class exploitation and repression. (in Sun 2013:57–60)

Such cadre-organized dramas often succeeded in producing political catharsis on a massive scale. An internal report entitled “Poor Peasants’ Suku Assembly,” also prepared in 1947, described what transpired during the Land Reform movement when “every district started practicing Suku” (46). Despite its self-promotion and pseudo-numeracy, the cadre issued a report that strikingly illustrates their performative ambition and gives some indication of the scope of suku’s dramatic success.

In the Suku assembly in the town of Chengguan, after only one person’s Suku, all those peasants had already started bellowing and to cry. Some people went back home, where the whole family again cried bitterly together [...]. According to incomplete statistics, there were 5184 peasants who did Suku in the whole of the year. 4551 of them cried bitterly during Suku [...]. There were 323 peasants speaking their bitterness about starvation; 546 speaking their bitterness about begging for food; 115 speaking their bitterness about scattered family; 116 speaking their bitterness about relatives being killed by bandits [...]. In the Suku Movement, cadres and people become one family; cadres felt an aching to see the people’s crying; people persuaded the cadres to stop crying. People said: “This is the Communist Party! The Communist Party is also our poor!” (in Sun 2013:46–47)

While this discussion of Suku focuses on its performative deployment before the 1949 revolution, the same dramaturgical structure functioned as a powerful organizing tool with which Maoism sought to shape the self-perception and emotions of the masses after the revolution as well. The Cultural Revolution of the 1960s, for example, was fuelled by the “*recalling* bitterness” campaign, which treated the prerevolutionary episodes of *speaking* bitterness not as performances, but as objective descriptions. Guo Wu documents how “individual memories of the formerly oppressed were gradually teased out by the Chinese socialist state to construct a class-based collective memory of the pre-1949 ‘old China’ [...that] aimed at reenacting class struggle and reinforcing class awareness by invoking collective memory” (Wu 2014:247).

Past expressions of bitterness not only became the articulation of individual and collective memories, but also involved rituals and performance, and thus were successfully incorporated into the larger institution of propaganda and Chinese popular culture.<sup>4</sup> As a result, all depictions of the old society were dissociated from “objective realities” and became “representational realities” (247).

The party-state sought to indoctrinate students through face-to-face oral reports by older people that emphasized their suffering before Liberation [in order] to educate students so that they would not forget the past [...] Turning a personal, bitter story of an older person into a public political asset was the essence of the recalling-bitterness sessions around the country. [...] Selecting the right person to speak and creating the appropriate theatrical atmosphere was crucial to the success of recalling bitterness and evoking

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4. During the cultural revolution, the “revolutionary operas” scripted and produced by Jiang Qing, the celebrity actress and political activist who became Mao’s wife in Yan’an in 1939, replaced traditional opera and played a significant propaganda role. Despite her outsized political power during these years, however, there is little evidence that Qing’s theatrical expertise contributed to the performativity of Chinese revolutionary politics more broadly conceived, in the decades before (Terrill 1984). Staging theatrical drama is one thing; staging social performances quite another, though they often historically intertwine. Mao Zedong had a performative gift for politics, though he never wrote or performed for theatre.

emotional responses from the audience. [...] Trained peasant orators would gulp wordlessly in pain when their narrations reached a climax [...] The ability to touch the audience was the main criterion in selecting speakers. After being chosen, the speakers were trained further to ensure they were eloquent, emotional, and able to cry easily. [...] Many memoirs of the Cultural Revolution's sent-down youths, written in the 1980s and 1990s, recall how formerly urban students were re-educated by old peasants about past bitterness. (260–61, 263)

The Chinese were able to make revolution, not because their Communist Party provided truthful information that responded to objective class interests, but rather because it forged a revolutionary art of protest that fused producers, scripts, actors, scenes, and audiences. The revolutionary drama may have seemed to exude realism and verisimilitude, but it worked to combine aesthetic and moral power in a manner that made it sublime (see Burke [1757] 1990).

## Civil Rights Protest in Mid-20th Century America

While revolutionary organizations need to be artful, they often possess levers of coercive power via party or state control, such that symbolic violence “adds value” to the dramatic power of ideological scripts. Bottom-up protests by relatively powerless movements have no such performative advantage, so the felicity of such protests becomes that much more difficult to sustain.

Consider, for example, the African American civil rights movement in the 1950–60s. A century earlier, the Civil War (1861–65) had abolished slavery, but with the end of Reconstruction, just a dozen years after Northern victory, further black emancipation was blocked. Southern blacks became engaged by a caste system, even as blacks in the northern United States, a growing population, remained stigmatized and disempowered. In the 1950s and 1960s, an extraordinary social movement challenged this system of domination, achieving a great, if still only partial triumph.

In recent decades, social scientists have tended to interpret the civil rights movement as a struggle over “naked power” (Morris 2007), a strategic battle between Southern blacks and their Southern white oppressors for control over material resources (McAdam 1982; Payne 1995). In my own work, I've proposed an alternative explanation. Certainly, the civil rights movement was an effort to remove the barriers blocking black access to state power. But because of a complex mixture of racial fears and democratic politics, the movement's struggle to gain such power could be neither violent nor even implicitly coercive. The movement could have recourse only to persuasion. Aiming at influence, not power, it generated symbolic dramas, projecting them, not to white Southern state power, but to the audience of Northern whites.<sup>5</sup>

This was not the direction in which the civil rights movement ostensibly aimed its message. Civil rights mobilizations seemed to be directed at Southern institutions, but their real audience was a “third party,” the white citizens who were watching this confrontation in the North. Vis-à-vis the immediate audience of Southern whites, civil rights campaigns seemed weak and, indeed, they were most often defeated. A few white Southerners had their eyes opened, but the great majority was unmoved and turned away.

Modern audiences are dispersed, layered, and fragmented. Performers cannot hope to connect with all of them at the same time. Martin Luther King *publicly* claimed that nonviolent tactics were designed to persuade Southern whites, appealing to their Christian and democratic hearts. As those inside movement leadership knew full well, however, King's tactics were actu-

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5. First, of course, there had to BE a movement. King's performances had to successfully mobilize black masses in the south. It was not only King—as director and star—but the cast of black foot soldiers who created the dramatic performances that could be projected to white audiences in the North.

ally designed to produce quite a different effect. True enough, King's thinking about non-violence had come from his study of another master of the art of civil protest, Mahatma Gandhi. Gandhi believed that iterative performances of *satyagraha*—"insistence on truth"—would eventually soften imperial hearts and change British minds. But what worked for late imperial Britain was not felicitous in the America of Jim Crow. The racism of most Southern whites, elite and mass, was far too ingrained for them to be responsive to *satyagraha* of an African American kind. Despite his Christian idealism, King knew this in his bones. He had grown up in this South, but he had studied for his doctorate in New England. It was the *satyagraha* of Northern whites that King had in mind (King 1957).<sup>6</sup>



Figure 4. The last leg of the march through Mississippi and into Jackson, June 1966. Front row, second from left: Juanita Abernathy, Reverend Ralph Abernathy, Coretta King, Reverend Martin Luther King Jr., James Meredith, Stokely Carmichael, Floyd McKissick. (Photo by Matt Herron / Take Stock; courtesy of The Image Works)

From Frederick Douglass to Harriet Tubman to W.E.B. Du Bois, the leaders of African American protests were social actors who had a flare for the dramatic and could command the public stage. Though often sharply differing in ideology and ambition, all of these leaders shared one, all-important capacity. They possessed an intuitive feeling for the American *conscience collective*, both white and black. They grasped what, in Saussure's terminology, might be called the American *langue*, the cultural language that set the background for the civil rights movement's *paroles*, the speech acts by which African American movements engaged and protested against their oppressive social worlds, the strategic scripts they projected not only to fellow blacks but to whites in the civil surround.

The deep cultural languages shared by black and white Americans were formed by secular strains of anti-authoritarian republican and liberal thought, alongside the religious themes of prophetic Christianity. Blacks identified with Jews in Pharaonic Egypt, seeing their own fate and possibility in the Exodus story. Whites traced their national mission to the rebellion against King George III, and in post-Revolutionary times saw themselves locked in a battle for democracy vis-à-vis European aristocracy, empire, and despotism. During the first three centuries of the American experiment, however, racism prevented whites from identifying their own emancipation narrative with the black struggle for freedom. Only gradually, with

6. There were, of course, some Southern whites who did support the black movement (Sokol 2006), and while most did so passively, a few were active supporters: clergy (Campbell 1997), rabbis (Bauman and Kalin 1997), women (Little 2009, Moody 2011, Murphy 1997), students (Michel 2004), editors (Roberts and Klibanoff 2007), and business people (Robinson and Sullivan 1991). While Chappell argues that "covert moral support from local white people" was "immensely encouraging to black protestors" (1994:xvi), the point is that such support rarely became overt. A handful of Southern whites may indeed have functioned as "inside agitators" (Chappell 1994), but they were invisible to the audience observing from the outside. White Southerners experiencing empathy and displaying sympathy could not be publicly placed on the performative scene. In the national civil rights drama, the "role" of white Southerner was reserved for figures who represented racist masses and repressive elites.



Figure 5. The bus on which Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat sparking the Montgomery bus boycott, on exhibit at the Henry Ford Museum in Dearborn, Michigan. (Photo by rmhermen; courtesy of Creative Commons)

the emergence of such persuasive African American performers as Douglass, Tubman, and Du Bois, and such publicizing organizations as the NAACP (the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People), did the potential for such mutual identification develop.

A highly educated, deeply religious, personally gutsy, and preternaturally gifted dramaturg, the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. set up Southern whites as the ostensible audience for civil rights protests. In the actual practice of his protest dramas, however, King turned Southern whites into mere foils. He transformed them from real ene-

mies into imagined ones, larger than life figures in a morality play that he designed, scripted, and choreographed, in which he himself played the leading activist role. Time and time again, such movement dramas subverted Southern white powers by seducing them to play the anti-democratic role of anti-Christ in their civil religious scripts.

When Rosa Parks refused to move to the back of the bus in Montgomery, Alabama, in December 1955, her courageous action had the appearance of a spontaneous individual protest. In fact, the move had been long planned by the local chapter of the NAACP, where Parks herself served as secretary. What could not be known beforehand, however, was that the choice to lead the upheaval that ensued would be a new arrival in the local ministry, a young preacher named Martin Luther King Jr.

Sustaining the nonviolent Montgomery bus boycott over 12 long months required that a wide range of performances be fused felicitously together. The success of the protest depended on a tightly knit production team; rigorous backstage rehearsal of civil actors; continuous direction of the unfolding *mise-en-scène*; scripting supple enough to maintain dramatic plotting and moral clarity through unpredictable ups and downs; and enough material power to provide thousands of financially strapped black people with private transportation, bail to get out of jail, and legal representation (Branch 1988). The social drama also required a heroic leading actor, one who could present himself as fearless in the face of police-state levels of repression and who was capable of rhetorically inspiring fervent emotional identification and moral inspiration (see Meier 1965).

Not only did King project the black protest script locally, to the black masses who were cast and chorus for the Montgomery movement, but also nationally, to Northern citizens, via white reporters powerfully affected by the transcendent notes King struck in his civil religious script: “This bus situation was the precipitating factor, but there is something much deeper. There is deep determination [...] to rise up against these oppressive forces” (in Lentz 1990:26). Citing King’s ringing declaration that “one of the glories of America” was “the right to protest for right,” *Newsweek*, at the time an influential weekly magazine, framed the Montgomery protest in civil rather than racial or economic terms. After the success of the boycott, *Time* magazine put King on its cover, describing him as “what many a Negro—and, were it not for his color, many a white—would like to be” (in Lentz 1990:34).

Montgomery was the first act in a series of protest events that steadily ramped up dramatic tension, a decades-long social drama that plotted the victory of civil good over anti-civil evil. There were the fraught, vividly reported lunch counter sit-ins of 1960, where wave after wave of nonviolent student protestors were arrested and jailed. There were the murderously risky Freedom Rides in 1961, which were met with horrendous beatings and were televised on the nightly news as courageous protests against criminal brutality.

When white police with their fire hoses and ferocious dogs attacked black school children in Birmingham, Alabama, in the summer of 1964, it became a drama that captured and outraged the Northern civil imagination as never before (Eskew 1997); and when, one year later, Alabama state police shot non-violent marchers determined to cross a bridge in Selma, the drama aroused the deepest moral anxiety, exploding

throughout the Northern collective consciousness (Garrow 1978). Movement leaders had chosen Birmingham and Selma precisely because they knew that the white leaders in these towns were particularly prone to racist outbursts and antidemocratic displays; and the protest events were scripted, rehearsed, choreographed, and artfully controlled throughout unfolding mis-en-scènes. Yet, as Coleridge explained, the artifice of drama can never allow itself to be seen: dramatic effect depends upon the willing suspension of disbelief. Southern whites dismissed civil rights protests as trumped-up hype, but white Northern audiences viewed them as authentic and deeply sincere, as powerful dramatizations of the moral truth of racial oppression. White Northern audiences were also exposed to the drama at closer range, witnessing racial unrest, violence against blacks, and arrests of black protestors in the North.

As Northern whites witnessed these unfolding acts of the civil rights drama in what, thanks to television news, seemed like real time, their sentimental sympathy for the “lost cause” of Southern whites gradually evaporated. “We have never [...] scattered our efforts,” King confided to a journalist in 1964, “but have focused upon specific symbolic objectives” (in Garrow 1978:321). Symbolic power, King understood, has real effects. Cathecting with the black protagonists, not their Southern white opponents, Northern citizen-audiences demanded that federal power be deployed to protect powerless blacks and punish their white oppressors. In 1964 and 1965, Congress, acting in the aftermath of JFK’s assassination, abolished segregation laws, and passed legislation insuring black civil and political rights. Northern state power invaded the states of the old Confederacy. Many called it the second Reconstruction.



*Figure 6. An African American woman being carried to a police patrol wagon during a demonstration in Brooklyn, NY, 1963. (Photo by the Underwood Archives; courtesy of The Image Works)*

## “Black Lives Matter” in 21st-Century America

### A New Black Subject

The 1950s–60s civil rights movement was American focused, but it also inspired the global collective imaginary, projecting tableaux beyond local scenes to hundreds of millions who connected with the performances from outside. It initiated a narrative arc, a sequential iteration of utopian social performance that, over subsequent decades, became a deeply engrained culture structure, not only in the United States but also in global civil society.

The utopian ideal of civil solidarity sits uneasily in a world of social inequality, stigma, and repression (Alexander 2006). Dissatisfaction with existing social arrangements is chronic, and the civil sphere is restless. Episodes of liminality, and social dramas demanding civil repair, are the periodic result: the Solidarity movement in Poland, the People Power Revolution in the Philippines, Velvet Revolutions in Central and Eastern Europe, Tiananmen Square, Obama, the Arab Spring, Occupy, the Umbrella protest in Hong Kong. Some of these movements succeeded in taking state power; all of them generated extraordinary symbolic force. They were felicitous political dramas played out in the public square, in their own locales and before the larger audience of “all humankind” (Alexander 2013).<sup>7</sup>

In this final section, however, I am concerned, not with such global ramifications, nor the last few decades, but with a new civil rights movement that has only recently emerged on the American scene—the Black Lives Matter movement. The iterative performances of the mid-century civil rights movement left behind a deeply ingrained culture structure, an intensely redolent set of background representations upon which later black protests felt compelled to draw. But, as I hope I have made clear, there is an enormous distance between background representations—the cultural structures that provide the langue for symbolic action—and the concrete performances situated in time and space that are informed by them. The latter are like pragmatic speech acts rather than emanations of cultural structures, and they require each of the other elements of performance to be brought into play. Between the black protest tradition as crystallized in the mid-20th century and the conditions of poor black inhabitants of the inner cities in the early 21st century, there loomed the enormous challenge of forging new action-oriented scripts. These scripts would also have to be made to walk and talk, informing dramatic scenes that could appeal to, energize, and perhaps even unify citizen-audiences fragmented by race and class and demoralized by political fatalism. There would also have to be strong leaders, dramaturgs who could produce protest performances and directors who could manage their *mise-en-scènes*. Successfully fusing audience, script, and actors would require, as well, access to the means of symbolic production; sympathetic interpretation of ongoing performances by critics, such as journalists and intellectuals; and sufficient leverage vis-à-vis material power to block state forces from exercising repression.

These disparate elements have, indeed, been brought into place by the black movement against police violence that has gathered force since 2012. Extraordinary creativity was needed to create each performative element; skill, fortitude, and *fortuna* were required to weave them

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7. The iterative performances that constituted the Chinese Revolution, before and after the Communist regime change in 1949, created a similarly powerful narrative arc that reverberated on the global stage for decades after. Without the Maoist script, it is hard to imagine the strands of anticolonialism in the 1950s (e.g., Frantz Fanon and Fidel Castro) and 1960s (Che Guevara) that promoted violent agrarian revolution and, quite often, exemplary violence as a vanguard trigger (Alexander 2016), much less the revolutionary performances of such Western leftist groups as the Weathermen and the Black Panthers, who drew upon interpretations of Mao, Fanon, and Che for their scripts. However, Maoism and its iterations were revolutionary, not civil society movements. By contrast, the US civil rights movement was oriented toward radical reform, not revolution, and its embrace of nonviolence was critical for such performance. This difference is what allowed it to become a central inspiration, a transforming script, for the radical civil society movements that emerged after the socialist utopia faded.

together into the iterative sequence that has allowed African Americans, once again, to seize the nation's political stage.

### *The Underclass Becomes an Acting Subject*

By the time the Black Lives Matter movement was formed, it had been decades since African Americans had been able to do so. The victory of the mid-century civil rights movement had been decisive, but it was partial. The gates of the ghetto (Duneier 2016) had been pried loose for African American workers, clerks, professionals, and businessmen (Landry 1988). Yes, such groups remained subject to far-reaching racial stigma (Anderson 2012, 2015), but their freedom of movement was vastly expanded. However, when they left the ghetto, the uneducated, unskilled, and unemployed were left behind, in the inner city, and a racial underclass formed, an often desperate, always degrading admixture of a dominated class and the abject residue of a still despised race (Wilson 1987). Racial and class prejudice built a cultural fence around this inner-city group (Patterson 1998); politicians, real estate agents, courts, police, and prisons exercised controls of an administrative, coercive, and material kind (Massey and Denton 1993; M. Alexander 2012). Young black males especially were incarcerated at alarmingly high rates, often for acts that would not lead to imprisonment if the perpetrators were white.

Working- and middle-class African Americans had peopled the 20th-century movement for civil rights, supplying crucial cultural capital. They brought education and professional skills to the task of protest, and the black church, with its powerful bonding and bridging institutions (Putnam 2000), provided not only generalized trust but protected spaces within which public performances could be rehearsed (Morris 1984). Because these kinds of resources were not nearly as available to the new racial underclass, its capacity for exercising political agency was severely curtailed.

In principle if not in practice, however, the potential for social protest on behalf of the underclass remained, along with the possibility of leveraging widespread social criticism into civil repair of the institutions that have sustained its depredation. Despite fissures, contradictions, weak-kneed liberalism, and conservative backlash, the civil sphere in the US remains potentially empowering, its ideals and institutions on call if the right social arrangements can be made. To create such arrangements requires a performatively powerful social movement, one that can so effectively dramatize underclass suffering that new networks of meaning can form between marginalized racial groups excluded from the civil sphere and the core groups who occupy secure and influential places within it.

In the years since 2012, such a performatively powerful black civil rights movement has begun to take shape. Police violence against black people had been routine for decades, but it had rarely been publicly marked. This changed when online organizers created evocative, highly condensed slogans and visual symbols, circulating them virtually on their social networks. When their cell phones and computers lit up, tens of thousands took to the streets, producing choreographed demonstrations that contrasted black innocence with police brutality. Once routine, police shootings now became dramatized as egregious, undeniable abuses of civil authority. Paul Kuttner has it right:

Neither police violence in Black communities nor resistance to that violence are new. But something new *has* emerged: a new focus for anger and despair, a new source of critical hope, a new catalyst for social imagination and creativity. There are surely many reasons that a movement has developed at this particular moment. [...One] factor has certainly been the skill with which organizers have deployed symbols, hashtags, chants, metaphors, and images in order to communicate—quickly and powerfully—the underlying values and goals of the movement. Every social movement develops a cache of symbols. These symbols give coherence to dispersed grassroots efforts. They tap into our emotions and encourage us to learn more. We use them to mark our collective identity and to capture the attention of media outlets, with their famously short attention spans. (2015)

“The Black Lives Matter movement,” according to Michael McLaughlin, “has reframed the way Americans think about police treatment of people of color.” The lives of poor black people began to matter.

The Movement has managed to activate a sense of red alert around a chronic problem that, until, now, has remained mostly invisible outside the communities that suffer from it. [...] Evidence does not suggest that shootings of black men by police officers have been significantly on the rise. Nevertheless, police killings have become front-page news and a political flash point, entirely because of the sense of emergency that movement has sustained. (McLaughlin 2016)

In the *New York Times* Jay Caspian Kang describes the dramatic effect of the protests in a similar manner: “The swiftness with which the movement now acts, and the volume of people it can bring out to every protest, have turned every police killing into a national referendum on the value of black lives in America” (2015).

The impact of such symbolic referenda has been to extend sympathy to and identification with the underclass. Until recently, according to the Pew Research Center, “public opinion was [...] closely divided” on the question of whether significant changes were still needed to achieve racial equality (2015). By July 2015, after three years of social mobilization, Americans who believed deep changes were needed outnumbered those satisfied with the status quo by two to one: “This shift in public opinion is seen across the board. Growing shares in all regions of the country, and across all demographic and partisan groups say both that racism is a big problem and that more needs to be done to achieve racial equality” (Pew 2015).

#### *Performing Indignation and Extending Identification*

How were such largely black protest performances able to affect the still majority white American citizen-audiences? As they unfolded on television and computer screens, the unprecedented wave of demonstrations against police brutality looked spontaneous, as if they were grassroots, springing up from the underclass victims themselves. Yet, this was not the case. Certainly, the demonstrations were heartfelt. Their authenticity, however, was choreographed, their verisimilitude the result of a singular fusion between actors and audience enhanced by performative effect.

When 17-year-old high school student Trayvon Martin was murdered by George Zimmerman, a neighborhood watch coordinator for a gated community in Sanford, Florida, on 26 February 2012, the national black community and its white supporters filled the airwaves with outrage over racism and civil irresponsibility. When the local police chief refused to arrest Zimmerman, claiming Florida’s so-called Stand-Your-Ground statute allowed his exercise of armed self-defense, thousands protested, and their demonstrations surprised and riveted what turned out to be a broadly sympathetic nation. The reaction was as electrifying as it was unexpected, pushing the envelope of interracial moral responsibility and emotional identification further than it had ever been extended before. When President Obama publicly crystallized this identification, dramatically avowing, “When I think about this boy, I think about my own kids [...] If I had a son, he would look like Trayvon” (in Shear 2012), he was speaking not only for himself and other African American parents but for a much broader swath of citizens whom he represented as president of the United States. The Million Hoodies for Justice protest group, formed a month after the shooting, organized a march in New York where protestors chanted “We want arrests!” and “We are all Trayvon,” many clad in hooded sweatshirts “symbolic of the clothing Martin wore when he was killed” (Miller 2012). Two weeks later, Zimmerman was charged with murder by a special prosecutor appointed by conservative Republican Governor Rick Scott.

Fifteen months after that, when Zimmerman was acquitted, civil outrage once again ignited, boiling over with the news that Eric Garner, an African American father of six, had died when a white NYPD officer put him in a 20-second chokehold in the course of his arrest. In the days and weeks of protests that mushroomed across US cities, highly theatrical “die-ins” were staged; protestors lay down in the middle of busy streets, and demonstrators publically chanted Garner’s final words, “I Can’t Breathe.” When, just one month after Garner’s killing, on 9 August 2014, a white police officer in Ferguson, Missouri, shot another young black man, Michael Brown, protests exploded again. Brown’s last words were, “I don’t have a gun, stop shooting!” These secular prayers of pleading and protest, “became a national rallying cry,” according to the *New York Times* (Healy, Stolberg, and Yee 2015:A1). As protestors chanted these words in cities and campuses across the country, they also projected indexical gestures that would be immediately recognized as ritual re-enactment. For example, they raised their arms above their heads, in solidarity with Michael Brown, the black teenager who, according witnesses, was surrendering when he was shot.

In December 2014, when a grand jury refused to issue indictments for Eric Garner’s murder, urban protests heated to a fever pitch. Performed with anger and resolve by African Americans in the face of potentially dangerous police repression, their dramatic words and choreographed movements were streamed live by social media and, reported by mainstream journalism, ricocheted around the nation. Chanting and raising their arms in archetypal gestures of solidarity and fear, demonstrators marched in public squares, blocked local and interstate highways, and interrupted shopping centers, religious holidays, and political events. Their slogans and gestures became totems—“Mike Brown is an emblem,” a protestor in Philadelphia declared (AP 2014)—and were circulated by iconic black figures, celebrities from music, film, sport, theatre, and politics. Across from the Broadway NYPD police station, African American actors staged a precision rap-and-dancing protest. Outside a Cleveland Cavaliers and Brooklyn Nets basketball game, thousands milled in protest, while, on the inside, superstar LeBron James donned an “I Can’t Breathe” T-shirt, proclaiming to national media, “as a society, we have to do better [...] for one another no matter what race you are.” In the same *USA Today* article, Nets guard Jarret Jack explained:

We aren’t just focused on ourselves as just athletes [...] We collectively understand that this is an issue that needs to be addressed. The more attention we can bring and awareness to it is great. It’s not a color issue, it’s a people issue. It’s a citizen issue. (in Zillgit and Strauss 2014)

The demonstrators outside the Cleveland arena welcomed these gestures, seeing their potential for connecting with a much wider audience beyond.



Figure 7. The Black Lives Matter movement march on Tampa Street in downtown Tampa, FL, back to Lykes Gaslight Park, 11 July 2016. (Photo by Octavio Jones / Tampa Bay Times; courtesy of The Image Works)

“That’s a result of them being educated brothers and having a slight moral compass,” a protestor identifying himself only as L.B. said. “They know they’re on their grand stage. Anybody that has any type of public voice needs to stand up and do something.” (Zillgit and Strauss 2014)

Projecting gestures and voices from such grand stages had an impact. The ritual-like symbolic actions generated a collective effervescence that pulsed outward in great waves and was observed by political commentators who gauged shifting opinion. Donna Brazile, the influential African American media commentator, now interim chair of the Democratic National Committee, declared:

“Hands up, Don’t Shoot” has become a larger symbol of the desire to prove one’s innocence [...] In many ways, it will always resonate as a symbol of an unarmed dead teenager lying for hours on the street. Just like “I can’t breathe” will never go away. They are forever etched in the complicated story of racial bias in our criminal justice system. (in Healy et al. 2015)

### *Black Lives Matter Seizes the Stage*

It was in the midst of the Ferguson protests that Black Lives Matter—the hashtag, the organization, and the broad eponymous movement—emerged on the public scene.<sup>8</sup>

#BlackLivesMatter had been created the day George Zimmerman went free, but in the year following it was rarely evoked.

After the murder of Michael Brown, #BLM led the Freedom Rides that fed the conflagration in Ferguson, and the number of visitors to its website jumped a hundredfold (Freelon et al. 2016). A breathless contemporary account by the activist Spanish-language website teleSUR is revealing. “A national coalition determined to challenge state violence will convene in Ferguson over the next three days,” teleSUR reported, and described the purpose of the gathering in performative terms—“to re-envision a Black political platform in the United States” (teleSUR 2014). The group that would build this platform was Black Lives Matter.

TeleSUR linked the organization

to the sacred tradition of black civil rights, providing one of the organization’s founders a platform to declaim about repression, resilience, and destiny:



*Figure 8. Sparked by the Grand Jury verdicts in Ferguson, MO, and the Eric Garner murder in Staten Island, NY, thousands marched on 13 December 2014 in New York City against police racial bias and the killings of unarmed black men all over the USA. (Photo by David M. Grossman; courtesy of The Image Works)*

8. “Clearly there is some degree of overlap between #Blacklivesmatter and Black Lives Matter: organization members (along with many others) use the hashtag, which in turn almost certainly leads prospective members to the organization. At the same time, the two terms are sometimes used to refer to a third idea: the sum of all organizations, individuals, protests, and digital spaces dedicated to raising awareness about and ultimately ending police brutality against Black people” (Freelon et al. 2016:9).

On Friday, close to 600 people will gather in Ferguson, Missouri, from across the continental United States, part of the Black Lives Matters (BLM) Ride. “The Black Lives Matters Ride is the Freedom Ride of our generation,” explains co-organizer Patrisse Cullors. [...] The BLM Ride comes out of the spirit and history of the 1960s Freedom Rides to Mississippi that aimed to end racial segregation. [...] “The BLM Ride is a call to action for Black people across the country to come together and re-articulate our destiny,” stresses Cullors. [...] “We believe that in order to move this country out of a cycle of destruction and trauma, we have to rise up, both locally and nationally. Ferguson represents both the repression that exists in Black communities, and also our immense resilience [...]” advocates BLM in their National Advocacy and Organizing Toolkit. (teleSUR 2014)

A UCLA graduate in religion and philosophy, Patrisse Cullors was a fulltime organizer for the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights in Oakland, a nonprofit dedicated to social justice issues in the inner city (Cobb 2016:36). She created the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter from a Facebook post by her friend Alicia Garza on the day of George Zimmerman’s acquittal. “The sad part is,” Garza wrote, “there’s a section of America who is cheering and celebrating right now. And that makes me sick to my stomach. We GOTTA get it together y’all.” Garza later added:

btw stop saying we are not surprised. That’s a damn shame in itself. I continue to be surprised at how little Black lives matter. And I will continue that. Stop giving up on black lives [...] black people. I love you. I love us. Our lives matter. (in Cobb 2016:35)

Garza studied anthropology and sociology at the University of California, San Diego, and worked as a special projects director in the Oakland office of the National Domestic Workers Alliance, representing 20,000 caregivers and housekeepers. The third member of #BLM’s founding trio is Opal Tometi, a writer and immigration rights organizer in Brooklyn, who built a social media platform on Facebook and Twitter so that, in the words of *New Yorker* journalist Jelani Cobb, “activists” could use the hashtag to “connect with one another” (26). As Cobb put it, the three women then “began thinking about how to turn the phrase into a movement” (26).

#### *Organizers, Producers, Directors, and Activists*

Garza, Cullors, and Tometi became invisible dramaturgs, writing scripts for the highly visible public performances of their organization. They were not on the scene, but behind it. Looking back, Cullors claimed the role of producer and director, distinguishing such responsibilities from participating in real-time performances and handling the *mise-en-scène*.

I identify as an organizer versus an activist because I believe an organizer is the smallest unit that you build your team around. The organizer is the person who gets the press together and who builds new leaders, the person who helps to build and launch campaigns, and is the person who decides what the targets will be and how we’re going to change this world. (Cullors 2016)

It was somebody from outside the founding group of invisible organizers, a Brooklyn-based activist and friend of Cullors named Daniel Moore, who actually coordinated the Freedom Rides to Missouri from New York, Chicago, Portland, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, and Boston. Moore was soon joined by DeRay Mckesson, then a 29-year-old former school administrator from Minneapolis who, transfixed by the images and texts unrolling on his Twitter feed, drove 600 miles to Ferguson to immerse himself in the actual protest scene (Kang 2015). In Ferguson, at a street-medic training session, Mckesson met Johnetta Elzie, a 25-year-old St. Louis native who had studied journalism in college. The two became hands-on, all-in, street-level organizing partners, avidly sharing information and showing up for virtually every event in the weeks and months ahead.



Figure 9. Black Lives Matter protestors occupied the Minneapolis police department's fourth precinct from 15 November to 3 December 2015. Minneapolis, Minnesota, 25 November. (Photo by Tony Webster; courtesy of Creative Commons)

Elzie [...was] one of the most reliable real-time observers of the confrontations between the protesters and the police. She took photos of the protest organizers, of the sandwiches she and her friends made to feed other protesters, of the Buddhist monks who showed up at the burned QuickTrip. Mckesson, too, was live-tweeting [...and] integrating video and referring to protesters and police officers alike by name. Mckesson's tweets were usually sober and detailed, whereas Elzie's were cheerfully sarcastic. (Kang 2015)

Elzie and Mckesson soon became “the most recognizable figures in the movement in Ferguson” (Cobb 2016:36). As iterations of black protest unfolded in response to later police shootings, the two became publically visible personae standing out from the emerging, but still largely anonymous “black subject” whose gathering power was increasingly seen and heard over television and computer screens.

Pretty soon, Mckesson and Elzie were appearing regularly on TV and radio. They were appealing personalities and soon became easily recognizable personas. Mckesson had begun wearing red shoes and a red shirt to protests. Later, he replaced this outfit with a bright blue Patagonia vest, which he now wears everywhere he goes. (Someone created a DeRay's vest Twitter account.) Elzie often wore dark lipstick, a pair of oversize sunglasses and a leather jacket: the beautician's daughter channeling a Black Panther. (Kang 2015)

This passage is from a spread about Mckesson and Elzie in a 2015 issue of the *New York Times Magazine*, a lengthy account filled with appealing color photos and marked by an enthusiastic, even adulatory tone (Kang 2015). Mckesson later announced his candidacy to become Baltimore's mayor. Soon after, clad in signature red sneakers and blue vest, he made guest appearances on *The Late Show* with Steven Colbert and *The Daily Show* with Trevor Noah.

#### *The Double Movement*

When journalists and social scientists began to examine the new BLM protest movement, they highlighted its online presence, as if software savvy plus anger and grit were sufficient in themselves to initiate the shock waves pulsating throughout the broader civil surround. Beguiled by technology, such understandings truncate the performative process, eliding the chasm separating scripts and actors, on one side, from audiences, on the other—making invisible, in other words, the very “de-fusion” of performative elements that underscores the cultural and pragmatic difficulties of achieving dramatic success.

That this gap was real, and immensely challenging, explains why the BLM protest movement was a series of interrelated but separated calls and responses, not one performance but several, each one temporally, spatially, and demographically independent even if topically inter-linked. The triggering posts of anonymous leaders, such as Garza and Cullors, were elabo-

rated by on-scene actors, such as Mckesson and Elzie, and retweeted to a network of hundreds of organizers who were viewed as “in place” and “ready to bring thousands of people into the streets with a tweet” (Kang 2015). These first responders in the layered audience (Rauer 2006) were primed and committed, waiting to be “re-fused.” Mckesson put it this way: “When I tweet, I’m mostly preaching to the choir” (Kang 2015). He was confident the audience for his misdeeds would become actors performing protest on the street. What this on-scene organizer was not quite as certain about, however, were the effects that such choreographed bodily displays would have on audiences at one layer removed, those watching and listening to the street performances via mainstream media. Mckesson hoped, of course, this more distant audience would identify with the dramas he was organizing, but he confessed that, in this second phase, he was actually preaching against the choir.

The heart of the movement is [...] shutting down streets, shutting down Walmarts, shutting down any place where people feel comfortable. We want to make people feel as uncomfortable as we feel when we hear about Mike, about Eric Garner, about Tamir Rice. We want them to experience what we go through on a daily basis. (in Kang 2015)

The BLM street protests did not aim to seize power; most did not even have concrete demands. Their ambition, rather, was communicative, to create dramatic performances that would trigger sympathy for the suffering of underclass others, generating an emotional cathexis that would extend cultural identification, putting “ordinary people” (whites mostly) in the position of the oppressed, making them “experience what we go through on a daily basis.”

To produce such vicarious symbolic experience, the portrayal of protest in the news media was key. This is the second act of the Black Lives Matter performance. It begins with journalists interpreting the protests and filing stories that their news organizations project outward via print, television, and the internet. The first circuit of the double movement—social media directives to a committed network that brought black bodies into the streets—produced the performance of the racial underclass as a new black subject. The second performative circuit aimed to re-fuse this protest with a much more distant audience. The new black subject had to be recognized by influential white core groups, and in a sympathetic way.

In their massive study of 40.8 million movement-related tweets between 1 June 2014 and 31 May 2015, Freelon et al. (2016) reconstruct the network structure of BLM’s digital communications. Two findings suggest precisely the kind of double movement I am proposing here. The first is that the digital network was decidedly loose, composed of weak rather than strong ties, among which there was relatively little exchange back and forth. Instead of a “dense network with many reciprocal ties—conducive to building trust between connections”—the kind which, according to Freelon and his colleagues, would be ideal for “circulat[ing] ideas for how to mobilize”—the researchers found an “extremely diffuse” network, one “clearly conducive to broadly distributing and circulating information” (16).<sup>9</sup> The second finding concerns not the geography of the network, but the substantive identity of its nodes. By far the most frequently connected hubs were media organizations, not individuals or protest groups, and most of these media were mainstream.<sup>10</sup> “In the case of the Black Lives Matter Web network,” Freelon and

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9. “With a graph density of .003 [...] only a tiny fraction of all the links that could exist within the network actually exist. As a comparison, a random network with the same number of nodes has a density of .02, meaning that the network contains two percent of all possible ties. There is little reciprocity between sites (in 97% of cases, sites linking out to another site don’t receive a link in from the latter site). Whether unidirectional or reciprocal, few sites have multiple links to any one site (the average tie weight—the number of times any two sites link to each other—is one, and only 30% of ties have a weight greater than one)” (Freelon et al. 2016:16).

10. “59% of the entire Black Lives Matter network are news sites [and] more than 75% of sites with direct connections to BlackLivesMatter.com are news sites. [W]e’ve pointed out that as a whole, the network is very sparse. However, connections among news sites in the network are extremely dense, meaning that they primarily connect to one another, and much less so to non-news sites” (Freelon et al. 2016:17).

colleagues conclude, “what primarily gets produced and distributed is news, which is meant to be widely distributed” (16).

This empirical information illuminates the neural structures of the double movement. Directives from protest organizers not only triggered street performances but massive retweetings among activists, which were subsequently posted directly, or redirected, to interested journalists. Alerted, reporters then put themselves immediately on the scene, virtually in real time or bodily in real space. Initiating the second performative circuit, reporters posted contemporaneous stories on media blogs. These were picked up by participants inside the demonstrations and, more or less simultaneously, by the tens, sometimes hundreds of thousands of potentially attentive watchers on the outside,

many of whom re(re)tweeted to new nodes on the network in turn.

This two-part performative structure remained in place even as the protest movement’s organization and tactics changed. Later in 2015, the controversies concerning police killings seemed to abate.<sup>11</sup> “If the goal of Black Lives Matter was [...] to convince more Americans that police brutality existed,” the *New York Times* reported, then “it was successful.” With that success, the *Times* observed, “the momentum began to shift and transform into something else,” and “there were fewer protests than before” (Howard 2016). BLM’s national organization broke into more than 30 rela-



Figure 10. An activist holds a “Black Lives Matter” sign outside the Minneapolis police fourth precinct building during the Black Lives Matter occupation following the officer-involved shooting of Jamar Clark. Minneapolis, Minnesota, 15 November 2015. (Photo by Tony Webster; courtesy of Creative Commons)

tively independent, locally based activist groups. While scattered street demonstrations continued, attention shifted to more targeted disruptions (Aron 2015; Ruffin 2016; Stockman 2016), especially of nationally visible political campaigns (see Eligon 2016). BLM demonstrators took control of a “Netroots Nation forum featuring [Bernie] Sanders and Martin O’Malley in Phoenix and began chanting slogans” (Helsel 2015). At a Sanders rally in Seattle, two female BLM activists took over the microphone, demanding the candidate extend his calls for radical reform from class to race. In Atlanta, BLM interrupted a speech by Hillary Clinton on criminal justice and race. At a rally in Philadelphia, her husband, former President Bill Clinton, tried facing down chants from angry activists who linked his 1994 crime bill to the massive incarceration of black men. “Black Activists Are Literally Stealing the Stage from 2016 Contenders—And It’s Working,” one liberal blog headlined (Moore 2015a).

It certainly appeared to be the case that, in response to the disruptive confrontations, Democratic “contenders [...] recalibrated their messages and tone”: O’Malley apologized for saying “all lives matter”; Sanders added “racial justice” and penal reform to his list of political

11. Not the police killings themselves, however. In a 12-month Pulitzer Prize-winning investigation, the *Washington Post* discovered there had been 990 fatal police shootings in 2015 (Kindy et al. 2015) and 250 in the first 3 months of 2016 (Sullivan et al. 2016). Those killed in 2015 were disproportionately minorities, 258 African Americans and 172 Hispanics, for a total of 430 as compared with 494 whites. One-third of the victims were aged 18–29.

priorities (Moore 2015b); and Hillary Clinton began a “Mothers of the Movement” campaign, encouraging the mourning mothers of Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner, Michael Brown, Tamir Rice, and Sandra Bland “to organize and travel the country with her campaign” and paying their expenses so they could attend the Democratic presidential debates (Chozick 2016a). Describing the impact of this dramatic tactic, the *New York Times* noted how it bolstered the authenticity of Hillary Clinton’s character and the vitality and verisimilitude of her campaign’s performance:

Having these women by her side has provided Mrs. Clinton with powerful and deeply sympathetic character witnesses as she makes her case to African American voters. And they have given her campaign, an often cautious and poll-tested operation, a raw, human, and sometimes gut-wrenching feeling. (Chozick 2016a)

Mr. Clinton, too, felt compelled to be publicly responsive, the *New York Times* headlining: “Bill Clinton Says He Regrets Showdown With Black Lives Matters Protesters” (Chozick 2016b).

BLM’s newly disruptive tactics were also directed at Republican candidates, but, rather than eliciting supportive responses, these protests appeared to be aimed at highlighting what activists regarded as the uncaring whiteness of the conservative movement. The tactic seemed particularly effective vis-à-vis the candidacy of Donald Trump. The violent responses of his white supporters to BLM’s provocations intensified not only Democratic, but also Republican anxieties about the anti-civil, “over the line” character of the New York real estate developer’s campaign.

While the *New York Times* described the sequence of iterative demonstrations analyzed in this section as “the most formidable American protest movement of the 21st century to date” (Kang 2015), BLM’s performative power remained relatively constricted in comparison with what had been generated by its mid-20th-century predecessor. To explain why, one must reference elements of social performance that were not quite there. There were problems, for example, with BLM’s script. The persuasive reach of disruptive indignation is limited. A more powerful myth would have laid out a redemptive pathway from suffering to salvation, from underclass to social justice, perhaps underscoring “American exceptionalism” or the idea of America as God’s chosen people. The secular tone of BLM, however, precluded any connection with American civil religion (Bellah 1970).

The lack of larger-than-life characters proved another major obstacle. Protagonists must be embodied in order to become heroic; collective subjects, online discourses, and digital images are not enough. DeRay Mckesson may have been the only distinguishable persona to have emerged from a protest movement that remained remarkably anonymous, but his 2016 Baltimore mayoral campaign still floundered for want of “name recognition” (Eligon and Stolberg 2016). In late December 2015, CNN claimed Mckesson “drives the conversation” (Sidner and Simon 2015). Four months later, the *New York Times Magazine* reported Mckesson “was on Fortune’s World’s Greatest Leaders list last year” and “has been to the White House so many times that he says he doesn’t get nervous anymore” (Howard 2016). Such claims of charismatic authority, however, were vastly overstated. Mckesson registered on the American radar screen, but he didn’t penetrate its sacred center. He did not become a collective representation of black suffering and hope, either for the racial underclass or the protest drama’s multicultural and multiclass audience on the outside. Mckesson did not embody, in the words he spoke, the tone of his voice, or the lines of his face, contemporary African American aspirations for justice. An effective organizer who became a recognizable face, Mckesson was more a celebrity, famous for being famous, than a genuine hero.<sup>12</sup>

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12. It is revealing that, while recounting Mckesson’s many accomplishments, the *Times* observed, “he collects celebrity ‘friends’ (Azealia Banks, Jesse Williams, Susans Wojcicki and Sarandon, Rashida Jones, Tracee Ellis Ross) [...] and] refers to them solely by their first names,” and explained this was “because, over the last year and a half, he has been the best known face of the Black Lives Matter movement, traveling the country to protest police violence” (Howard 2016).

## Conclusion

Social movements do not succeed because they are materially powerful; they become materially powerful because they succeed. To explain this seeming paradox, I have argued that social movements should be understood as social performances. To seize power in the state, one must first seize the collective imagination, projecting dramas on the stage of social life that depict the triumph of justice, so powerfully fusing with distant audiences that dangerous insurrection becomes legitimate.

The Chinese communist movement claimed it arose from the clash of objective interests, but the party itself had to make these class contradictions come to dramatic life. Mao was transformed into a larger-than-life persona, a heroic savior, and the peasant masses had to be taught to cry bitter tears. Despite the protests of generations of critical intellectuals and legal reformers, African Americans suffered mostly in silence for decades after slavery. It was the performative genius of Martin Luther King Jr. and his supporting staff that finally gave them voice. The drama they forged together projected a redemptive narrative that riveted the Northern white audience, gained significant political power, and made major repairs in the rent racial garment of American life. Fifty years later, even as social scientists laid out the structural forces encircling the new black underclass, Black Lives Matter forged an active black subject. Deploying the newly digital means of symbolic production, its organizers projected compelling narratives, slogans, and gestures, triggering massive African American protest and, fusing with sympathetic journalists, bringing the racially affirmative demand that black lives matter as much as white lives into the heart of a reluctantly responsive nation.

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