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#BlackIsBeautiful: the radical politics of black hair

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Black Lives Matter 5280 (BLM5280) posts an image on its Facebook page each morning with the caption 'Good morning #Beautiful people. #BlackIsBeautiful.' The images in this series often depict Black people in ways that challenge heteronormative conceptions of family and white beauty standards. Through feminist visual culture and digital ethnography, I show how BLM5280's photo series leverages the radical legacy of Black hair to claim symbolic and political power. I discuss my work as an allied filmmaker with the group, and examine BLM5280's online practices in relation to its local organising. Although curating images on social media may not, in itself, bring about social change, this cultural practice plays an important role in shaping perceptions of Blackness, amplifying the voices and agency of underrepresented people, and strengthening the social and emotional well-being of BLM5280's online and offline communities.

INTRODUCTION

> I remember Mama
> The hairdresser
> And the way she hummed
> When she plaited my hair.
> 'Mama,' I asked,
> 'Is this my crowning glory?'
> – 'Tenderness,' Joyce Carol Thomas (2002)

'Black girl hair is magic because it can do literally everything,' Patrise Cullors, co-founder of Black Lives Matter, says in the short film *Hair Tales* (Bryant 2016). The film, directed by Michaela Angela Davis, is part of a series of films in which Black women discuss how hair has shaped their life experiences and continues to inform their sense of self and their relationships with friends, family, and society. Similar to other videos in the series, Cullors looks directly into the camera and offers her self-reflective hair story. She explains how her childhood hairdresser visited her family home every two weeks to style her and her sibling's hair. Because of the painful combing and treatments involved with these visits, Cullors told her mother that she could not 'do

this anymore.' Following this refusal, her mother kept her inside the house because, as Cullors explains, her mother believed that Black women's hair said a lot to others about their social and economic status. 'We were poor, and to be poor and Black, and visibly poor and Black is taboo,' Cullors says in the film. 'For her, if her Black girls didn't have that ideal beauty standard, then it would reflect badly on her, and I think she felt guilty … I just remember feeling like there has to be more than my hair.'

After reading the work of Black feminist scholars bell hooks and Audre Lorde, Cullors realised how closely Black hair is connected to female beauty standards and identity. To challenge the expectations that society places on Black women's hair, she shaved her head. 'It was the first time in my life that I didn't feel like my hair was a thing that I was leading with,' she says in the film. 'It was so many other things.'

In another 'hair story' published in January 2020 on *TheRoot.com*, United States Congresswoman Ayanna Pressley publicly revealed her hair loss due to alopecia areata.

'This is a word about why my Black hair story is both personal and political,' Pressley says in the video (Moulite 2020). Her recognisable Senegalese twists – which, she says, are viewed by some as 'militant' – have become 'a synonymous and conflated part of not only my personal identity and how I show up in the world, but my political brand.' Pressley discusses her decision to wear wigs when alopecia began taking her hair, and says she felt 'naked, exposed, vulnerable' for participating in a 'cultural betrayal.'

'All the little girls who write me letters come up to me and take selfies with me, hashtag #TwistNation,' she says. 'The reality is, I'm Black. And I'm a Black woman. And I'm a Black woman in politics. And everything I do is political.'

Cullors and Pressley's stories reveal the complexity of Black hair, and the role it plays in shaping Black subjectivity. This article explores the politics of Black hair by examining a Facebook photo series curated by

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Black Lives Matter 5280 (BLM5280), the Denver, Colorado chapter of the Black Lives Matter movement. BLM5280 regularly posts updates to its Facebook page, which has more than 33,500 followers as of July 2020.[1] Posts include, for example, links to news stories, commentaries by organisers, photographs and videos of demonstrations, meeting announcements, and campaign updates. This study focuses on an ongoing photo series that BLM5280 curates on its Facebook page in which organisers post a photo each morning with the caption, 'Good morning #Beautiful people! #BlackIsBeautiful.' By representing Black people in ways that invite the oppositional gaze, these images challenge heteronormative conceptions of family and sexuality, and white beauty standards. I analyse these photos in relation to BLM5280's mission, which states, 'BLM5280 uses a holistic racial justice approach that includes strengthening individual and community health and wellness, relationship-building, educational programming, and direct actions' (Black Lives Matter 5280, 2015). Utilising feminist visual analysis and digital ethnography, I connect BLM5280's online and offline communicative practices and address the following question: How does BLM5280's Facebook photo series 'Black is beautiful' visualise the complexity of Blackness and communicate its organising mission through radical depictions of Black hair?

Although Black hair has received significant attention in popular culture (e.g., Chris Rock's documentary *Good Hair*; Netflix's *Nappily Ever After* and *Self Made: Inspired by the Life of Madam C.J. Walker*; see also, Easter 2018), academic scholarship, and online blogs, I examine how visually narrating Blackness plays a crucial role in the messaging and local organising efforts of BLM5280. I situate Black hair in its historical context to understand how Black hair has historically been the visible expression of Black politics, which are inextricably and materially linked to the body. I apply theories of media power and feminist visual analysis to examine what bell hooks called the 'oppositional gaze.' Black hair, hooks argued, is fundamentally connected, through history and social norms, to identity. Studying how and where identities are produced and contested has implications for understanding how Black hair – and visualisations of it – 'has the power to dictate how others treat you, and in turn, how you feel about yourself' (Thompson 2009, 2).

BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Black women's hair has, historically, had 'significant impacts on their economic, social and emotional lives' (Jacobs-Huey 2006, 213). It affects how they're perceived by Black men and their employment prospects (Thompson 2008a; Ashe 1995). After tracing a brief history of Black hair, I discuss how conversations about Black hair have moved online and how BLM5280 leverages the current networked media environment to connect its activism to broader struggles for racial justice, and reimagine how and where Black hair is expressed.

A Brief History of Black Hair

To understand the politics of Black hair, it must be situated in its historical and socioeconomic contexts (Mercer 1987; Synnott 1987; Hunt 1994). Because hair is intimately and physically connected to the body, reviewing the history of Black hair recognises the Black body as a site of struggle, particularly in the United States. During the enslavement of Black people in the U.S., the African diaspora in the South wore creative hair styles to challenge the institution of slavery (Dash 2006). After abolition, former enslaved people wore their hair natural to contest white supremacist power structures and to counter a 'color complex' that privileged a Eurocentric beauty ideal of straight hair and light skin (Robinson 2011). Some former enslaved people of African descent, however, continued to wear their hair straight. Arogundale wrote, controversially, that following emancipation 'blacks throughout the colonies had the opportunity to be aesthetically self-determinant, but instead they [straightened their hair and] chose white beauty values' (2003, 62).

Byrd and Tharps (2001) examined the modern political history of Black hair in the U.S., from the 1920s to the early 2000s. The authors detailed the political organising of Marcus Garvey, a Jamaican-born activist and member of the Harlem Renaissance who formed the United Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) in the 1920s, which sought to reclaim an 'African-based aesthetic [as] a central tenet of his political platform' (38). Black Power activists in the 1960s built on this legacy, and wore Afros to symbolise their revolutionary struggle against white oppression, global capitalism, and imperialism. Seeking to reclaim the African diaspora during the Civil Rights era in the United States and eschew European aesthetics, Black Power activists viewed 'conking and straightening ….[as] emblematic of internalized self-hatred' (Dash 2006, 31). Afros, activists argued, signified defiance against the system and association with the movement, while straight hair represented conformity with systems of oppression.

By the 1970s, popular films such as *Shaft* and *Superfly* brought the Afro mainstream and 'normalized the style

and placed it so far out of any context of Black revolution and pride … . that Whites who had once felt intimidated could now relax when an Afro passed their way' (Byrd and Tharps 2001, 68). bell hooks (2007) argued that although the natural hairstyles of this era challenged white supremacist culture by exhibiting outward strength that could instil fear in whites, fear can also be internalised by Black women. 'The extent to which we are comfortable with our hair usually reflects our overall feelings about our bodies,' hooks wrote (para. 8).

As the politics of Black hair evolved, so too did the language surrounding it. When natural hair gained acceptance within Black communities and in mainstream culture in the second half of the 20th century, Shannon Boodram (2013) argued against the use of the word 'natural,' because, she wrote, it justifies 'racism, prejudice and classism by claiming that there is a pre-ordained explanation as to why one group deserves better than the other' (para. 9). Instead, she suggested, Black women should embrace the kinky/ curly revolution that encourages Black women to 'love your hair the best way you know how and have love for anyone who has done the same or is on their own journey to doing so' (para. 11). By visualising the complexity of Black hair on Facebook, BLM5280's photo series celebrates the political legacy of Black hair and contends with its centrality to Black subjectivity in the U.S.

'Black is beautiful,' which BLM5280 uses to caption its Facebook posts, also has historical significance. A prominent refrain of the 1960s' Black liberation movements, it represents, according to Paul E. Willis (1990), language through which to 'contest the hegemony of white aesthetics with a grounded aesthetics of its own' (92). The Afro, Willis wrote, was an outward expression of a previously-internalised defiance. 'Fully aware that such hegemony depended on the subjective internalisation of [white] norms and values, the Afro hairstyle was adopted by Afro-Americans as an outward affirmation of an empowering sense of black pride' (92). #BlackIsBeautiful, as a social media hashtag, serves two functions: *technically*, it is a hyperlink that allows users to discover related content across the platform; *discursively*, it compels viewers to reflect on their identification to/with Blackness.

Producing and distributing radical alternative media is a common practice for contemporary networked social movements (Canella 2017). For activists pursuing racial justice, media can challenge mainstream representations of African Americans that, historically,

have been negative and one-dimensional (Harris-Perry 2011; Dixon 2017). In advertisements, film, and television, light-skinned women with straight hair are often prominently depicted in positive roles, which reinforces the notion that short, kinky, or curly hairstyles are unacceptable (Patton 2006). As activist media updates outdated narratives, more nuanced stories about Black people are receiving popular and critical acclaim (see, e.g., *Atlanta, Blackish*, and *Insecure*). Patricia Hill Collins (2004) cautioned, however, that including Black life in popular culture should be approached with caution, because inclusion 'may replicate the power relations of racism today just as effectively as the exclusion of Black images did prior to the 1960s' (43). Therefore, it is important to recognise the power dynamics in media.

The Digital Salon

For generations, beauty salons and barbershops have offered Black women and men spaces to not only style their hair but also to find community and conversation. Tiffany Gill (2015) noted, optimistically, that social media and online forums mirror this sense of community. Online communities, she wrote, afford lifestyle spaces in which Black women can 'shar[e] and exchange … advice that [is] so crucial to black women's lives' (75). In addition to information about hair products and treatments, Facebook groups and message boards may also provide Black women with 'emotional support via empathy, love, trust, and caring' (Ellington 2015, 26).

YouTube vloggers have assumed the role of expert and help Black women navigate the vast amount of information online. Alicia Nicole Walton, a psychotherapist by profession, created CurlyNikki. com in 2008 to 'be an advocate for women who feel social pressure to have their hair straightened' (Bey 2011, para. 9). Although the intentions of Walton and other online video producers are no doubt genuine, Black hair is a multi-billion-dollar industry. Along with activists and influencers, the hair salon has an entrepreneurial spirit (Harvey 2005).

Selfies and videos posted on Snapchat and Instagram with #TeamNatural, #curls, and #fro, capture this entrepreneurialism and attempt to influence the discourse around Black hair. According to Tiffany M. Gill, social media connect 'a personal quest for affirmation to a wider community' (76) and 'cultivate a politics of dignity for black women' (77). However, Gill also problematised these sites as spaces in which

Black women are subjected to double standards from within their own community.

The contradictions for activists within networked communications are many. Jodi Dean (2009) argued that networked communications and social media are ineffective for conducting long-term political organising because resistance is captured and commodified. Dean argued that the current digital media environment, in which activists compete with opponents and each other for clicks and views, reflects the platforms' capitalist logics. The need for circulation and the drive for spectacle, Dean argued, diminishes organisers' ability to meaningfully participate in politics. Metrics in the attention economy (i.e., views, likes, shares) are naively offered by digital activists as proof of their political success.

This is not to suggest that activists should never utilise visual storytelling on social media to fight for justice; but the mediated social interactions on these platforms are constituted through a particular set of power relations. Visualising injustice on social media, through photos and videos, means negotiating the unjust 'distribution of media's narrative resources' (Couldry 2011, 49). Resources, simply put, are the capacities needed to produce, distribute, and access culture – the *material* resources needed to create and distribute texts, and the *cultural* resources needed to read, analyse, and discuss them. The current distribution of material and cultural resources constrains some texts and privileges others. The complex dynamics between culture and the political, social, and economic institutions that influence the production and circulation of culture, must be understood through *media power*. Freedman (2014) defined media power as 'a set of relationships that help to organize the deployment of symbolic resources … that, in conjunction with other institutions and processes, help to structure our knowledge about, our ability to participate in and our capacity to change the world' (30). To examine how BLM5280 uses its Facebook series 'Black is Beautiful' to claim symbolic and political power, I recognise the contradictions embedded in social media and analyse BLM5280 as a multifaceted social movement organisation that operates online and offline with and through media power. The images in BLM5280's Facebook series complement its local organising and reinforce its mission by building community through care and love, centring the voices of Black women and girls, and offering nuanced representations of gay, queer, cis-gender, non-binary, and transgender Black people.

ANALYSING THE IMAGES

I utilised feminist visual culture and digital ethnography to analyse the 'Black is Beautiful' photo series. The first image that appeared in the series was posted to Facebook on 1 September 2015, with the caption, 'Good Morning Beautiful People.' Since then, administrators of the page have been posting images each morning of Black women, men, babies, children, and families. The first instance of the caption 'Black is beautiful' appeared in May 2015, several months prior to the start of the daily photo series. Because the photo series has been active for more than five years and contains such a large collection of images (more than 1,600 at the time of this writing), I reviewed every third photograph posted from February 2015 to April 2018 until I reached 300 images. I then searched for key themes using grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967). This timeframe was selected because this was when I was actively collaborating with BLM5280 as an allied documentary filmmaker and community-engaged researcher. From this sample of 300 images, three key themes emerged: (1) the gaze of the subject in the image, looking either into the camera's lens and directly at the viewer, or off-camera and into the distance; (2) the radical politics of Black hair; (3) the relation of Black hair to the body. I offer a deep reading of four images that best represent these themes and discuss how the aesthetics and technical details in the images re-present Blackness and the politics of Black hair. Feminist visual culture, as a method, allows me to examine how gender, sexuality, race, community, and politics are constituted and negotiated through imagery.

Feminist Visual Culture

Feminist visual culture is a framework for examining power. An image is considered in relation to the contexts in which it was produced and circulates – this requires examining the image itself, the people viewing it, how and why the image was produced, and the sites where it is displayed. Lisa Cartwright, relying on the foundational work of Gillian Rose (2016), argued that 'desire and sexuality are not simply reflected in the content of the images or appearances, but also structure looking practices as a nexus of power, agency and the human subject's psychic life … .' (2012, 315).

Theorising how agency and subjectivity are constituted through visual culture, hooks (1992a) understood the gaze as a practice that is racialised through domination and fear. Building on Manthia Diawara's concept of

'resisting spectatorship' (1988), hooks concluded that the 'alternative texts' that Black women create 'are not solely reactions. As critical spectators, black women participate in a broad range of looking relations, contest, resist, revision, interrogate, and invent on multiple levels' (128). While hooks focused on film and the cinematic experience, I argue that BLM5280's Facebook photo series invites the oppositional gaze through images that emphasise looking and 'open up the possibility of agency' (116).

The caption 'Black is Beautiful,' discussed earlier as part of the Black political movements of the 1960s, alters how the photographs are viewed. Stuart Hall (1997) argued that 'Black is beautiful' represents a hegemonic struggle over power and meaning. He described how subaltern groups use counter-strategies to challenge dominant representations in the media, and turn accepted meanings on themselves. The caption 'Black is beautiful,' along with images that subvert perceived negative representations of Blackness, has the potential to invert 'the binary opposition, privileging the subordinate term, sometimes reading the negative positively' (272). Counter-hegemonic images, therefore, challenge dominant codes and 'construct a positive identification with what has been abjected' (272). By acknowledging the dominant cultural codes and negative stereotypes associated with Blackness, BLM5280 uses 'the body as the principal site of its representational strategies, attempting to make the stereotypes work against themselves' (274).

Digital Ethnography and Allied Photography

To further understand how the 'Black is Beautiful' series is one part of a broader political project that seeks to claim power, I participated in numerous activities with BLM5280. These included attending community meetings, where I engaged in conversations with key organisers of the group, and documenting, through photography and video, protests hosted or attended by BLM5280. Because online activities do not exist independently of the local political and socioeconomic conditions in which activists operate, I rely on Nakamura's (2002) concept of digital ethnography, which centres race and ethnicity in internet studies and encourages researchers to participate in offline practices. I rely on interviews I conducted with BLM5280 organisers and my observations of the group's organising practices.

Digital ethnography goes beyond passively observing BLM5280's social media accounts. I collaborated with BLM5280 for 2.5 years, from August 2015 to April 2018, as a documentary filmmaker, community-engaged researcher, and activist media maker. I attended community meetings and city council hearings to support the group's campaigns, followed and interacted with its Twitter and Facebook pages, and filmed direct actions organised by BLM5280. My online interactions with BLM5280's social media included: liking, commenting on, sharing and re-tweeting posts by the group, and producing multimedia with and for BLM5280, which were shared on its social media pages. I also posted some of this media on my personal social media pages, and 'tagged' BLM5280 organisers in these posts. The tags notified organisers that I uploaded new content and encouraged organisers to provide feedback. These interactions helped me know whether my media was consistent with the group's mission.

I am self-reflective about my identities as a white cis-gender man and how these identities affected my position to the group and my reading of the Facebook images. Producing films and photographs in partnership with a Black-led movement that centres the voices of Black women and girls forced me to constantly evaluate my role in the Movement for Black Lives as a white ally. Regular communication with key organisers in BLM5280 enabled me to update my analyses about the group's social media activities, specifically the 'Black is beautiful' photo series. What drew me to the images of BLM5280's Facebook photo project were the ways in which the gaze of the subjects in the photos ask something of viewers – to engage with often unseen representations of Blackness.

I relocated from Colorado in 2018, but I remained in conversation with BLM5280, primarily through Facebook. I starred BLM5280 as a 'favorite' account, a feature that places BLM5280's posts at the top of my news feed. Another benefit of digital ethnography is that it provides researchers with opportunities to remain immersed in cultures that they cannot physically access. Negotiating boundaries was key for my work. BLM5280's core leadership consists solely of Black people, so my affiliation with the group is a supporter, rather than a 'member.' Digital media allowed me to study the movement's communicative practices while respecting its physical spaces.

FACEBOOK AS A SITE OF STRUGGLE

The first image I reviewed from BLM5280's 'Black is beautiful' photo project was posted 12 February 2015. It features a Black woman with short, kinky hair looking directly into the camera (Figure 1). Her eyes are prominently featured in this image, and the green colour
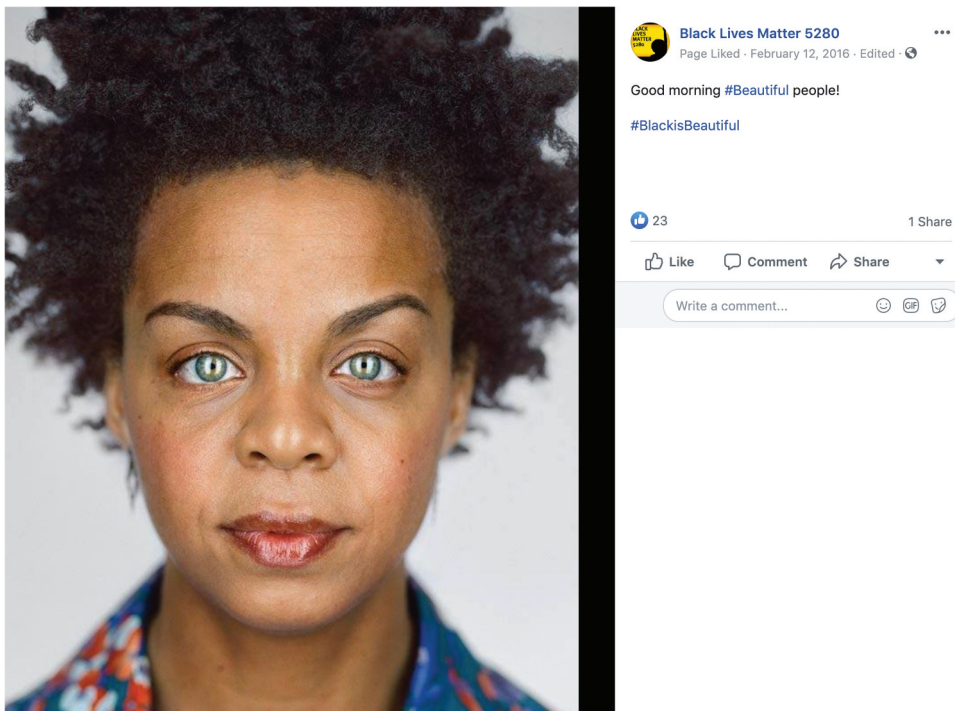
FIGURE 1.   #BlackIsBeautiful Facebook post (12 February 2016).

FIGURE 2.   #BlackIsBeautiful Facebook post (2 December 2015).

of her eyes are piercing and sharp, inviting viewers to gaze into them. The lighting enhances the eyes by highlighting the centre of her pupils, further asking viewers to connect with and stare into her relaxed face. The woman's lips are slightly pursed and shine with red lipstick, which also softens her gaze. The woman's eyebrows are slightly raised, and circle and cradle her eyes in a wide embrace. Faint wrinkles around her eyes and across her forehead signal age and maturity. Despite the relaxing tone of the image, accented by her eyes and pursed lips, the viewer's gaze eventually drifts to her hair, perhaps lingering there only briefly. The photograph is

composed using a shallow depth of field, which places the shoulders and back of the woman's head slightly out of focus and forces viewers to look at the centre of the frame, where her face and eyes appear, rather than up and towards her hair. Despite the woman's natural hair that is styled to the sides and top of her head, the technical details, such as lighting and focus, produce a visual aesthetic that implies hair does not dictate to this woman how she sees herself. The photo is cropped so that the ends of her hair are not visible, eliminating the full shape of her hair, again de-emphasising the importance of her hair.

By wearing her natural hair subtly, the image suggests the woman is not only comfortable and confident with her hairstyle, but she takes pride in challenging hegemonic beauty standards (Thompson 2008b). The woman carries herself with an ease that asks viewers' gazes to linger.

The second image reviewed was posted to BLM5280's Facebook page on 2 December 2015, and it features a young girl looking longingly into the camera's lens (Figure 2). The image asks viewers to look into her deep, dark eyes, suggesting an innocence that is not naïve, but rather aware. The young girl appears to have agency and control over her likeness. Her lips are pursed, similar to the first image, but they are not accented by colourful lipstick, perhaps reminding viewers of her youth. The sleeveless shirt with butterflies and ruffles on the front also signifies her young age. Interestingly, these details are juxtaposed with silver hoop earrings that suggest the girl

is not a child but transitioning into young adulthood. The photographer uses an extremely shallow depth of field that encourages one's gaze to focus on the girl's eyes and subtly drift away as you reach the hair. Although the woman in the first image wore her hair short and styled up and to the sides, the girl's hair is worn in a large Afro that reaches high above her head and lays lightly on her petite shoulders. The lighting is again an important feature, as it hits intensely on the girl's forehead and on the right side of her face, which accentuates her eyes. Her hair is lightly touched with a backlight, so the viewer briefly sees the top of her hair in the upper right-hand corner of the frame. The cropping of the image, however, restricts the viewers' ability to view the fullness of her Afro. The photo has been edited in post-production to include a vignette that wraps the centre of the frame and again directs viewers' attention to her eyes.

Brooks and McNair (2015) reviewed Black girls' hair in African American literature. The authors found that these books provided strong lessons for young girls and reinforced the notion that 'all hair is good' (302). By publishing the image of this young girl on social media, BLM5280 seeks to empower Black girls and suggests that this girl maintains authority over her hair and her body.

The third image reviewed was posted on 27 February 2016 (Figure 3). Unlike the head-and-shoulder framing used in the first two images, this photo is a full-body picture of a Black woman standing
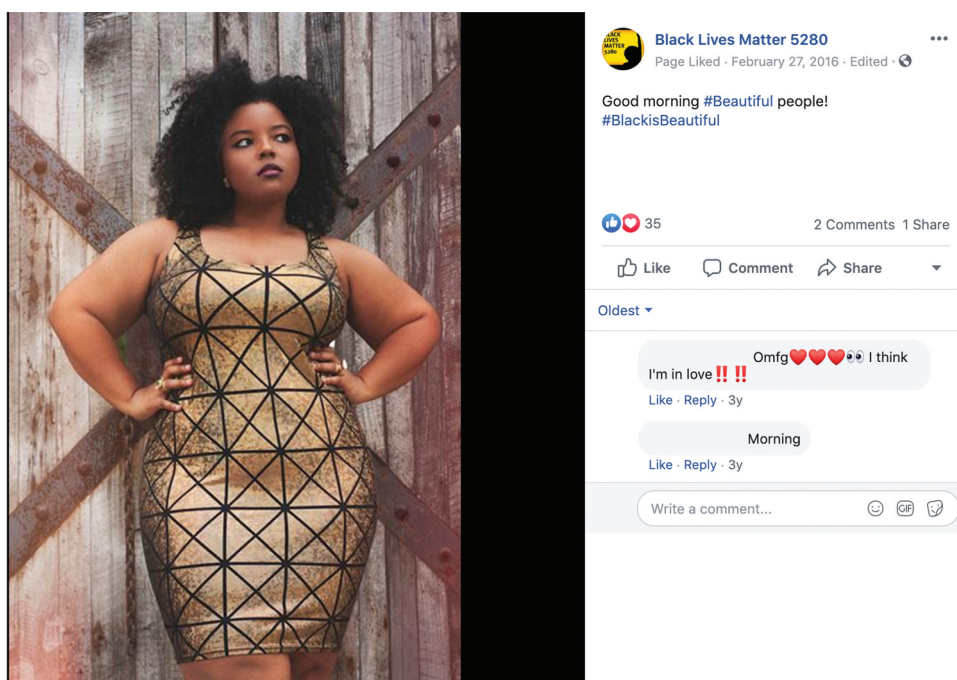

FIGURE 3.   #BlackIsBeautiful Facebook post (27 February 2016).

FIGURE 4.   #BlackIsBeautiful Facebook post (11 September 2016).

with her hands on her hips and looking up and to the left, away from the camera's lens. While she does not stare deeply and intently into the lens like the previous two images, her posture welcomes the viewer's gaze. Wearing a tight, sleeveless dress calls attention to the woman's shape and challenges the thin body image ideal typically seen in magazines and popular entertainment. Her hair is worn kinky and curly, combed up and above her head. Her posture signals her indifference to viewers' looks, which suggests her ambivalence about and confidence in her hair and body.

The fourth image I reviewed was posted on 11 September 2016, and it is notable for how BLM5280 directly addresses the politics of Black hair in the caption (Figure 4). The image shows Zulaikha Patel, a 13-year-old girl and student at Pretoria Girls' High in South Africa, who led a demonstration at the school against its hair policy. Sparked after Zulaikha's teachers called her Afro 'exotic,' the protest highlighted racism within the school (Vilakazi 2016). In the image posted by BLM5280, Zulaikha appears wearing a large Afro, her right fist raised, and with a slight smile on her face. She is surrounded by supporters who are smiling and documenting the moment with their smartphones. Zulaikha is positioned slightly off-centre and is looking off-camera, drawing viewers' attention upwards and to the left, in the direction of her raised fist. BLM5280 captioned the post: 'Good morning #Beautiful people! Queen #Zulaikha protesting the criminalization of her beautiful black hair at Pretoria High School for Girls in South Africa. Our hair should not be a political statement! #blackisbeautiful.'

The caption contradicts the notion that Black hair is 'a political statement,' and argues instead that Black women and girls must be seen as more than simply the colour, length, and texture of their hair. Three years prior to U.S. Rep. Ayanna Pressley's hair-loss story on *TheRoot.com*, BLM5280 utilised online visual culture to create a space in which Black people were confidently and unapologetically expressing their full selves. Within networked communications, BLM5280's Facebook photo project is a form of counterpower that is in conversation with similar online and offline projects for Black liberation. These practices – dispersed and fragmented across time and space, yet connected through hastags and shared values – collectively challenge negative representations of Blackness, communicate solidarity, and make visible the demands for justice. Although BLM5280 seemingly rejects the politicisation of Black hair in this caption, the 'Black is Beautiful' photo series and Pressley's hair story demonstrate how Black women's hair inextricably links the personal and the political. Because hair is intimately and physically connected to the body, it is the visualisation of the self – one that is, perhaps, struggling for its legitimacy and existence.

Ingrid Banks (2000) argued in *Hair Matters* that a dichotomous analysis of Black women's hair choices is reductive. Concluding that straight hair submits to white oppression or that natural hair radically challenges dominant power structures ignores how embracing choice offers Black women 'voice and empowerment.' As the images reviewed here show, BLM5280 curated images for its Facebook series that promoted various identifications with Blackness and encouraged looking – both by the subject and from the

viewer. Because the photo series is published on Facebook in a media environment in which activists, politicians, and journalists compete for views, BLM5280 may only capture brief *glances*, rather than 'gazes.' Despite this limitation, the photo series reveals how BLM5280 practices community-building online through publicly sharing images that depict Black women as 'agents or thinking and acting beings who understand the forces that shape their lives' (69).

A phrase often heard at BLM5280 community meetings and actions is 'Black girl joy.' Because Black women, historically, have performed a disproportionate amount of (unpaid) care work – specifically, within African American communities and in workplaces – BLM5280 uses its online platform to care for its community. Visualising joy and love on social media publicly recognises the labour of Black women. Whether viewers of the 'Black is Beautiful' photo series re-examine the negative stereotypes that they have about Black people is not the goal – nor is it the point. Sharing images about the complexity of Black life, Black sexuality, and Black families is an internal project that affirms the humanity of BLM5280's online community and lets members know they are seen and loved.

REFLECTIONS FROM THE MOVEMENT FOR BLACK LIVES

I attended numerous public community meetings hosted by BLM5280 and produced several documentaries in collaboration with the group (see, e.g., Canella 2015). Prior to filming, I always spoke with organisers to discuss reservations some in the movement had about my work, since I was documenting the group through a literal and figurative 'white lens.' I worked through these concerns by asking Amy E. Brown, co-founder and organiser of BLM5280, for her perception of how the movement is depicted in the news media and on social media. She told me that portrayals of Black people and Blackness are often sanitised 'through this lens of what will keep white folks comfortable, and there's just not time for that.' Conveying Black Lives Matter's demands through radical media that is unapologetically Black, she said, communicates the urgency of the moment:

> People's lives are counting on movement on these issues, so there's absolutely times for direct action, there's absolutely time for civil disobedience, there's absolutely times that the photos taken are going to look like women screaming because it's Black women screaming. Because sometimes folks don't hear

you until you interrupt a meeting and scream truth to power.

Brown's comments acknowledge that although photos and videos of activists and organisers protesting in the streets may reinforce, for some viewers, the 'angry Black woman' stereotype, these images reflect the diversity of communication strategies that movements use to express their demands. These images reveal the emotions embedded in those demands as well. Brown said 'both parts' of the movement – anger and love – must be depicted through media to fully communicate BLM's mission. 'When you look at what's happening in the world, yeah, we need love, and we also need folks in this fight,' she said. 'So, I think [images of protest are] appropriate.'

Social media, for Brown, offer BLM5280 opportunities to communicate with its supporters about events, actions, and organizing campaigns. For commercial news media outlets that may only have space to publish one photograph from a demonstration or rally, an image of joy or love is unlikely to be selected. These emotions do not fit the conflict frame that many news organisations use to depict and delegitimize the movement (Kilgo and Harlow 2019). BLM5280 produces and publishes a variety of media on Facebook and Twitter: short videos, live streams, and photos. Distributing a range of stories on social media provides the group with opportunities to not only document the movement, but also to curate a historical record of the movement and its work. Frustrated by what she views as superficial portrayals of the movement in mainstream media, Brown said she would like news media to 'be more of a documentary.' 'I'm very clear that media is using this as an opportunity to polarize groups that already perceive themselves as different,' she said. '[Media] has been used as a chance to capitalize on existing stereotypes, existing systems of oppression, existing narratives that divide us and oppress us.'

Posting short videos, links to news articles about the movement, and its daily 'Black is beautiful' photo project on Facebook, BLM5280 uses social media to challenge existing stereotypes and the systems of oppression that they reinforce. By leveraging the affordances of digital media, BLM5280 challenges how news is made, how information is disseminated, and how knowledge is produced. Brown recognised that visitors to BLM5280's Facebook page will have varied reactions to the posts shared there, and occasionally these reactions are expressed in the comment sections. She was careful not to give social media too much credit

or too much blame for how the movement is perceived, or for how Black people are treated in the United States:

> I don't know if it's challenging stereotypes [on social media], just truth telling. Telling *my* truth, that this narrative has been taken away for generations and generations, and twisted in every way possible to serve whomever possible. [Social media] give me an opportunity to tell my story, to tell you what my world looks like today … It gives me a chance to create my narrative and my truth for people because, as we said before, the media is not going to do that for us. I can't expect people to know what's in my heart and head as I go through this work, because there is so much, there's so much. So, I appreciate having those outlets.

Brown recognises the contradictions within in social media and notes how media power, fundamentally, is a struggle over truth. Navigating the social and political tensions that are inherently part of networked communications is crucial for understanding how meaning is negotiated and constructed. Analysing the 'Black is Beautiful' Facebook series through feminist visual culture, digital ethnography, and media power highlights how BLM5280 leverages social media and visual culture to challenge the unjust distribution of society's material resources. Working closely with BLM5280 as an ethnographic filmmaker and researcher, I understand *the social* in social media as a complex matrix of people, affects, and technologies that animate, promote, and constrain action and meaning. Because the social is present in the making, curating, disseminating, and reading of photographs, a humanistic approach to visual culture realises how the gaze and Black hair are intimately connected to the body.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Audre Lorde (1984), a Black feminist scholar, said that women have been told to look away from 'the erotic' so that they would not disrupt Eurocentric male systems of power. Suppressing looking at the erotic has made it difficult for women to embrace the creative and communal power embedded in the erotic. 'Recognizing the power of the erotic within our lives can give us the energy to pursue genuine change within our world, rather than merely settling for a shift of characters in the same drama,' Lorde wrote (91). BLM5280's visual storytelling embraces the erotic by narrating a story of Black hair that challenges white beauty norms and promotes the complexity of Blackness. This article reviewed the multiple sites in which visual meaning is produced, contested, and circulated (e.g., on Facebook, at public community meetings, and at protests). Through a deep reading of the images' technical and aesthetic details, I reveal how these interconnected online and offline sites encourage looking and the oppositional gaze. Future research should study viewers' perceptions of these images to understand how the 'Black is Beautiful' series is received by audiences. I focused on the politics of Black hair and women, at the expense of a broader discussion of masculinity and family. Future research could study how BLM5280's Facebook series challenges heteronormative conceptions of family.[2]

The images posted to Facebook by BLM5280 and similar activist media practices are important sites for examining how culture has the potential to script new knowledges and invigorate political imagination. Power, meaning, and oppression are relational processes that are constantly in motion. Although these images may not, in themselves, alter political and economic power, bell Hooks (1992b) argued that cultural practices play a significant role in influencing public opinion. As long as white supremacist institutions exist, she wrote, resistance is undermined by the notion that 'social inequality can be attained without changes in the culture's attitudes about blackness and black people' (10). Proclaiming #BlackIsBeautiful next to photos of dark-skinned, full-figured women, and children with big, natural hair, reveals how BLM5280 utilises the radical political tradition of Black hair to showcase Black voice and agency, promote love and care for its online and offline communities, and celebrate the diversity of Blackness.

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NOTES

[1] Available at: https://www.facebook.com/BlackLivesMatter5280.
[2] For additional posts from the 'Black is beautiful' photo series that challenge Black masculinity and sexuality, see, for example: https://bit.ly/2Ipfz0w; https://bit.ly/2WjWp14; and https://bit.ly/2WjKK24.

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