

“Thank You, Black Twitter”: State Violence, Digital Counterpublics, and Pedagogies of Resistance

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Abstract

In this article, I examine the role of Black Twitter as a “digital counterpublic” that enables critical pedagogy, political organizing, and both symbolic and material forms of resistance to anti-Black state violence within the United States. Focusing primarily on post-Ferguson events, I spotlight the ways that Black people have used Black Twitter and other digital counterpublics to engage in forms of pedagogy that reorganize relations of surveillance, reject rigid respectability politics, and contest the erasure of marginalized groups within the Black community.

Keywords

race, identity, activism, social, diversity, popular culture, racism, poverty, urban, violence, Black males, subjects, culture

I arrived in Ferguson, Missouri, a few days after August 9, 2014, when Michael Brown, an unarmed 18-year-old Black male, was killed by Officer Darren Wilson. Upon my arrival, I immediately visited QuikTrip, a popular gas station and convenience store that had become ground zero for protests,

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teach-ins, and public commemorations of grief in the wake of Brown's death. Around the grounds of the building were graffiti tags and signs that conveyed the multiple sentiments of the moment: "RIP Mike," "No Justice No Peace," and a spray-painted metal post that replaced the familiar QuikTrip logo with "QT People's Park. Liberated 8/10/14." In the very front of the newly occupied building, stenciled in blue sidewalk chalk, were the words "#ThankYou ♥ #Black Twitter #HandsUp #DontShoot." The words, written by prominent Ferguson activist Johnetta "Netta" Elzie and echoed by many local residents, were a gesture of gratitude to the Black social media community for its response to the killing of Brown.

Moments after Brown's death, Ferguson residents used cell phones to capture photo and video footage of his body as it lay on the ground of Canfield Drive. These images were quickly circulated across social media platforms—particularly Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter—along with the accompanying narrative that Brown had been killed by Wilson despite having placed his hands in the air in an act of surrender.¹ As Brown's body remained on the ground for four and a half hours, social media users expressed outrage at the State's failure to properly attend to Brown's corpse or initiate a timely and proper investigation of the circumstances surrounding his death (Hill, 2016). A primary site for this outrage was "Black Twitter," a virtual community of Twitter users engaged in real-time discourses primarily related to Black American culture and politics.

In the days following Brown's death, the Black Twitter community disseminated information about the shooting that went unreported by traditional media outlets, issued calls for new evidence, demanded the release of Darren Wilson's still-withheld name to the public, organized protest actions against the Ferguson police department, and engaged in broader dialogues about anti-Black state violence. These efforts, anchored by the hashtags #MichaelBrown, #Ferguson, and #HandsUpDontShoot, transformed Brown's death from a local event to an international cause. Moreover, as suggested by Netta's street art, they underscored Black Twitter's role as a "digital counterpublic." By digital counterpublic, I refer to any virtual, online, or otherwise digitally networked community in which members actively resist hegemonic power, contest majoritarian narratives, engage in critical dialogues, or negotiate oppositional identities.²

In this article, I examine the role of Black Twitter as a digital counterpublic that enabled critical pedagogy, political organizing, and both symbolic and material forms of resistance to anti-Black state violence within the United States. Focusing primarily on post-Ferguson events, I specifically spotlight the ways that Black people have used Black Twitter and other digital counterpublics to reorganize relations of surveillance, reject rigid respectability politics, and contest the erasure of marginalized groups within the Black community.

The Emergence of Digital Counterpublics

The notion of digital counterpublics that undergirds this article is rooted in Nancy Fraser's (1990) conception of the "subaltern counterpublic." Fraser's conception was a critical intervention and historical rejoinder to Habermas's (1962) notion of the "public sphere," which was historically comprised of public spaces such as coffee houses, literary societies, or Masonic lodges. Within these spaces, private citizens came together to publicly discuss ideas, resolve problems, and check State power. Habermas viewed the public sphere, particularly as constituted in 18th-century Europe prior to the rise of mass media and consumer culture, as a normative framework for democratic dialogue and praxis. As Fraser and others have argued, the Habermasian conception of the public sphere neglected the various ways that oppressed groups (e.g., women; working class; lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender [LGBT]; Black) have been historically marginalized or altogether excluded from the bourgeois public sphere. Furthermore, as Warner (2002) argues, Habermas's theory presumes a level of individual agency and collective self-organizing that ignores the broader discourses and power arrangements that shape citizen choices.

In response to Habermas, numerous scholars have spotlighted the ways that marginalized groups have always formed their own subaltern counterpublics in which to "develop oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs" (Fraser, 1990, p. 123). Harris-Lacewell (2004) shows how everyday speech within spaces like Black barbershops and churches are used to generate critical racial political discourses outside the gaze of the White mainstream. Hirschkind (2009) demonstrates how cassette tape technology in Egypt is used to disseminate moral and political narratives through the genre of the sermon, enabling the constitution of an Islamic counterpublic that challenges modernist understandings of politics and religion. Whaley (2010) argues that Alpha Kappa Alpha, a historically Black Greek lettered sorority, served as a space for a range of political interventions ranging from reformist to radical. In my own research (Hill, 2011), I explore how Black bookstores operate as "literacy counterpublics" that enable community participants to reimagine the role, purpose, and function of education, schooling, and the practice of literacy itself. These studies demonstrate the wide range of modes, genres, and contexts in which counterpublic spaces are constituted. They also spotlight the complex and sometimes contradictory array of political and ideological projects that are produced within particular counterpublic spaces.

In the current historical moment, many subaltern counterpublics around the globe have been relocated, constituted, or extended to virtual, online, and other digitally networked spaces, resulting in the formation of *digital counterpublics*. These shifts are occasioned by the rapid expansion of digital

technologies, the development of the Internet, and the rise of social networking websites and applications. These shifts are also linked to growing levels of access to smartphones, which combine mobile telephone access with computer functions such as Internet access, digital video, and operating systems capable of running third-party applications. According to Pew (2015), 92% of all Americans own cell phones and 68% own smartphones. Among youth ages 18 to 29, smartphone ownership has reached market saturation, which is estimated at 86%. These high levels of smartphone access have untethered individuals from their computers, allowing them to engage technology in a wider range of contexts and practices. The growing use of smartphone technology has had a particularly strong impact on communities of color, for whom smartphones are disproportionately the only means of home Internet access (Pew, 2015). These shifts have been further expedited and expanded via processes of globalization, which have enabled the distribution of technologies around the world at a historically unprecedented speed and scope (Appadurai, 1990).

The formation of digital counterpublics is occasioned not only by the contingencies of technological innovation and the efficiencies of global technoscapes, but also the overdetermining impact of neoliberal capitalism. As practices of efficiency, austerity, deregulation, privatization, and “free” trade become the governing logics of both the public and private sector, traditional (i.e., physical) spaces of counterpublic (and public) engagement, such as bookstores, restaurants, and coffee houses, are being eliminated or radically reconstituted. Big box retailers like Walmart and online sites like Amazon.com have eliminated both large and independent traditional bookstores from major American cities. In countries around the globe, local coffee houses and restaurants are increasingly being replaced with chain establishments like Starbucks and McDonald’s, contributing not only to imperialist cultural homogeneity, but also radical shifts in how notions of community and publicity are constructed within our collective imaginations. Because of these developments, digital counterpublics have become indispensable and in many ways unavoidable, sites of 21-century community. Within these spaces, we are forced to reimagine the role of spatiality and materiality in the constitution of community, reassess the possible sites for subaltern politics, and reconsider the role of digital epistemologies in everyday discourse and public pedagogy.

New Surveillances

Since the September 11, 2001 attack on the World Trade Center, the U.S. government has undergone radical shifts in its practices of surveillance. The Patriot Act and FISA Amendment Acts have empowered the American

government to surveil the communications of everyday citizens, even those not under suspicion of a crime. Video surveillance equipment has become a fixture within the built environment of public schools, street corners, and government buildings (Devine, 1997; Saltman, 2010). Government infiltration of Arab, Muslim, and South Asian communities has become commonplace within many American cities (Ali, 2016). These and other surveillances, advanced through the normalizing discourses of “anti-terrorism” and “national security,” have become an increasingly central feature of 21st-century neoliberal statecraft.

For Black citizens, current practices of State surveillance are not new, but an extension of a long-standing tradition of monitoring, controlling, and disciplining Black bodies that precedes the American nation-state itself. From flesh branding and slave catcher patrols to McCarthyism and COINTELPRO, the State has always deployed technologies and mechanisms of surveillance to monitor, control, and discipline Black bodies (Browne, 2015). These technologies have been used not only to advance State power and enhance private capital, but also to reify a White supremacist discourse that equates Blackness with criminality, thereby naturalizing social inequality and legitimizing draconian public policy (DuBois, 1935; Muhammad, 2011).

Within the current moment, however, some of the same technologies of surveillance used to criminalize Blackness are being repurposed by Black citizens, particularly Black youth, to resist the criminalizing techniques of State power. Specifically, smartphone technology has enabled Black youth to digitally capture (through photography, video, and livestreaming) everyday interactions with law enforcement without the support of mainstream corporate media outlets or State-owned surveillance technologies like street light cameras or surveillance drones. Through Black Twitter and other digital counterpublics, these texts can be globally distributed without sanction or mediation from corporate media or law enforcement institutions. These processes allow for what I term *new surveillances*, or a reconstitution of the relations of surveillance between individuals and the State. Rather than merely being objects of State and State-sponsored surveillance, smartphone and other technologies enable Black citizens to surveil State agents and institutions, thereby holding the State and its apparatuses accountable for practices of anti-Black violence and other forms of social injustice.

While national attention to the Ferguson protests was largely sparked by digital images of Michael Brown’s corpse, considerable post-Ferguson activism has been animated by digital videos of police actively engaged in acts of misconduct and violence. For example, on June 5, 2015, a video taken from a teenage pool party in McKinney, Texas, showed Corporal David Eric Casebolt violently throwing an unarmed 15-year-old Black girl to the ground

in her bathing suit. Casebolt also drew his handgun on two unarmed Black male teenagers in attendance of the party. On October 26, 2015, video footage showed Deputy Ben Fields, a school resource officer at Spring Valley High School in Columbia, South Carolina, physically attacking a student who refused to leave the classroom. Fields grabbed the student by her neck, slammed her to the floor while she was still inside of the desk, and then dragged her out of the classroom. The officer then arrested the student for the nebulous crime of “disturbing school” (Yan & Castillo, 2015), a charge that carries a US\$1,000 fine and up to 3 months in jail.

In each case, videos were recorded on smartphones and uploaded to YouTube by Black youth who were present at the time of the events. Links to the videos, which were viewed by millions of users across a variety of platforms, were widely distributed on Black Twitter. Members of the Black Twitter community expressed outrage at the use of excessive force by the police, the criminalization of Black youth and, in the latter example, the militarization of school space by law enforcement. In addition to engaging in critical dialogue, Black Twitter users also used the platform to demand the firing and criminal prosecution of the officers. In the Texas pool party case, Corporal Casebolt was fired; in the Spring Valley High School case, Deputy Fields resigned amid considerable public pressure (Pearce, 2015). Such examples demonstrate the potential of new surveillances for resisting State power and redressing acts of injustice.

These new surveillances not only capture the bad acts of the State, but also have the potential to serve as mechanisms for preventing such acts. With individuals observing and recording police encounters via digital video, police are less likely to engage in acts of misconduct like unlawful stops and arrests or physical violence. Such an assertion is supported by empirical data on body cameras, which show significant declines in police use of force and “stop-and-frisk” incidents when they are being digitally monitored (Ariel et al., 2015; Ready & Young, 2015). Although the surveillance tools used by citizens are not physically attached to police officers in the same manner as body cameras, they nonetheless serve a similar monitoring function. In addition to individual surveillance, organizations like Malcolm X Grassroots Movement and CopWatch.org work to implement organized programs in which citizens systematically observe and record police encounters with citizens. Such projects are the digital extension of mid-20th century programs created by The Black Panther Party, Nation of Islam, and other Black nationalist organizations that empowered everyday citizens to surveil and confront State power.

It is not my intention to overstate the capacity of smartphones or any other technology to undermine the contemporary American punishment state. To do so would be to underestimate the structural forces that shape our relationships

to these technologies as they pertain to the valuation of Black lives. For example, numerous juries have often been unable (or unwilling) to convict police officers for killing unarmed Black citizens, even when the entire death sequences are captured on video. Most recently, a 2016 jury was unable to convict South Carolina police officer Michael Slager for killing Walter Scott, an unarmed Black man who was running away from Slager at the time of the shooting. Such examples evince the anti-Black and dehumanizing logics of White supremacy, which frame Black bodies as perpetually violent and dangerous irrespective of condition or context, and thereby unworthy of restraint, mercy, or protection (Hill, 2016). Within this context, White fear, whether warranted or unwarranted, rational or irrational, becomes exculpatory when adjudicating the death of Black bodies.

Despite these clear limitations, new surveillances are nonetheless critical for radically reshaping the conditions of everyday life for Black people, particularly Black youth, within the United States. Through these new surveillances, Black youth are able to contest dominant media and policy narratives that frame Black youth as inherently criminal, violent, anti-intellectual, and ultimately disposable (Baldrige, 2014; Giroux, 2009). These narratives are not limited to the discursive realm, as anti-Blackness informs law enforcement practices in relation to Black youth as well as the public and governmental response to incidents of anti-Black state violence (Goff et al., 2014; Hill, 2016). Moreover, as argued above, these surveillances serve as concrete forms of resistance to state violence by placing otherwise private interactions between citizens and law enforcement within a broader set of public and counterpublic spheres. When linked to Black Twitter and other digital counterpublics, these tools enable new forms of pedagogy, resistance and, most fundamentally, survival.

Rejecting Respectability

On August 15, 2014, the Ferguson police department released a video of Michael Brown robbing a local convenience store minutes before he was killed by Officer Darren Wilson. The footage of Brown shoving a store owner and stealing a cigarillo stood in sharp contrast to the media headlines circulating immediately after his death, which showed Brown as a college-bound teenager wearing his cap and gown from his recent high school graduation (Banks, 2014). After seeing the video, many media pundits, activists, and everyday citizens argued that they could no longer advocate for Brown's case. Some claimed that Brown was directly or indirectly responsible for his own death because of his bad choices, even though Wilson testified that he had no knowledge of the store robbery when he stopped Brown for jaywalking (Hill,

2016). Others argued that Brown was no longer a compelling victim because he lacked the proper public image to garner, or perhaps even merit, national sympathy (Hill, 2016). Each of these positions reflects various levels of investment in a *politics of respectability* that is actively contested within the digital counterpublic of Black Twitter.

The term “politics of respectability” originates in the work of Evelyn Brooks Higgenbotham (1993), who showed how Black Baptist women in the 19th and 20th century deliberately embraced the cultural, social, and moral norms of dominant society in order to “earn their people a measure of esteem from White America” (p. 14). This approach, deployed by many sectors of Black society, was predicated on the belief that Black oppression was at least partially linked to prevailing, but ultimately changeable, stereotypes about Black people and blackness itself. By meeting White standards of cleanliness, thriftiness, or sexual purity, many Blacks aimed to defy negative stereotypes and better position themselves to struggle for equity and inclusion within dominant society (Higgenbotham, 1993). Such beliefs were embraced not only by the women’s movement, but also mainstream Black elites like Booker T. Washington, Anna Julia Cooper, and W. E. B. DuBois, as well as Black nationalist organizations like the Nation of Islam. Although disparate in their political ideologies, these figures all nonetheless embraced a conception of “racial uplift” that was informed by a politics of respectability (Cooper, in press; Gaines, 1996; Griffin, 2000; West, 2000).

The embrace of respectability politics has been thoroughly critiqued for its problematic dimensions. Scholars argue that the appeal to White mainstream values by the Black middle class has led to intense class tensions, the rejection of poor and working class culture, and the reinforcement of negative stereotypes about Black people (Higgenbotham, 1993; Wolcott, 2001). Critics also argue that respectability politics overstate the role of individual agency by implicitly or explicitly suggesting that individuals can merely choose to behave in ways that eliminate social misery (Harris, 2014; Reed, 1996). In addition to victim blaming, such a posture reflects a moral censure and outright shaming of the Black poor by the Black middle class (Dyson, 2005). Furthermore, respectability politics serve as an allied force of neoliberalism, as they tether long-standing academic and policy narratives about the “urban underclass” and “culture of poverty” to heightened and increasingly unrealistic expectations of individuality and self-reliance (di Leonardo, 1998, 2016; Hill, 2016; Reed, 2001).

Despite these prominent academic critiques, the politics of respectability continues to linger prominently within mainstream 21st-century Black political and cultural discourse. In 2004, during a ceremony commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court

decision, actor and philanthropist Bill Cosby sparked a national conversation by giving a speech in which he criticized the Black poor for their failure to speak standard English, sexual impropriety, improper dress, and criminal behavior. Cosby's speech was applauded and defended by many Black media personalities, politicians, and cultural critics, as well as White conservative media figures like Rush Limbaugh and Bill O'Reilly. Since 2008, President Barack Obama has been criticized for deploying respectability politics when addressing Black audiences, such as his 2003 Morehouse commencement speech, his development of policy initiatives like My Brother's Keeper, and his discussions of the deaths of Black citizens like Hadiya Pendleton (e.g., Coates, 2013; Cobb, 2014; Dyson, 2016). As of 2016, Hampton University, a historically Black institution, continues to ban male members of its MBA program from wearing cornrows and dreadlocks. The school's dean, Sid Credle, has argued that these natural hairstyles compromise the professional appearance necessary for successful navigation of the job market (Wilson, 2012). Within the digital counterpublic of Black Twitter, these and other respectability discourses are routinely engaged, critiqued, and rejected.

The rejection of respectability politics within Black Twitter is indexed by the strong advocacy for "imperfect victims" within the digital community. Despite the fact that Michael Brown had allegedly robbed a convenience store, Eric Garner was stopped for illegally selling cigarettes, and Walter Scott ran away from his arresting officer—all of which compromise the "perfect victim" status demanded by 1960s civil rights respectability politics (Hoose, 2009). Black Twitter users offered vocal support for their cases. This support is evidenced by the frequent usage of the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag in Black Twitter discussions about their deaths (Anderson & Hitlin, 2016). The use of the hashtag not only demonstrates high user engagement, which can be measured through raw counts of word usage, but also strong resonance with the Black Lives Matter movement's antirespectability politics within the Black Twitter community (Garza, 2014; Spence, 2015). By using the hashtag to assert that every Black life "matters," despite ostensible bad choices or an imperfect life history, the Black Twitter counterpublic actively contests dominant anti-Black narratives about whose life is worth protecting.

In addition to tacitly rejecting respectability politics through advocacy, the Black Twitter community explicitly critiques particular articulations of respectability politics. An example of this came after the 2016 deaths of Alton Sterling and Philando Castile at the hands of law enforcement. In response to the killings, NBA basketball player Damian Lillard tweeted that Black people "have to take better care of each other [*sic*] . . . We do harm more often to our brother/sister than anyone else." He continued, "Change is needed on our behalf NOW . . . And then the battle can go further in demanding that we be

treated better from others” (original emphasis; Lillard, 2016a, 2016b). Rather than criticizing the officers who killed Sterling and Castile, or acknowledging the structures that normalize extrajudicial state violence, Lillard criticized the Black community writ large for its own behaviors. In doing so, Lillard invoked a distracting and pathologizing “black on black crime” discourse that often accompanies anti-Black state violence. This position, which is largely informed by respectability politics, demands particular (and respectable) Black behaviors as the precondition for public sympathy and political mobilization (Hill, 2013). Immediately after Lillard posted his tweets, the Black Twitter community posted thousands of critical responses. Examples include the following tweets:

@ripcityNick: Those are two separate issues, you are way off on this. Black people shouldn't need to change to be treated equally. (Nick, 2016)

@NahlejOne: Blacks were supportive of each other before. In the 1920s they burned down Black Wall St and killed a whole community. (One, 2016)

@SavionWright: Yet prisons are full of black people and being killed by the people SWORN to protect and serve them with no repercussions . . . SMH. (Wright, 2016)

Through these and other responses, the Black Twitter community rejected Lillard’s respectability politics as unethical, ahistorical, and largely irrelevant in relation to larger structural determinants of state violence. Nearly 2 hours after Lillard’s initial tweet, writer and social justice activist Shaun King tweeted that he had spoken to Lillard, who indicated that he found the Black Twitter community’s response helpful. Lillard also suggested that he was “genuinely remorseful” for the tweet and “open to learning” (King, 2016).

Lillard’s response to public critique could be interpreted as the product of public shaming or public relations savvy rather than a genuine reconsideration of his ideological position. The power of Black Twitter, however, does not rest upon the genuineness of Lillard’s response to criticism. Regardless of Lillard’s personal politics, his comments became a public text that could be used as a site of critical interrogation. The critical response to Lillard’s tweets enabled the Black Twitter community to engage in a critical pedagogy, both internally and to the broader publics (e.g., mainstream television news outlets, blogs, and other sectors of Twitter) that observed and shared the event. Through this pedagogy, the community was able to challenge, and ultimately reject, the legitimacy of respectability politics.

Resisting Erasure

On July 10, 2015, Sandra Bland was pulled over by Texas state trooper Brian Encinia for failing to signal while making a lane change. Bland's interaction with Encinia, and refusal to put out her cigarette, led to her being forcefully taken from her car and placed under arrest. Three days later, Bland was found hanging in her cell in what was officially deemed a suicide. Immediately after her death, the Black Twitter community produced tweets that raised critical questions about the legitimacy of the arrest, the veracity of the State's suicide claims, the national media's failure to cover the story, and the broader politics of gender and criminal justice. In addition, many tweets also addressed the five other Black women who died in police custody during the same month as Bland (Hill, 2016). Many of the tweets about the women were accompanied by the hashtag #SayHerName, which has become a primary space for the Black Twitter community to engage an inter-sectional feminist politics that actively resists the erasure of Black women girls from conversations about anti-Black state violence.

The #SayHerName hashtag was coined in February 2015 by the African American Policy Forum (AAPF), an organization cofounded by feminist legal scholar Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw. #SayHerName was created in response to the lack of comparable media attention paid to the police involved deaths of Black women and girls during the same time period that "Mike Brown, Eric Garner, and Tamir Rice [had] become household names and faces" (AAPF, 2015, p. 3). By highlighting the deaths of Black women, girls, and femmes by law enforcement, AAPF aimed to ensure that their stories "become an impetus for public policy debates on the future of policing in America" (p. 3). In doing so, they also disrupted a long-standing tradition of using the abuse or killing of Black male bodies—such as Emmett Till, Rodney King, and Trayvon Martin—as the impetus for collective outrage, social action, and public policy.

In addition to highlighting female deaths, the #SayHerName hashtag has also created space to address the gender-specific ways that Black women and girls experience state violence. After Bland's death, many Black Twitter users commented on the specific ways that Black women and girls are expected to interact with law enforcement officials. These expectations, which are centered around patriarchal norms of femininity, politeness, and deference to male authority, lead to disproportionate arrests when defied by Black women and girls (Freiburger & Burke, 2011; Nanda, 2012; Saar et al., 2015). In addition, stories about sexual violence, assaults on pregnant women, and gendered profiling were all included in Black Twitter conversations using the #SayHerName hashtag. Through these narratives, Black Twitter did not merely append female faces to male-centered narratives, but also radically shifted how state violence is imagined and contested within the space.

Another goal of the #SayHerName movement is to expand mainstream conceptions of gender. Moving beyond binary and cis-centered understandings of woman- and girlhood, which reduce gender identity to the sex assigned to an individual at birth, #SayHerName is explicitly inclusive of transgender women and girls, as well as those who identify as “femme” or “feminine” but do not accept traditional gender binaries. This is evidenced by the inclusion of women like Mya Hall, a Black transgender woman killed in front of the Baltimore, Maryland headquarters of the U.S. National Security Agency (NSA) under debated circumstances (Hill, 2016; Romano, 2015), within the #SayHerName discussions on Black Twitter. In addition to covering her underreported death, Black Twitter also created space to address the specific ways that trans populations face state violence through misgendering, profiling, harassment, sexual abuse, and criminalization of their bodies within public space (Hill, 2012; Kulick, 1998; Movement Advancement Project & Center for American Progress, 2016). Through these practices, Black Twitter operates as a radical site of feminist and queer politics and pedagogy.

Moving Forward

In this article, I have attempted to highlight the ways that Black Twitter operates as a digital counterpublic that enables new and transgressive forms of organizing, pedagogy and, ultimately, resistance. Still, it is important not to romanticize the space or overstate the capacity of such spaces to produce symbolic and material forms of resistance. As with all publics and counterpublics, Black Twitter is a contested terrain, a site of struggle over competing meanings, politics, values, and identities. To understand the contours and contradictions of this terrain, this article must not be seen as an end, but rather a starting point for further theoretical, methodological, and empirical reflection. Specifically, we must consider the ways that Black Twitter and other digital counterpublics enable new forms of theorizing around, among other things, space, place, sociality, politics, and resistance. We must also explore how these digital spaces and technologies produce new epistemologies that demand new methods, and a reshaping of our current methods, of systematic inquiry. We must then deploy these methods to gain empirical insight into the complex range of rituals, practices, ideologies, and productions of Black Twitter. Through this work, we not only gain academic insight, but we increase our ability to spotlight, protect, humanize, and, perhaps, save Black lives.

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Notes

1. Subsequent investigations, particularly one conducted by the Department of Justice, suggest that Brown was not with his hands in the air. For greater detail about the death sequence between Brown and Wilson, see Hill (2016).
2. While other scholars have previously used the term *digital counterpublic* (e.g., Durrani, 2015; Kohn, 2012), they have not explicitly defined it. Instead, they have used the term somewhat axiomatically as the digital alternative to traditional counterpublics. In this article, I explicitly define digital counterpublics and, in the subsequent section, briefly explore the material and discursive forces that have constituted them.

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