



Staying Angry: Black Women's Resistance to Racialized Forgiveness in U.S. Police Shootings

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ABSTRACT

Requests for forgiveness can effectively silence and delegitimize anger, and requests to publicly perform emotional labor can effectively make that labor both required and undervalued. I focus on interviews and press conferences between 2014 and 2016 with police shooting mourners Esaw Garner, Lesley McSpadden, Samaria Rice, Audrey DuBose, and Valerie Castile. I show how these Black women resist racist calls to deprive them of their anger and right to seek justice, refusing to suture the social crisis of police violence with their emotional labor. On television, the news context obscures the entertainment value of anger and grief that partly motivates these requests. I argue that speakers are well aware of the way supposedly angry, supposedly violent affect gets judged on the Black body in the public sphere. Family members resist the pressure to forgive—a form of resistance that insists on the right to anger in the public sphere—while strategically maintaining a reasonable demeanor.

KEYWORDS

Anger; Black women's rage; forgiveness; justice; police shootings; public sphere; television news

Racial forgiveness and the media

In August 2016, *New York Daily News* columnist and social activist Shaun King wrote a piece pleading with news anchors to stop asking the families of victims of racial violence to forgive their attackers. He claims, outraged, that only Black people are taxed with this form of public emotional labor. Only Black people are expected to overcome their pain and extend this strange form of generosity. Only Black people are denied their right to grieve. They are asked to forgive and relinquish their anger, often in absence of apology, because in many of these cases of racialized violence and terror, the people who committed the violence do not think they did anything wrong (Devega, 2015; Danielle, 2015; Patton, 2015; CNN Transcripts, 2016).¹ In the words of Officer Darren Wilson, who shot and killed Michael Brown, “I just did my job” (ABC News, 2014a).

As we see in television news interviews with surviving loved ones following police shootings, it is Black women in particular whose emotional labor is exploited as they love, raise, and sometimes mourn Black men. The request for forgiveness is a manifestation of the work that Black women are expected to do to maintain the racist and sexist

social order (Collins, 1990). Requests for forgiveness can effectively silence and delegitimize anger, and requests to publicly perform emotional labor for others can effectively make that labor both required and undervalued. In this article, I focus on interviews and press conferences between 2014 and 2016 with three of the most high-profile mourners, Esaw Garner, Lesley McSpadden, and Valerie Castile, alongside shorter discussions of Samaria Rice and Audrey DuBose. I center these Black women's voices to explore how they resist racist calls to deprive them of their anger and right to seek justice. In contrast to the creative communities of resistance that Black women have built in counterpublic spaces, the traditional public sphere places different pressures on Black women's expressions of emotion and especially anger. There is rich scholarship around Black women's expression of emotionality and rage in counterpublics and the disciplining of Black women's voices in the public sphere (Davis, 2018; Cooper, 2018; Jackson, 2016; Griffin, 2012). I argue that Black women's refusal to publicly forgive the shooters and suture the social crisis of police violence on national television is itself an expression of rage that constitutes resistance through its insistence on the emotional rights of Black women.

When Black women are asked during television interviews to forgive perpetrators of violence and terror, they are being asked to maintain the social status quo in which the state cannot be in the wrong. They are being asked to be obedient citizen-subjects, excusing a system of violence and oppression through the symbolic forgiveness of its representatives, even as those representatives are carefully framed as often exceptional individuals rather than the system itself (Cohen, 2009; Jacobson, 1999). And they are being asked—in public, in front of a media audience—to abdicate their anger at the perpetrators, granting them forgiveness when they have not even asked for it. Black women in particular are subject to unfair demands on doing emotional labor for others (Jones, 2009; Durr & Wingfield, 2011), even or perhaps especially when they are in highly vulnerable moments of personal mourning and loss.

Television and television interviews inhabit a particular kind of public sphere, both collective and intimate, both spontaneous and staged (Dahlgren, 1995). The presence of the at-home audience, invisible to the interviewee, obscures the impact of the orchestrated genuine emotion that Laura Grindstaff (2008) calls the “money shot.” Participants are carefully groomed and primed backstage by producers to deliver this big emotional payoff, which is powerful in part because it is sincerely expressed, even as it is deliberately elicited. This kind of careful manipulation is quite present in these interviews, invisibly motivating the attempts to emotionally expose Black women through their responses to forgiveness requests. The families of victims (to be clear, we are talking about parents, partners, and children being asked to forgive the people who murdered their children, husbands, wives, and parents) may not feel particularly forgiving (Bauer, 2008).² They almost certainly are outraged, grieving, and looking for vengeance. But it is very difficult to express these emotions in public, on television, especially given the long historical trap of the state diagnosing and then punishing Black rage as violent, threatening, and unjustified (Jackson, 2006). The pain around the state-sponsored shooting of a loved one could always already be read as the dangerous rage of the angry Black man,³ the irrational

rage of the angry Black woman (Shapiro et al., 2009; Davis, 2018). Refusing to forgive is itself an act of resistance, a way to insist on rage.

Anger is powerful (Cooper, 2018). It does work as part of a demand for justice and retribution. Justified anger is acceptably wielded by those who are in control of the political, social, and ethical landscape, with the right to determine the terms of engagement. Anger is also coded as masculine. Women are repeatedly asked to forgive and even return to perpetrators of bodily violence (Walton, 2005; MacLachlan, 2009).⁴ Both women and African Americans are two groups whose right to anger has long been suppressed and disciplined by systemic oppression, who have been taught that it is probably partly their fault (Razack, 1998; Cooper, 2018). As scholars like Shardé Davis (2018) and Sarah J. Jackson (2016) have shown, Black women build counterpublics to express rage and solidarity. I ask: How can that rage be negotiated in the traditional public sphere when Black women do not control the dialogue and discourse? Drawing on five key cases of police shootings of Black men, I look at nationally televised interviews with family members to explore ritual racialized forgiveness in the public sphere. I focus in depth on three very high-profile interviews with Esaw Garner, Lesley McSpadden, and Valerie Castile, with two additional discussions around Samaria Rice and Audrey DuBose, that include important elements: the death of a child and the willingness to forgive if and only if an apology is offered. These shorter discussions are in other ways consonant with the more in-depth examples. In addition to the media scholarship on Black women's counterpublics, I turn to feminist philosophy of language, which explores the disempowering nature of public forgiveness and apply it to what I call "racialized forgiveness," in discourse with the notion of racialized violence (Perry, 2001).

My notion of racialized forgiveness examines a ritual that aims to create an appearance of social equilibrium while, in fact, the goal is to return to the sanctioned status quo of structural oppression (Kampf & Löwenheim, 2012). Racialized forgiveness requests are designed to benefit the perpetrators rather than the victims and their families, framing the shooters as individual exceptions to the state system that they represent. Racialized forgiveness requests situate families, and especially mothers, as the fantasy "middle ground" of nonviolence and polite protest that is also a trap to delegitimize Black anger (e.g., see Colin Kaepernick's nonviolent protests). Racialized forgiveness is always mediated between institutions (with structural power) and individuals (without it); individual shooters are thus simultaneously situated as the state itself, which must be forgiven for reasons of social stability—excusing White supremacy for its history of oppression and violence and allowing the oppressed to continue to function as citizens within their prescribed role in the state structure.

In my analysis of interviews with Esaw Garner, Lesley McSpadden, Samaria Rice, Audrey DuBose, and Valerie Castile, I locate (1) if there is a forgiveness request; (2) if it is connected to a direct apology from the perpetrator; and (3) how these women respond by resisting the call to heal others while maintaining control and protecting their right to mourn and rage. They do so strategically, in a carefully controlled way, to minimize being read as threatening and violent. Both the police and the media construct community and control the status quo; through analyzing responses to racialized forgiveness requests, I consider the particular pressure placed on Black women to

forgive structural violence as a way to maintain order and restore social balance (Carey, 2008; Gitlin, 1980). In the conclusion, I consider how Black women strategically invert the politics of respectability in instances of justified anger and resistance (White, 2010).

Literature review

Forgiveness requests seek, in part, to silence anger. As Audre Lorde's (1981) "The Uses of Anger" insists, anger is not only the appropriate but the necessary response to racism. Ignoring or minimizing anger is a barrier to listening, to learning, and to allyship. I am attentive to how Black women use anger in their resistance, rejecting forgiveness requests as another form of anti-Black racism. This attempt to silence and neutralize anger is another manifestation of structural state violence against Black women who are targeted both by the murder of their loved ones and by harassment, racial profiling, exploitation, abuse, and other forms of police violence. Andrea Ritchie (2017) profiles the experience of Black women, insisting that we listen to their voices in any analysis of structural racism and police brutality, highlighting the extent to which the targeting of Black women has been rendered invisible. My analysis centers the responses of Black women to police brutality and violence, noting how their words engage not just with the deaths of those they love but also with their own histories of structural attacks and oppression. Their anger is about not just apologies and forgiveness but also a larger system in which Black women have been directly and indirectly targeted.⁵

This is not just a story of the loss of loved ones, the mourning of mothers and lovers and daughters. It is the story of the mourning of Black mothers and lovers and daughters. As Dawn Marie Dow (2019) chronicles, the experience of mothering while Black in America requires particular strategies of negotiation and resistance, even as Black mothers are marginalized from the parenting community in the United States. Dow's work resonates with classic theories from Patricia Hill Collins (1990) in highlighting how Black women have been situated as outsiders within and marginalized from both Black social theory and feminism (see also Crenshaw, 1991). Following Collins, I show how Black women reject forgiveness requests by insisting on anger as an activist feminist resistance to anti-Black racism, situating the request itself as another form of attempted silencing and marginalization. This approach builds on the scholarship of Shardé Davis's (2018) analysis of Black women's counterpublic spheres as spaces for the productive and political expression of rage and emotional solidarity and Sarah J. Jackson's (2016) work on online counterpublics as sites of Black solidarity and organizing. Davis joins scholars like Brittney Cooper (2018) and Rachel Alicia Griffin (2012) in demonstrating how Black women's rage is an important response to American anti-Black sexism and disrespect that undermines the politics of respectability and provides a space for vulnerability and emotion.

As these studies highlight, the public sphere pathologizes Black women's emotional expression and engagement, particularly around anger and vulnerability, resulting in the formation of vibrant alternative spaces (Davis, 2018; Sharma, 2013). This article, however, is situated in the most public of spheres: mainstream nationally televised news interviews. Following Davis's (2018) and Jackson and Banaszczyk's (2016) provocations

on the exclusion of Black women from the racial counterpublic, I seek to situate Black women's rage precisely within the public sphere. As Gee (2014) has outlined, language is a key site of power. I explore how Black women wield this power as a form of resistance *within* the public sphere, navigating the pressures of respectability with an insistence on anger and rage that scholars have located within the counterpublic (Davis, 2018). Communication and media studies scholarship has been invested in exploring the productive political uses of the counterpublic; I draw on this research to locate the ways that language—and the refusal to use the language of forgiveness—can equally express rage in the public sphere, even within the context of the politics of respectability and, as Armond R. Towns (2016) has shown, White control over Black women's mobility and discourse.

Victor Turner's (1980) theory of social drama makes clear the broader social stakes for apologies as a way to intervene in a crisis of transgression to return it to status quo. Forgiveness may itself be only for the purpose of the restoration of balance rather than emotional peace, renewed intimacy, or a return to prior status, but even the sometimes-fragile suture offered by apology and forgiveness may be enough for the crisis to pass. However, state-sponsored structural brutality and violence against the Black body cannot be allowed to fade. The rejection of forgiveness requests is an insistence on maintaining the crisis and using anger as a way to come to better solutions (Lorde, 1981). There is tremendous pressure on Black women to perform unfair emotional labor not just on the individual level but on the societal level both in real life and online (Threads of Solidarity, 2018), while somehow resisting the toll this work exacts. In the case of police shootings, Black mothers, wives and lovers, and daughters have been called to do the labor of healing and forgiveness at a structural level. The television news infrastructure attempts to make their anger and mourning public, suggesting forgiveness as a response that is, likewise, a public commodity.⁶

The institutionalization of forgiveness is heightened through publicity: When forgiveness requests are done in the public sphere, they are necessarily representative of larger structures and systems.⁷ This is particularly clear in the case of forgiveness requests for police shootings, which combine interpersonal and institutional forgiveness requests, often through a third party such as a journalist. They do so in a highly politicized fashion that does not consider the unique nature of each case and seeks to delegitimize the anger and potentially evacuate the claims for justice and retribution of the victim. This resonates with female survivors of intimate partner violence (IPV): Sometimes no apology is necessary for a woman to forgive her attacker⁸ (Martin, 2010; Gordon, Coop, & Porter, 2004).

The families of police shooting victims often find themselves on the news in what are called "experiential interviews." As Dayan and Katz (1994) have pointed out, media events are the responsibility of news divisions rather than entertainment because news has claimed dominion over historicity and so-called reality, even though media events lie in between (Montgomery, 2007). Tamar Liebes (1998) pays particular attention to tragedy news presented as what she calls "disaster marathons." This very particular genre of interviews with grieving families is also a kind of media event that straddles news and entertainment. Forgiveness supports the social drama mediation by restoring the police to their rightful moral and emotional dominance over the Black families they

shoot and kill. Forgiveness narratives also do work to support the disempowerment of mourning families. And interviews with the families of victims are designed to entertain, to draw in viewers, and to make money, of course.⁹ These moments serve to both personalize the interviewees and reinforce or restore order and control (Kampf & Liebes, 2013).

There are a number of op-eds rightly protesting the forgiveness discourse that interviewers use with the families of police shooting victims. These are forceful, elegantly written pieces that discuss both the history of racialized violence and the fundamental imbalance between the way that reporters speak to White relatives and Black relatives about forgiveness. To wit: No one asked the families of the victims of 9/11, the Columbine shootings, or the Sandy Hook shootings if they forgave the terrorists or the shooters (for more, see Devega, 2015; King, 2016). What a grotesque question, what an insane intrusion on grief, what an inappropriate reaction to the violent and needless ends of the lives of these beloved individuals. The reporters did not dare to suggest or insist that an apology was necessary. The need for an apology is already obvious in the case of White victims.

Methods

Did the news media actually dare ask these questions with families of color? What words were used? What was the reaction from the families? How often and how systematic was the problem? What did the shooters themselves have to say about apology and forgiveness? If so, how did these Black women respond? What were the stakes for these requests and their resistance in the public sphere?

These were my main guiding questions as I tracked third-party forgiveness requests for police in televised news interviews. I created a database of police shootings for 2013 through 2016 for a total of 106 recorded incidents. In each of these cases, I explored whether there was a request for forgiveness and by whom it was made, as well as the response. I drew on the *Washington Post* (2015) collections of police shootings for these three years, choosing to focus on shootings of Black men who were not involved in acts of dangerous crime when they were shot. The database was cross-referenced with one from *Buzzfeed* (Davis & Quah, 2015) to see if any key cases were missed. I then did a number of Internet searches for each victim's name and the names of their families, locating television news and press conference interviews with these loved ones. There was television news coverage for 74 people from 2013 to 2016. I watched these interviews online and transcribed them, resulting in 50 pages of written transcripts. Where possible, I obtained written transcripts from news Web sites that I then cross-referenced with my own transcriptions. With each case, I searched the transcripts to see if a forgiveness request was made. When such a request was located, I identified (1) who made the request; (2) to whom was it made; (3) if it was connected to an apology from the perpetrator; and (4) whether forgiveness was granted. I located interviews for 18 of the cases, all of which engaged in the question of anger or forgiveness in some way, though some were less explicit than others.

To build a case-oriented understanding (Fischer & Wertz, 2002), I chose to focus on three key cases with the most news coverage because they generated high-profile

attention across the United States, with a supplement of two other important examples that differ in notable ways—namely the death of a child and the openness to forgiveness. The latter are briefer discussions because they were less high profile and because in other aspects they are consonant with the key cases. I move through my analysis chronologically to highlight the development of this discourse over time. The interviews with the families of Eric Garner, Michael Brown, Tamir Rice, Samuel DuBose, and Philando Castile were featured on national television rather than local outlets. It was to these interviews that writers were responding when they protested forgiveness requests, and it was in these interviews that the expectation of public emotional labor by Black women was most explicitly on display. The media outlets that interviewed these families whose dialogues I explored were CNN, ABC News, and CBS News (and in one case, Al-Jazeera), mainstream stations that comprise the public sphere, all of which skew neutral or slightly left (Media Bias Chart, 2018). I located the forgiveness request and its response, identifying the responses of Black mothers and lovers. I searched for commonalities across their responses, noting whether forgiveness was granted and what language was used in the response. I compared the language of the three responses and closely read the words and tone to observe how the respondents navigated the pressures on Black women in the public sphere. After identifying the cases that generated national attention, I transcribed the statement of the shooters as recorded in public news reports. I analyzed these statements in conjunction with the literature on apologies to see what, if any, discursive strategies were used to avoid responsibility. In all five cases, forgiveness was not granted; and in all five cases, apologies were not offered.

My chosen time frame, structured by the galvanization of Black Lives Matter in 2014 and the increased media attention to police shootings of Black men, means that many important stories and cases are not captured, including that of Rekia Boyd. Boyd was shot by an off-duty Chicago police officer on March 21, 2012, and died in the hospital the next day (Black Lives Matter, n.d.). I mention the Boyd case in particular because I wish to highlight, following Kimberlé Crenshaw's hashtag campaign #SayHerName, that Black women as well as men are victims of police shootings, though Black women tend to be far less visible in the debates. The #SayHerName campaign, among other initiatives, speaks directly to this erasure by putting Black women's concerns and experiences at the forefront, highlighting their activist work and their struggles (and deaths) (Williams, 2016; Tillet, 2015). I do not want to reproduce the erasure of Black women's bodies and Black women's experiences through my time frame, so I wish to draw attention here to women and femme victims of police shootings, including Rekia Boyd, Sandra Bland, and Charleena Lyles (for more, see African American Policy Forum, n.d.). The dearth of televised interviews and widespread discussion prior to 2014 indicates a lack of attention to this issue, not a change in the volume or number of shootings—nor, indeed, less pain or anger. It was just less public. It was less mediated in the public sphere.

That lack of attention changed in a very public way with the 2014 murder of Eric Garner, which was followed less than a month later by the murder of Michael Brown.

Case 1: Esaw Garner

On July 17, 2014, Eric Garner was stopped by police in Staten Island while selling loose cigarettes. He was handcuffed and then held in a chokehold by Officer Daniel Pantaleo, which, combined with the chest compression he experienced from the officers who handcuffed him, proved fatal. His last words, “I can’t breathe,” were captured by a cell phone camera along with the entire incident. Garner lay on the ground, motionless. First aid was not immediately given. Critical minutes passed with Garner on the ground not receiving oxygen from the responding emergency medical technicians (EMTs). Garner, unarmed, guilty (perhaps) of nothing more than selling untaxed cigarettes, died at the hands of the police. The lack of immediate care was an egregious breach of protocol, and the chokehold is a technique explicitly forbidden by police regulations (Baker, Goodman, & Mueller, 2015). The cell phone footage guaranteed that these violations were brought to light. Garner was far from the first unarmed Black man to be killed by police, but he was one of the first to have this kind of death broadcast to the world in this way and to have the world pay attention. He was, of course, not the last.

Esaw Garner, Eric Garner’s wife, held a press conference after the failure of the grand jury to indict Pantaleo in late 2014.¹⁰ Press conferences differ somewhat from staged sit-down interviews but still operate as traditional public spheres that discipline anger and highlight my key questions.¹¹ The press conference format offers more control to the speaker, who has prepared a statement and has made decisions as to the structure and setting. A press conference is still, in Dayan and Katz’s (1994) terms, a kind of media event, and it is still a kind of entertainment. But it is less a social performance and almost entirely a cultural one. The performative aspect is entirely clear, and the conference speaker is among those (but not the only one) dictating the terms (Clayman & Heritage, 2002).¹²

These factors might have made it easier for Esaw Garner to reject the condolences offered by Pantaleo. Following the grand jury decision, Pantaleo issued a carefully worded statement through the Patrolmen’s Benevolent Association that acknowledged the tragic nature of the events but stopped well short of taking responsibility for them. The statement opened with an expression of selflessness and invitation to view Pantaleo in a morally superior light: “I became a police officer to help people and to protect those who can’t protect themselves.” He then expressed his own remorse over events without connecting them to his own actions: “It is never my intention to harm anyone and I feel very bad about the death of Mr. Garner.” He closed with an ambiguously worded request from family to family to accept his condolences, which implicitly included a request for absolution, even though an apology (and with it a recognition of wrongdoing) was never offered: “My family and I include him and his family in our prayers, and I hope they will accept my personal condolences for their loss” (NBC News, 2014).¹³

It is not an apology—not even close. But acceptance of nonapology condolences could translate to absolution, doing the work of apology and restoring the status quo without requiring retribution, justice, or a change to the system in any way. It is a clear nonapology, a long-standing phenomenon known intimately to small children and politicians everywhere (Kampf & Blum-Kulka, 2007; Kampf, 2011b).¹⁴ The trick of the

nonapology is that even though no real apology is offered, forgiveness might be granted, letting the perpetrator off scot-free.

Garner refuses to fall into the trap in her press conference. She rejects both condolences and (absent) apology, asserting her right to anger, insisting on the harm done, and challenging the refusal to allow her to experience both. And as her response points out, it is fairly meaningless to apologize to a dead person, particularly one who is dead by your hands. She answers the question of accepting Pantaleo's condolences with an unambiguous (and angry) "Hell no." Then she points out why the anger is righteous and why it matters in a very real way: "The time for remorse would have been when my husband was screaming to breathe." She challenges the moral authority and humanity of Pantaleo by making clear the very real and very conscious harm that was indeed done by him: "That would have been the time for him to show some type of remorse or some type of care for another human being's life, when he was screaming eleven times that he can't breathe." She makes a clear statement that rejects his version of events, rejects the possibility of apology, and absolutely denies Pantaleo the right to absolve himself: "No, I don't accept his apology. No, I could care less about his condolences." She concludes by underscoring the very real effects of Pantaleo's actions and the fundamental difference in where Pantaleo and Eric Garner are now: "No, I couldn't care less. He's still working, he's still getting a paycheck, he's still feeding his kids, and my husband is six feet under, and I'm looking for a way to feed my kids now. Who's going to play Santa Claus for my grandkids this year?" (CBS News, 2014).

Garner offers a powerful and stirring statement that was consonant with the emerging national conversation on the shooting of unarmed (or legally armed) Black men. But this particular discourse focuses on Pantaleo and only Pantaleo; the system itself seemingly remains unchallenged. Garner explicitly says, "[A] cop did wrong. Someone that got paid to do right did wrong." Even though she notes that "he won't be held accountable," the fundamental notion that cops are meant to do right is reinforced (CBS News, 2014). Pantaleo's claim that police officers enter the profession to protect others stands, even as his own fulfillment of those ideals is undermined. But Garner's anger is itself a way to resist the overall system. Being and staying angry is an emotional response to racism and tragedy, and also a strategic one: Anger is a way to fight.

The world—and not just the people of color who had no choice but to care who had to live with this every day regardless of cell phone footage and "woke" White people and the newfound outpouring of compassion—began looking more closely (Lebron, 2017). The police were under examination. The crisis, in Victor Turner's terms, is that the state as embodied by the police was under threat. The authority of the police needed to be reinforced. The moral authority of the police needed to be reinforced; the physical authority was not in doubt and was only underscored by the public's awareness of these shootings. It was not just a question of hurt feelings or public relations management. It was a challenge to the very framework upon which the enforcement of order is built. Within the logic of Pantaleo and his defenders, the police could not be in the wrong. Status quo needed to be reestablished, or the schism would have dramatic and far-reaching consequences for the police, the state, the marginalized subject position of Black bodies and Black citizens in the United States, and the system of oppression upon which all of these rest. And Black women were asked to fix it. A public declaration of

forgiveness would do it. As Zohar Kampf (2011a) has shown, journalists can meaningfully intervene in the production of news by how they frame the narrative of the story. They can help suture this crisis with a request for forgiveness.

Esaw Garner pushed back, insisting on her anger and indeed its value and use. That was hard. It is very difficult to turn down a forgiveness request. It is also arguably more difficult for women, who have been conditioned their entire lives to grant forgiveness and be accommodating. It is even more difficult on television, with the weight of history—a history that has perpetuated and manipulated the trope of the angry Black man and woman as an excuse to further discipline and punish—and under the scrutiny of millions. But Garner does it: She refuses to forgive.

Case 2: Lesley McSpadden

On August 9, 2014, less than one month after the Eric Garner shooting, Officer Darren Wilson fatally shot an unarmed 18-year-old named Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, leading to protests and rallies across the country. The movement #BlackLivesMatter, which emerged on social media after the 2013 acquittal of George Zimmerman in the shooting of Trayvon Martin, took to the streets (Lebron, 2017). On November 24, 2014, the grand jury declined to indict Wilson. He was a free man with, in his words during an interview with ABC News, “a clean conscience.” He had felt that he was at risk from Brown during the incident, and “all I wanted to do was live.” He asserted, “I did my job right.” Wilson stated, “I’m sorry that their son lost his life,” but “it wasn’t the intention of that day. It’s what occurred that day” (ABC News, 2014b). Here, again, Wilson does not offer an apology—nor were his words treated as such.

Brown’s parents were interviewed numerous times following the shooting. Their lawyer, Benjamin Crump, expressed their sentiments and those of many others when he said, “I expected him to say, ‘My heart is heavy, my conscience is troubled.’” But “he didn’t say that.” While Wilson’s comments seem callow and uncaring, reflecting, in Crump’s words, “no regard for their child,” those comments also serve an important rhetorical purpose in bolstering the institution of the police and, by extension, the state (ABC News, 2014b). By tying the shooting and killing of Brown directly to the efficient and appropriate execution of his job, Wilson manages to take responsibility for the events and acknowledge their tragic nature but deny that he was in some way wrong in his actions. In effect, Wilson stated that the killing of Brown was an appropriate and even necessary performance of his duties, an appropriate an even necessary action for the maintenance of law and order. A mistake was made in this case—perhaps—but not one for which Wilson feels regret. He did what he was trained to do. Rather than question the system that trained him, Wilson insists that he had to identify the risk and protect himself in the face of it. His conscience is clear.¹⁵

Brown’s mother, Lesley McSpadden, does not, at least in her interviews, take on the institution of the police that produced Wilson, though she (in response to his disparaging of Brown’s upbringing) does question his rearing (Halpern, 2015). She takes on Wilson himself, who she calls “cold and malicious,” “evil,” and “devilish” in an interview with Al Jazeera America on August 5, 2015, one year after the shooting.

Early in the interview, McSpadden is asked: “Have you forgiven him?”

She replies, “Never.”

The interviewer then asks, “Why?”

“Why not?” McSpadden replies. “He won’t even admit what he did was wrong” (Al Jazeera America, 2015). In other words, no apology was offered. Why should forgiveness be?

McSpadden’s delivery is measured, careful, and quite powerful; her words are stirring, all the more heartrending for her calm demeanor and affect. The interviewer tries to get a heated response through the element of surprise, perhaps to goad her into a more telegenic version of anger, telling her about “a new interview that I don’t even think you are aware of with Darren Wilson in *The New Yorker* magazine” (Al Jazeera America, 2015). He reads excerpts to McSpadden that criticize Brown’s upbringing, his culture, and the values of his community. Essentially, the article intimates that Brown’s shooting was basically his own fault—which is to say, the shooting was not Wilson’s fault, and it was not the police’s fault, and it was not the state’s fault.

McSpadden is given the chance to engage with the excerpts and, in a way, to have her say with Wilson himself. She declines to legitimize the narrative of Brown’s culpability or the culpability of the culture in which he was raised, calling the magazine piece “a waste of an interview, a waste of air,” and Wilson “a waste of space.” The interviewer then pushes McSpadden to give more details about Brown. McSpadden talks about his leadership qualities, his familial ties, his respectability. The implication is clear: Wilson, the “waste of space,” can move unproblematically through the streets; Brown cannot. McSpadden’s role as a mother, of Brown’s as a good and respectable son, are underscored. We hear her story alongside her anger. Telling her story is another way of resisting and not forgiving.

When asked to discuss the surveillance video from the store that, according to Wilson, showed Brown engaged in a robbery, McSpadden insists that it does not show the whole story and agreed with the interviewer that it is “character assassination” (Al Jazeera America, 2015). Wilson’s denial of responsibility and critiques of his interview keeps Brown’s own behavior on the table and keeps the broader culpability of a racist system off of it, at least in these media discussions. Throughout, McSpadden keeps her cool—no money shot to be seen here. It is unfair that the weight of history placed this burden upon her, but she clearly knew the stakes for seeming under control. Her behavior and child-rearing were on the table, as were the behavior and child-rearing of all parents who lost a child to a police shooting and those of all Black mothers and partners whose stories are rarely heard centered. McSpadden tells her story, giving voice to her rage by rejecting the notion of forgiveness and letting the world see her emotion through her strongly worded dismissal of the magazine’s narrative. McSpadden keeps her cool by keeping her words measured and her body controlled.

Case 3: Samaria Rice

The shootings continued, as did the activism and protests. Black Lives Matter grew increasingly organized and widespread. The national conversation continued. But there were rather few interviews with the families of the victims: Police shootings were

common enough that most were not major news. This changed with the shooting death of a child: After 12-year-old Tamir Rice was shot and killed on November 22, 2014, his mother, Samaria Rice, noted in a press conference: “I have not yet received an apology from the police department or the city of Cleveland in regards to the killing of my son.” Instead, she got what her lawyers (Benjamin Crump, again, and Walter Madison) called a “pattern of disrespect,” demonstrated when “they try to justify what happened in any other way than to say, ‘We were wrong, we were at fault and we want to try to heal this family’” (NBC News, 2015). Rice was unlikely to get anything close to that from the city because an apology, a real apology, is an admission of guilt and an acceptance of responsibility. A state infrastructure would have to navigate that so-called “tragic conflict” very carefully and be very clear where exactly the fault lies. Would they blame admissions standards to the police force (Govier & Verwoerd, 2002)?¹⁶ Would they implicate the training protocols? Either approach would require the police to make some adjustments, and maybe offer some compensation, but it would allow the entire structure of who ought to be persecuted to remain untouched. There is responsibility and there is responsibility: The police are deeply invested in keeping the responsibility superficial.

In another nonapology, Cleveland mayor Frank Jackson subsequently said he was sorry for the “very insensitive” language used in the description of Rice in a legal filing and promised the city would file an amended version. This was a very, very low-stakes admission and commitment (NBC News, 2015).¹⁷ But Samaria Rice raised the stakes in the conversation by holding not just the officers but also the city accountable. She wanted an apology, but she never herself committed to forgiveness. She wielded her anger as a way to underscore the racism at stake, emphasizing her role as a mother of a young son. Because Samaria Rice demanded the apology itself, no one asked her about forgiveness without one.

Case 4: Audrey DuBose

Sometimes responsibility is undeniable. The July 19, 2015, shooting of 43-year-old unarmed man Samuel DuBose was among the first to be captured by body camera (Gates, 2016). Officer Ray Tensing was charged with murder. Audrey DuBose, Samuel’s mother, held a press conference after her son’s death that was couched in highly religious and deeply militaristic terms, calling supporters soldiers and referring to the battlefield where she would take her place among others similarly affected. She was asked by a reporter if she saw “it in your heart to forgive this officer whether he’s convicted or not?” DuBose replied, “If he asks for forgiveness ... oh yeah, I can forgive him. I can forgive anybody” because “God forgave us.” Her Christian convictions strongly framed her relationship to questions of forgiveness, calling her to that form of religious observance regardless of the emotions’ difficulty but with certain constraints.¹⁸ In her intonation, DuBose placed strong emphasis on that original “if.” Tensing had not asked for forgiveness. DuBose would withhold forgiveness and focus on justice until he did ask for forgiveness. He never did.¹⁹

Case 5: Valerie Castile

Philando Castile was fatally shot by Officer Jeronimo Yanez on July 6, 2016. His mother and uncle, Valerie and Clarence Castile, were interviewed on CNN the next day. The interviewer noted at the outset, “We know that this is your first interview” (CNN, 2016). It was a big get for the news outlet. The Castiles were ready with thoughtful and measured statements about the persecution of Black people by the police in America. Valerie stated early that “Our African American men, women, and children are being executed by the police, and there are no consequences.” She later noted, “They’re still saying there’s no profiling. But it is. We’re being hunted every day. It’s a silent war against African American people as a whole.” Clarence continued: “It’s sad. We think we’re in a land of plenty, freedom, and things like that.” Valerie agreed: “We’re never free” (CNN, 2016).

In their interviews, the Castiles unstintingly placed blame on the officer, the system that produced him, and the state that allowed and even encouraged the systemic shooting of Black people. The interviewer did not ask about forgiveness. Instead, she underscored, “You’re not asking for much except your questions be answered, and for justice.” She asked for clarification: “If the police officer is fired from the force, is that justice?” Both Castiles reply with a clear “no”; they respond that only “jail time” would suffice, because he was a guilty man (CNN, 2016).²⁰ In an interview the following day, the Castiles emphasize that the officer committed a crime and should be “put in custody, treated equally,” and “treated like any criminal. Be put in custody, handcuffed, fingerprinted, bail, Get an attorney. And go through all the due process ... he should be treated like any other criminal” (CNN Transcripts, 2016). Philando’s sister Alize Castile later emphasized the extent to which this was a systemic pattern of racial violence: “It’s just like we’re animals. It’s basically modern-day lynching that we’re seeing going on, except we’re not getting hung by a tree anymore—we’re getting killed on camera” (CBS News, 2016). Alize could have added “by the police.” The state is not only condoning and supporting these killings but also carrying them out.

While the Castiles were never directly asked if they forgave the officer (despite Shaun King’s article to the contrary), the issue of forgiveness was raised on July 8, 2016. The interviewer carefully introduced the issue of violence, saying “I’m not making a statement about you here. But I want to talk about Congressman John Lewis and something that he tweeted out here.” He continued, quoting Lewis: “I was beaten bloody by police officers but I never hated them. I said thank you for your service.” The interviewer then asked the Castiles if “protesters will listen to him” in his plea, echoing Dr. Martin Luther King, for peaceful protests. Valerie answered: “They may. They should.” She emphasized that protests need not be violent, subtly speaking to all the ways in which violence gets read in to the Black body. She insisted, “You can exercise your right to demonstrate and be peaceful.” Valerie then tied it back to Philando, noting, “My son was a peaceful man.” She reiterated: “We don’t condone violence.” Though she was not asked directly, Valerie took this opportunity to insist that “the thing about forgiving, you can forgive sometimes, but you’ll never forget. But he took my son’s life. I can’t forget that, and I don’t forgive him. Bottom line” (CNN Transcripts, 2016; Margalit, 2004).²¹ Valerie stays angry as part of her own peaceful protest.

The interview concluded with an explicit statement of something that had been circulating around the Castiles from their first appearance, when the reporter said that they “both are so reasonable” in their demands for justice. The interviewer asked, “How are you able to do this? How are you able to get on television and speak so clearly?” This question is partly a recognition of the tremendous pain they are in following the death of Philando and admiration for the clarity and effectiveness of their message in the face of anger and outrage. It is also, in its way, a reflection of surprise that they are so visibly circumventing the angry Black people trope while still effectively insisting on the right to retribution, justice, and outrage. They answered this rather strange and intrusive question—particularly the loaded word “clearly” that recapitulates so many racist tropes around “well-spokenness”—by emphasizing that they had a message and needed for it to be heard. They were well aware of the multiple ways their claims could be undermined by their affect, so they might have felt compelled to be especially careful. Philando was aware of this constraint as well, as was his girlfriend, who referred to the police officer as “sir” during the incident even as her boyfriend bled to death in front of her. Clarence spelled it out explicitly, noting that their narrative had two important pieces, and both could be nullified by their delivery by those quick to find reasons not to hear. They wanted people to pay attention to the systemic racial violence but at the same time to know that Philando himself was a decent and good person:

The composure is coming from ... hav[ing] a message to share. And being irate, distraught, you know, sad and not being able to focus and get this message across. It's not the best thing. The best thing for us is to be cool. It's to be able to explain how we feel about our nephew, what type of person my sister's son was, you know, and what type of legacy that he leaves behind. How he affected people in a positive way throughout his short-lived life. (CNN Transcripts, 2016)

Discussion

The news context obscures the entertainment value of anger and grief that partly motivates public requests for forgiveness during television interviews with families of police shooting victims. The other motivation is stabilization of the social status quo; the Black women analyzed here do not satisfy the demand for absolution, and they insist on their right to rage and anger. Their rhetoric suggests a strong awareness of the unfair expectations of the public platform, which they navigate strategically by using language to voice their pain while retaining control by resisting the pressures of a certain kind of emotional performativity.

Anything other than composure would be read as the out-of-control ranting of the violent Black body. As writer Britni Danielle (2015) put it:

Because of our history in America, Black people aren't given space to be publicly angry because when we are, it feeds into deep-seated stereotypes about our supposed animalistic nature. Far too often, expressing ourselves forcefully is categorized as being “angry” and “combative”; calling people out on their inconsistencies is seen as an “attack”; flooding the streets in protest is regularly called a riot. In America, Black folks are supposed to swallow everyday microaggressions, or even not-so-subtle racism, because pointing them out means we're too obsessed with race and just want to complain.

The pressure to deny anger that Danielle points to holds even around the unjustified death of children.

In the television news interviews and press conferences with families of police-murdered Black men that I analyze in this article, the responses of Black women to forgiveness requests indicate that they are well aware of the way supposedly angry, supposedly violent affect gets judged on the publicly displayed Black body; after all, their loved ones were killed because of it. They tend to keep their cool on television. They have to if they want to be heard. They have to if they do not want to be killed. (Sometimes even keeping your cool is not enough. According to video footage, Philando Castile kept his cool with the police before he was shot, and he was killed anyway.) They have internalized the disciplining of the state to make their anger nonthreatening and palatable (Browne, 2015).

Interviewers requested forgiveness from Esaw Garner, Lesley McSpadden, Samaria Rice, Audrey DuBose, and Valerie Castile, possibly but maybe not on behalf of the shooter, who has possibly but maybe not himself acknowledged that there was any wrongdoing. So, the interviewee is asked to grant forgiveness to someone who has not asked for it but is really being asked to absolve the system—the institution of the police, and maybe the state as a whole—that produced the individual shooter. This move both acknowledges that the shooter is part of the system and includes the system in the individual's absolution, while at the same time entrenching the system's moral authority by emphasizing the individual and exceptional nature of the act (for more on justice in these cases, see Park & Lee, 2016). In so doing, multiple crises are sutured: The moral authority of the police, and thus the state, is once again made unambiguous; White supremacy is absolved of systemic wrongdoing by rendering the problem unique and specific rather than general; the claims of Black persecution are nullified as the claims for retribution are evacuated; and the possibility of a challenge to the existing order is neutralized. And, of course, the network gets the ratings. That is a lot of work done by one forgiveness request (Kampf, 2011a).

But there can be resistance. In fact, in the cases I examine, racialized forgiveness is never granted. In these interviews, Black women refuse to be disciplined by forgiveness and refuse to give up on anger, which, following Lorde (1981), means refusing to give up on resisting racism both on the individual level and the structural level. The anger and rage of Black women is a vital and activist part of their experience of loss; as their words insist, their loss is not just of the life of a loved one but the space to negotiate how to live with that state-perpetrated loss as part of a long history of state violence. The responses of Black women to what I see as an attempt to erase their anger and, indeed, their right to express or even experience emotion lies at the heart of this analysis. Even as they insist on the productive and necessary anger, they must incorporate bodily discipline as a strategy of both effective communication and survival.

Conclusion

After 2016, explicit requests for forgiveness declined. As the narrative shifted toward exploring the explicit pattern of discrimination and racialized shootings, such discussions seemed increasingly inappropriate. Public organizing and protests, particularly

around the Black Lives Matter movement, demonstrated the centrality of anger as a way to confront systemic racism. Interviewers began to understand what Black women always already knew: Anger is important. However, Black women continue to be strategic in how they display rage in the public sphere. The requirement that anger be expressed politely serves to discipline protest more broadly; the rhetorical notion of the “middle ground” between police and Black Lives Matter emphasizes solutions rather than continued violence. Given that public protestors of police violence are being managed (and sometimes arrested) by the very people they are protesting, this approach very quickly shifts to controlling the protestors who agitate for change, rather than challenging those who represent and maintain the status quo. This middle ground, in which both sides avoid violence, becomes another way to discipline and suppress the voices of protest whose claims are filtered through the ways they are performed. Demeanor becomes the new mediating and disciplining force as forgiveness has been revealed to be inappropriate, particularly as the object of forgiveness is increasingly unclear. Both individual officers and the system itself have become implicated as the shootings and deaths did not stop—and have not stopped.

This is an ongoing crisis, and one that apologies and forgiveness cannot now suture as the underlying racism of the system become ever more explicit. Black women should not be expected to perform forgiveness to save society as it is currently structured. Instead, they can stay angry, which is a necessary conduit for creating long-term social change. For the system itself to be challenged, however, racism itself has to be acknowledged as a problem (for more, see Harvey, 1995). The public and centered anger of Black women is a huge part of that process. For many—namely, the perpetrators and beneficiaries of White supremacy—racism not only is not a problem but also is the necessary condition for the orderly functioning of the state. The crisis for those people is that the authority of the police is being challenged, not just in individual cases but as part of an ongoing national conversation. The law continues to buttress the authority of the police, explicitly rejecting assertions of an underlying and institutional problem, and placing the burden on grieving families to forgive and restore the uneasy status quo. Racialized forgiveness requests underscore the problem of structural oppression, attempting to silence Black women’s anger and obscuring their voices while asking them to absolve and save the system. When Black women are asked on television to forgive the police who shot their loved ones, they are being asked to suture societal crises at great personal sacrifice. And they are asked to do it while performing personal control and emotional discipline. As we have seen, many Black women have resisted the impossible demand to forgive, heal, and save society, while at the same time strategically adhering to the pressure to remain emotionally in control.

National protests and demonstrations are clear indications of a problem. The need for families to insist on their right to anger and retribution speaks to the continuing attempts to delegitimize their claims. Ongoing forgiveness rhetoric continues to place the emotional burden on grieving Black women to excuse both individuals and the system itself. Through strategic rejections of these requests, Black women insist on their anger and their unique marginalization as Black women and Black mothers and lovers, while at the same time insisting on their right to give voice to their own experiences. It is not their job to suture the crisis. It is not their job to comment on and condemn

instances of violence within social movements. It is not their job to be the middle ground between the police and the Black Lives Matter movement. It is not their job to entertain the masses through the performance of forgiveness. It is not their job to forgive—especially not without an apology, but even with one.

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Notes

1. Devega (2015) and King (2016) include lists of corresponding acts of violence against White people for which corresponding forgiveness requests were not made. For a take that explicitly explores the role of religion, Stacey Patton (2015) discusses Black families, religion, and forgiveness. It is also important to note that Valerie Castile was in fact not asked the question about forgiveness by the CNN anchor. Rather, the interviewer introduced the notion of peaceful protest, and Valerie Castile responded that she did not condone violence but also would neither forgive nor forget the perpetrator.
2. Interviewer forgiveness requests are likely highly geographically specific. Given both the racialized context and the influence of confession models, this particular phenomenon may be limited to the United States.
3. For a personal example of this phenomenon, see John L. Jackson (2015).
4. I refer here to sexual violence in particular.
5. There are numerous studies documenting that women apologize more than men. The blame effect becomes even more pronounced among low socioeconomic status women. For more, see Bettina Spencer (2016).
6. Responses on the part of the individual shooter and/or the police express condolences or regret without actually apologizing.
7. These requests are another act in the social drama/apology discourse: the directive speech act that is made after a transgression (requests for apology) or reparation (requests for forgiveness).
8. For a humorous take on the phenomenon of women apologizing, see Comedy Central (2015).
9. Journalists may intervene in social dramas to elicit apologies in order to turn bad news into good, thereby participating in the maintenance of the social order and legitimizing the work of journalism in enforcement of social norms. Forgiveness requests do similar work in orchestrating reconciliation and harmony, though in these cases of racialized forgiveness the attempts always failed.
10. The Garners eventually won their civil suit out of court for an award of \$5.9 million.
11. This is very much in keeping with true live television.
12. Press conference questions can also be highly aggressive.
13. This is a classic nonapology, blurring the identity of the wrongdoer, the transgression, and the victim.
14. While children are familiar with the denial of responsibility when they apologize to adults, peer-to-peer apology interactions among children differ significantly than those between adults or between adults and children.
15. Benjamin Disraeli was an early endorser of the institutional #sorrynotsorry with his famous statement, “Never explain, never complain.” He acknowledged that mistakes will always be

made in the execution of public duties, but apologies would compromise future actions in that role.

16. This conflict is particularly acute in cases of litigation or claims for material compensation.
17. The family later settled a \$6 million lawsuit with the city.
18. Religious and particularly Christian convictions play a strong role in forgiveness narratives.
19. Tensing's first trial ended with a mistrial due to a deadlocked jury.
20. In this case, jail could serve as revenge and/or justice.
21. This is likely the quote to which King was referring earlier. There is strong resonance here with the well-known Holocaust idiom "Never forget, never forgive," coined by Abba Kovner.

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