Introduction

More Than Our Pain: Affect and Emotion in the Era of Black Lives Matter

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In 2013, following the acquittal of George Zimmerman in the killing of Trayvon Martin, the Black Lives Matter Global Network coalesced as a call to action demanding justice for Black Americans killed by police and vigilantes. As videos of black death scrawled across device screens in what felt like an unending feedback loop, more violence unfolded as protestors in the streets of Ferguson, Missouri, in 2014 were targeted with tear gas, rubber bullets, fists, batons, and tanks. The protestors' grievances were largely dismissed in mainstream media coverage of the events. Black anger and hurt was manipulated in the nightly news as outpourings of collective anguish, grief, and righteous rage became media stories of individual looting and greed.

Using tactics to spectacularize death and criminalize victims and protesters, the media avoided root problems of racialized violence in the United States. As Brittney Cooper wrote in August 2014, "Nothing makes white people more uncomfortable than black anger. But nothing is more threatening to black people on a systemic level than white anger. It won't show up in mass killings. It will show up in overpolicing, mass incarceration, the gutting of the social safety net, and the occasional dead black kid."[1] Black Lives Matter activists and protesters called for an emotionally honest accounting of the racism and harm that African Americans face. Moreover, they provided a space for mourning and healing denied by the national media.

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This volume *More than Our Pain: Affect and Emotion in the Black Lives Matter Movement* explores expressions of grief and rage as well as love and joy central to the movement from 2013 forward. In the streets, outpourings of grief met with collective indignation, a solemn funeral send-up, a registering of centuries of grievances, and a wave of love—these emotions knitting a shattered community together (see figure I.1). Black joy and love brought communities together when the weight of trauma, pain, and murder—historical and contemporary—was too much to bear. As poet Dominique Christina laments in part III of this volume, "I have forgotten how to cry in this country, I open my mouth, I capsize. I barely woman. I barely human. I wolf or something like it. I sugarcane and long memory.

Figure I.1. Andrew Padilla, Mike Brown protests led by a young girl in St. Louis, October 2014. © A. Padilla.

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I cotton field and long blade. I eulogy. I suicide note. I manifesto. I rage. I grief. No tears left."

The plurality—as well as the potency—of these emotions calls into being important forms of national and international solidarity. Critical also at this moment was the work protestors and activists did to bring attention to the specific affects and emotions that pervade white supremacy, which largely presents them as rational and neutral. As detractors of the Black Lives Matter movement sought to dismiss its grievances and demands, the gap between differing emotional worlds, or what B. Cooper called *sentient knowledges*, became abundantly evident. How can a single event provoke such profoundly different emotional responses amongst different individuals and groups? As Erin Stephens writes in her chapter in this volume, Black Lives Matter organizers cultivated emotional resources for movement work, attempting to mitigate the ability of "White emotion" to undermine legitimate grievances and claims of social injury.

During the Ferguson protests in 2014, activist Deray McKesson tweeted a reminder that "we are more than our pain."[2] McKesson's words pushed back against the flattening of emotions and the distractive and race-baiting logic of the media, which labeled the uprising as a riot, thereby conjuring stereotypes of black criminality. Taking inspiration from this phrase, *More than Our Pain* asserts that affect and emotion have been central to the organizing and uprisings seen across U.S. cities such as Ferguson, Baltimore, and Charlotte (and many more) since 2014. The sentient knowledges unleashed during these moments have been central to the many artists, writers, and cultural producers who have given them visual, verbal, and political form. Many of them ask a shared question of how can one artistically represent a life that has been severed from political representation? Feelings are not psychological states beyond social meaning, as Sara Ahmed points out. Rather, they are social and cultural practices deeply related to the power structure of society. They are a form of meaning-making whereby both self and society are constituted.[3] *More than Our Pain* takes Ahmed's claim as central to our work of grappling with whose grievances are registered on the national political stage. Where—in what spaces—do we live our emotional lives in their fullest or in their most reduced capacities? How do we do the work of re-humanization when our emotions are erased or delegitimated? As Yomaira Figueroa-Vásquez and Jessica Marie Johnson write in their chapter in part I, "We need new words for what we do, for how and why we stay, for the labor of making black love and black joy and black pleasure in a world of this."

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More than Our Pain: Affect and Emotion in the Black Lives Matter Movement offers multiple viewpoints on how affect and emotion are key to Black Lives Matter Global Network's radical modes of collective assembly and protest. The authors in community in this volume assert the Black Lives Matter movement as a human rights movement, rather than a civil rights movement, which has relied on the foregrounding of emotions erased from the public sphere by acts of violence and deliberate political exclusion as well as those forged in the bonds of communal protest. It should be remembered that the movement itself originated in an act of love when co-founder Alicia Garza, following the acquittal of George Zimmerman in the killing of Trayvon Martin, penned a love letter declaring "black people. I love you. I love us."[4] *More than Our Pain* centers and supports these emotions and affects unleashed by the Black Lives Matter movement in order to reclaim their misuse in the media, propel their resistance into the future, and honor the spirit in which Black Lives Matter organizing has transpired.

Affect and Emotion in Social Justice Activism

In adopting multiple affective strategies (rage-filled raucous voices, sagging pants and hip-hop ethos, belligerent refusals to be forgotten, high-fiving and hip-shaking practices of freedom and joy), Black Lives Matter actors marked a clear break from the civil rights–era activists. When conservatives and reactionaries in the 1950s and 1960s identified civil rights activism with rage and rebellion, many black leaders trained activists to dress in Sunday clothes and turn the other cheek; that is, they countered false narratives about protesters as thugs and criminals with images of God-fearing, disciplined young black Americans. As the wisdoms of Black Feminism have shown, there are steep costs to suppressing the intense feelings that result from racial discrimination, as internalized rage results in self-destructive behavior, an inability to display vulnerability, and lashing out at others who care most about you.[5] In contrast, the Black Lives Matter movement in the early twenty-first century makes no qualms about black rage and the prospects of rebellion. Affect and emotion—no longer the antithesis of rationality as traditional political theory presents it—have moved from the margin to the center of the movement. Accordingly, *More than Our Pain* explores how affect and emotion have driven collective action in the face of this *new nadir* in twenty-first-century race relations in the United States.

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Like Black Lives Matter activists today, leaders of the modern Civil Rights Movement channeled emotion strategically in the social justice campaigns of the 1950s and 1960s. Specifically, they proved adept at training activists to show love and, at times, sadness to achieve moral suasion. The affective power of grief, for example, galvanized the Civil Rights Movement following the open-casket funeral of Emmett Till, in which the mutilated body of a black teenage boy showed the horrors of Jim Crow terrorism to the world (see figure I.2).[6] Louis Till, the young child's father, communicates dismay and tragedy as he stares at the viewer. He also stands firm, clutching his wife Mamie Till, mother of the slain boy, whose catatonic

Figure I.2. David Jackson, *Emmett Till*, 1955. Printed in *Jet Magazine*, 1964. "Just like mothers before her, choked, hurt Mrs. Mamie Bradley viewed gory features of her son, Emmett, for last time."

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glance at her son's defiled body belies the deep grief that occasioned it, the incomprehension family and friends feel when someone they love dies (or gets murdered) inexplicably.

The emotions of love and joy, on the other hand, were perhaps best captured in a photo taken after the Brown vs. Board of Education of decision in 1954 (see figure I.3).[7] A dignified mother sat beside her daughter on the U.S. Supreme Court steps, her arm drawing the young girl near, as she appeared to explain the decisions that banned racial segregation in public schools. Social justice campaign leaders carefully curated these signs of affect and emotion to showcase the humanity and peacefulness of civil rights protesters, who were defying racial stereotypes of black Americans as criminals and rabble rousers. Expressions of anger and rage found no place in these strategies; to show the full spectrum of black American emotional responses to Jim Crow may have risked reifying racial prejudice.

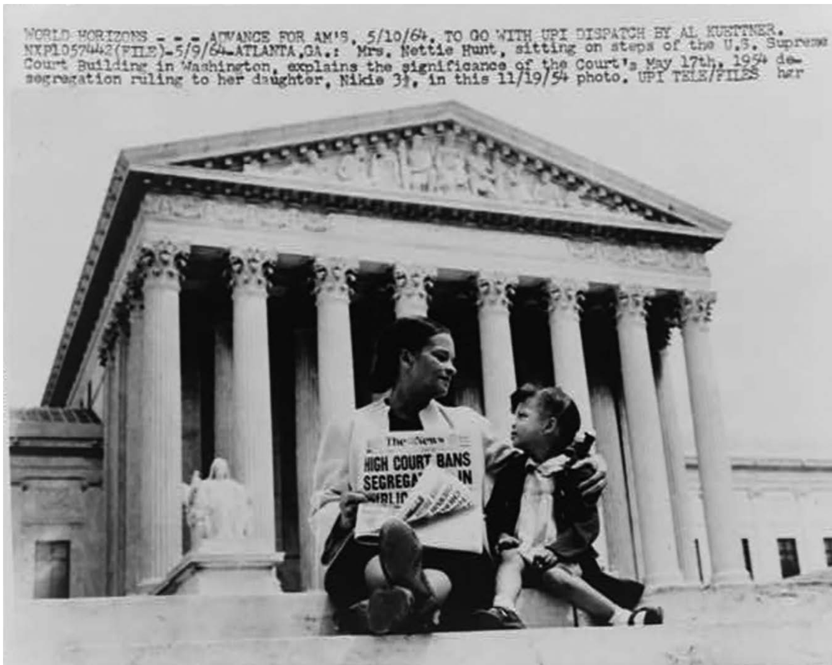

Figure I.3. Mrs. Nettie Hunt and daughter Nikie on the steps of the Supreme Court, 1954. Gelatin silver print. © New York World-Telegram & Sun Collection, Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress (97) Digital ID #cph 3c27042.

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Fear, anger, and disgust were emotions expressed in private, not in public, and certainly not as the political message intended by direct actions; civil rights activists hoped to inspire righteous indignation in onlookers and bystanders rather than unleash their own that ostensibly fueled the social justice protest. Activists planned and practiced nonviolent direct actions precisely so they would not devolve into expressions of emotions, especially anger, which could feed popular stereotypes that black Americans were rabble rousing and disturbing the peace criminally. The dramatization of Jim Crow terrorism in the 1950s and 1960s required activists to show stoicism as victims of heinous racial attacks, so that other U.S. citizens could witness how viciously Jim Crow sympathizers treated black Americans for trying to desegregate public spaces and to vote in U.S. elections. Expressing anger, in their eyes, would have weakened the moral impact of watching black Americans get dehumanized without any provocation or physical retaliation.

In contrast, Andrew Padilla's photograph of the 2013 #Hoodiesup protest for Trayvon Martin in the Bronx shows a mother holding her child in a loving embrace while raising her in a defiant black power salute (see figure I.4). The photograph reveals the interconnected nature of defiance and love during a moment of intensified public conversations about the fears

Figure I.4. Andrew Padilla, NYC #Hoodiesup protest for Trayvon Martin in the South Bronx, summer 2013. © A. Padilla.

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that black parents have for the safety of their children. BLM activists were redefining rage as a righteous response to the derogation of human rights. By deploying this emotion in protest tactics and rhetoric, they carved out a space for the articulation and dramatization of anger, disgust, and rage in nonviolent direct actions. More important, as in this photography, they elicited affect and emotion to catalyze allies; the goal is not only to trigger empathy but to provoke action. Another photograph taken by Padilla during this protest reveals the strength and dedication of committed activists, who drew on their emotions as a source of energy during the march, demanding the gathering audience to witness their pain (see figure I.5). Righteous rage, when harnessed by social justice activists, can impassion communities and inspire an international human rights campaign by spotlighting the tragedies of injustice and fueling protest with indignation that follows.

More than Our Pain examines the strategic deployment of affect and emotion in the mobilization efforts of the Black Lives Matter Global Network. This volume insists that the intentional deployment of affect and emotion in the political mobilization efforts of BLM activists marks an innovation of the nonviolent direct-action strategies of the modern Civil Rights Movement. *More than Our Pain* advances the important work of scholars

Figure I.5. Andrew Padilla, NYC #Hoodiesup protest for Trayvon Martin in the South Bronx, summer 2013. © A. Padilla.

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who are identifying continuities and discontinuities between the BLM and other social justice campaigns in the black liberation struggle. As historian Jeanne Theoharis explains, much of the early work on the Black Lives Matter movement analyzed the campaigned comparatively, noting similarities and differences with the modern Civil Rights Movement:

> Key similarities exist between the civil rights movement and BLM—from the forces they are up against to the criticisms they encounter to the expansive vision of justice they seek. Like the young activists propelling BLM, civil rights activists were regarded as dangerous and reckless by many and as downright desirous by others. The movement was pushed forward by young people, who made many people nervous sixty years ago, just as they do today. Thus, substantively considering new movements for racial justice in the context of the civil rights movement means seeing the ways they are tied to, rather than set apart from, this longer movement history.[8]

More than Our Pain aims to show, however, that Black Lives Matter activists have innovated new strategies and tactics to advance social equality, specifically innovations in technology and protest strategy that distinguish them from the modern Civil Rights Movement.

For example, *More than Our Pain* contributes to an increasingly nuanced investigation of the historical contingencies of the Black Lives Matter movement. One nuance receiving considerable investigation is the use of social media technologies. Historian Barbara Ransby has called social media the site where Black Lives Matter was "incubated": "Social media is the place where news of outrageous injustices is disseminated and people are called to action. It is the soapbox and public square of this generation, where many of the debates about strategy, tactics, and ideas are argued out in sound-bite form, for good or ill. In many ways, it is where [the Black Lives Matter movement/Movement for Black Lives] was incubated."[9] The use of platforms like Twitter and Facebook have facilitated the international Movement for Black Lives, "a critical and important tool for publicity and for creating a forum for debate and politicization."[10]

Sociologists and communications scholars have also conceded that social media transformed the social justice campaigns of the early twenty-first century. Ray, Brown, and Laybourn, for instance, have studied the social media data to understand the ways that "the evolution of social

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movements and the sustainability of collective identities."[11] The innovative use of social media to mobilize a social justice campaign both national and internationally reveals the historical contingencies that differentiate Black Lives Matter from other black liberation struggles. "Social media provide," Ray and colleagues concluded, "a portal to combine theoretical frameworks in identity formation and collective action with methodological advances in technology to capture the creation and sustainability of social movement narratives as they are occurring."[12]

Innovative use of affect and emotion joins technological evolutions as defining characteristics of the Black Lives Matter movement. The murder of Trayvon Martin is widely held as the clarion call to protest. This was a moment of national outrage in black American communities nationwide, captured powerfully by Patrisse Khan-Cullors, one of the movement's founders:

> I read that a white man—that's how the killer was identified and self-identified until we raised the issue of race—had killed a Black boy and was not going to be charged. . . . I start cursing. I am outraged. In what fucking world does this make sense? I put out a call: Have people heard about 17-year-old Trayvon Martin? I have loved so many young men who look just like this boy. I feel immediate grief, and as my friends begin to respond, they, too, are grief stricken. We meet at my house. We circle up. A multiracial group of roughly 15 people dedicated to ending white supremacy and creating a world in which all of our children can thrive. We process. We talk about what we've seen and experienced in our lives. We cry.[13]

Khan-Cullors gave voice to anger and frustration when confronted with vigilante, Jim Crow justice. This was not the blind rage that devolved into riots and chaos but, rather, the righteous rage that convened a meeting of mourners to remember the dead and to plan for "a world in which all of our children can thrive."

Moreover, *More than Our Pain* reveals how the Black Lives Matter slogan affirms black humanity in part by echoing affect and emotion on a wide range from joy to rage. Black Lives Matter activists insist that black Americans live complex, feeling lives that get reduced to stereotypes and devalued by state institutions. The stereotype that black Americans are predisposed to criminality and violence has helped police officers kill unarmed black Americans without repercussion and municipalities finance the prison

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industrial complex with impoverished black populations. So, quite reasonably, the slogan responds defiantly to the wanton destruction of black life in the hands of police, prisons, and vigilantes: a sarcastic reminder that life should be honored at all times, even when the person is perceived racially as black. This is one half of the work "Black Lives Matter" does as political rhetoric.

The other half of the work is valorizing black American culture and community. Black Lives Matter activists deploy the slogan as an affirmation of what matters to black Americans—life. Black Lives Matter *because* Black Americans love; they treasure family, friends, community, and nation; they fear state-sanctioned terrorist acts from police brutality to mass incarceration; they mourn the men and women, young and old, whose lives have been harmed and terrorized; and they protest and persevere in the face of racism and oppression. The "Black Lives Matter" slogan thus demands the re-humanization of the black American interpersonal experiences.

In turn, Black Lives Matter activists have innovatively integrated affect and emotion in their protest tactics. They have used anger, joy, fear, love, and other emotions in their direct actions and writings to dramatize for local and national audiences that *black lives matter*, for being complicated, feeling members of U.S. civil society, and thus not a myth whose transhistorical racial stigma has rendered expendable. Black lives matter because the black American men and women losing their lives were sons and daughters, husbands and wives, fathers and mothers; because they belonged to and were beloved in their communities; because they were loved; because their death devastated those left in the wake. The affect and emotion incorporated in Black Lives Matter tactics enriches the meaning of the slogan and suggests a fruitful approach to studying the social justice campaign.

Shaping Collective Protest and Speech through Affect and Emotion in this Book and Beyond

Defining affect as the capacity to affect and to be affected, authors in this volume analyze three main emotions that BLM activists have used to mobilize the movement: grief for the injured and lost, rage at many forms of violence visited upon black and brown life, and the joy of celebrating the vitality of black life in the face of those who would harm it. Grief articulates rage, which, in turn, catalyzes collective action. Indeed, as Lauren Alleyne crafts her "Elegy, for Tamir Rice," she begins by invoking that it was going to be a curse poem, hexing the man who killed Rice with "an

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unchained melody of rage" that would haunt his nightmares. However, she charts another course to redeem Rice's suffering through writing a prayer poem instead. In it, she constructs a radical freedom, where freedom is a verb conjugated by the power and beauty of black life. Like Alleyne, Shanna Benjamin also expounds on the radical possibilities of black rage. In her chapter "The Uses of Anger: Wanda Coleman and the Poetry of Black Rage," Benjamin reveals how anger is a useable art. Anger affirms our presence in the world, asserts our subjectivity despite persistent erasure or stereotyping, and expresses vulnerability even as it might be misunderstood by most. Benjamin portrays the poet Wanda Coleman as a mistress of black rage whose careful attention to poetic form provides an opportunity for our catharsis while also critiquing racist inequities. But anger alone cannot heal the Black community.

Beyond mounting mourning and grief as a collective loss, the Black Lives Matter movement embodies other emotions in the struggle against injustice, such as anger, fear, resentment, but also joy in shared communion of resistance. By asking other questions as well about how, for example, black excellence and joy is often distorted and turned into pathology, and why rage, instead of being seen as righteous insurgency, is more often represented as criminality, the Black Lives Matter Global Network puts affect at the core of contemporary failures of democratic values, but also uses it as the precondition of future change. Emotions can come from an individual, but they are also the fabric that holds the social body together. Javon Johnson writes in his chapter "Black Joy in the Time of Ferguson" that "our bodies harbor knowledge, and in these moments every smile, head nod, hip shake, and high five is an exchange of embodied truths that black joy is phenomenally transformational." Johnson's chapter extols the healing beauty of black joy.

In appeals to "stop killing us," BLM activists demand the most basic of human rights. They recall Third World Feminist organizing in the United States and the 1979 march in Boston against the murders of Black women. "We cannot live without our lives" read one banner held during the march. Here the emotional appeal is most urgent and emphasizes how deadly and dehumanizing our contemporary formations of power and capital are. In part II of this book, authors examine how affect and emotions shape collective action. The urgency of affect within the Black Lives Matter movement gained traction in a moment of the rise of post-truth politics where a speaker's emotion is vaguely, if at all, linked to reality or the verifiability of their speech. The balkanization of media consumption amidst assertions of "fake news" created a moment in which people increasingly choose their own set of

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facts, most often associated with their preferred set of "cultural values."[14] As affect is still increasingly presented as anchorlessly adrift from factual reality, the power of the Black Lives Matter movement's use of affect is rooted in techniques of witnessing. Witnessing records not only the devastation of violence within the community, but also calls attention to the specifics of how this violence is absorbed into mainstream news narratives—making these crucial actions invisible even when conducted in a sphere of total visibility. Robin Kelley has written about both the importance and trauma of this witnessing. "While every generation of black Americans has experienced unrelenting violence," Kelley writes, "this is the first one compelled to witness virtually all of it, to endure the snuffing out of black lives in real time, looped over and over again, until the next murder knocks it off the news. We are also talking about a generation that has lived through two of the longest wars in U.S. history, raised on a culture of spectacle where horrific acts of violence are readily available on their smartphones."[15] Witnessing, under the conditions of spectacularization, erasure, and gaslighting, makes this task all the more critical, yet difficult to bear.

We must at times, as Yomaira Figueroa-Vásquez and Jessica Marie Johnson tell us in their chapter "Hoodrat Praxis in a Time of Love and Fury" refuse to bear witness. We cannot participate in the narratives and discourses that erase us. "Black diasporic women have spent centuries cultivating an insurgent, femme-loving, audacious practice of freedom whose roots lie in creative and defiant resistance to their own enslavement," they write. We are united with our *forefemmes* in a refusal to submit and our belligerent fight for our kin. Similarly, Erin Stephens reminds us that Black women's strength, born in pain and struggle, is not magical, nor endless. Black women's emotions are likewise not a commodity to be consumed at will. Witnessing to this strength and pain is a labor of both love and fury. Poet Lauren Alleyne witnesses in this hoodrat praxis that they speak of. In her "The Hoodie Stands Witness, *for Trayvon Martin*," Alleyne has Martin's sweatshirt tell his story, from the banal objects held in its pockets to comfort it gave Martin as the bullet ripped through them. Alleyne conjures the fabric as a bandage, a second sweaty skin, that held him in his last moments.

More than the Pain also contends that a grammar of the body—dominant bodies and stigmatized bodies, armored bodies and bodies in pain—lies at the core of the twenty-first-century black freedom struggle. The Black Lives Matter movement proceeds from the point of asking whose life counts as a life that is protected, cared for, and grievable. Emotional rejections of extrajudicial violence and dehumanization surface as powerful weapons

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that *body* forth political representation in spaces where black humanity is marginalized, if not erased. Derek Conrad Murray's chapter "Bodies That Matter" makes this point forcefully in his discussion of vulnerability in the over-determined realm of black visuality, the image of blackness.

Locating the source of Black Lives Matter activism in body and affect sheds new light on the movement's innovative protest strategies, which challenge the erasure of Black life with *embodied* politics. At die-ins, protesters form a collective corpse by lying on the ground for four minutes—a metaphor for the four hours Michael Brown's lifeless body lay on the Ferguson, Missouri, street. Their collective rebirth at the end of the performance is a statement of the strength of collective action in the face of its erasure. Similarly, when BLM supporters raise their hands and chant *hands up, don't shoot*, they enact an affective form of political speech. As protesters face down a riot squad with military grade weapons, *hands up, don't shoot* counters an armored fascist body with the fragility of painfully exposed flesh.

Affect and emotion offer productive insights into how black social justice activists mobilize for change. For example, Siona Wilson's chapter " 'I can't breathe': Resistance between Body, Word and Image" points out that the phrase *I can't breathe* used by Black Lives Matter activists became more than a reference to Eric Garner's death in 2014: it was also an expansive metaphor for the feelings of exasperation and despair at the failed criminal justice system in the United States—a call to unify in mourning for the men and women whose lives have been hurt and/or lost due to police brutality. Affective work also addresses the denial of racial injustice implicit in phrases like "all lives matter." Joseph Flynn's chapter "Puzzle Pieces on the Floor" offers practical steps for overcoming what he calls "white fatigue" with issues of racism and social justice. This fatigue makes it difficult if not impossible to see how the long history of racial violence and stereotyping affects society in all aspects, especially the criminal justice system.

Finally, the goal of *More than Our Pain* is to show how affect and emotion are implemented as strategies for successful collective action and protest. The volume's contributors explore grief, rage, love, and joy as responses and resistance to lethal police violence in order to uplift, unite, and form a contemporary praxis of assembly, protest, and self-care. *More than Our Pain* also condemns the ways in which the mass media has represented, defanged, and sold black affect in their coverage of the Black Lives Matter movement. Examining black rage as a righteous force for change and black joy as a shield against oppression, *More than Our Pain* offers a space where the black radical tradition is celebrated and where the next steps toward an equitable, democratic, and just society will be inspired.

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