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PHOTOGRAPHY ESSAY

Photos can show protests' complexity—or they can perpetuate old lies

Pictures from demonstrations around the U.S. can become powerful symbols, but some only tell one side of the story.

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One morning last week, a photograph made me mad. It sounds odd to say it that way, but that's the way it felt. It wasn't the image itself that annoyed me. It was the way it was used and the messages it sent. A photograph can show a truth and yet contain within it a monstrous lie. Sometimes those lies are about people like me.

On the morning after the third night of nationwide protests against the agonizingly public murder of George Floyd, an unarmed and handcuffed black man, by Derek Chauvin, a white Minneapolis police officer, I called up a newspaper's website and braced for the worst. As we all know by now, the video of Chauvin choking the life out of Floyd's prostrate body was widely shared on both social and conventional media. Protests against the killing began in Minneapolis and quickly spread across the country.

Floyd's death was, of course, the latest in the relentless procession of police killings of unarmed African Americans to become a public spectacle. Each of these killings, and their reenactments in the virtual space of our smartphone and computer screens, feels like a hammer blow, physically exhausting and emotionally devastating. Like most African Americans, I live with the knowledge that to be black in America is to know that almost any encounter with a policeman could be fatal. (*In the U.S., systemic racism and COVID-19 are killing people of color.*)

There was nothing surprising about the photograph that confronted me on the newspaper's website that morning.

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seemed to be enraged. Indistinct figures of other protesters surrounded the police car, smoke lingered in the air and an atmosphere of chaos prevailed. It was a well-crafted photojournalistic image, and I hated it.

My purpose is not to shame the photographer. The primary role of a photojournalist is to be our witness, and that's what happened here. So I won't be more specific about who made the photo or where I saw it.

The problem with the photo is that it told a single story, as [Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie](#) might put it, about the man on the roof of the police car and about the protests in which he took part. That he stood atop the car is a truth. But the photo also summoned up an old lie about black men. It invoked the centuries-old stereotype of black men as inherently savage beasts, an idea about the nature of blackness that has been employed to justify enslavement, lynching, and the unwarranted use of force by the police. The man surely has a life beyond the moment in which the camera captured him. But nothing about the image encouraged us to ask whose son he might be, whose father, whose neighbor, whose friend. The photograph also suggests that mayhem defined the protests, rather than the demand that policemen stop killing defenseless black people. ([The violent death of George Floyd reflects a brutal American legacy.](#))

This wasn't the only photo of the protests that the newspaper displayed that day. Others provided more context. But this image was front and center. My irritation didn't stop there, however. What made me stand up and walk away from the computer was the certainty that I'd seen this same photograph, telling the same lie, many times before.

Almost instinctively we search for an image that seems to define a particular event or historical moment. Think, for instance, of the way that textbooks and documentaries repeatedly use Dorothea Lange's [Migrant Mother](#) to sum up the Great Depression. Icons have their problems. Most fundamentally, no single image can sum up a complex historical phenomenon. Poor mothers were certainly haggard and worried during the Great Depression but we wouldn't want our understanding of those difficult years to stop there.

The photo of the black man and the burning police car is unlikely to become an icon of this moment. Americans seem to be increasingly aware that the protests have roots in [the long history of police mistreatment of African Americans](#).

Still, images of violence or its aftermath dominate coverage of the protests of the last two weeks. A photograph by Julio Cortez of the Associated Press is more complex than most. It evokes the tension between the American promise of freedom and democracy and the grim reality of American racism and white supremacy. Cortez made the photo in Minneapolis during the third night of protests. In it a man of indeterminate age and ethnicity walks down a street holding an American flag head-high. Beyond the man, a liquor store burns, its flames outlining the man's silhouette and illuminating the flag in an eerie orange glow. Photographers and artists, such as [Faith Ringgold](#), have long incorporated the flag in their work, making it emblematic of the contradiction between American freedom and American racism.

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The killing of Michael Brown, an unarmed black man, by police officer Darren Wilson, sparked the Ferguson protests. Like Cortez, Cohen made his photo at night. It shows protester Edward Crawford, whose later death remains controversial, in the act of hurling a tear gas canister back at the police. As with Cortez's photos, flames are a prominent element in the picture. And the image of an American flag on Crawford's shirt confers a similar symbolic power.

Cortez's and Cohen's photographs are both extraordinary images and deserve acclaim. Yet looking at them makes me weary, bringing to mind images of black protests that I first saw as a child in the 1960s and that have regularly come my way ever since. It is no criticism to point out that these photos reproduce visual tropes of African American protest that have been around since at least the 1960s. These recurring images haven't gone away because the underlying causes are still with us. It's a burden that no African American can escape.

Images of defiant black women are among the more exhilarating tropes of black protest. Photographs of Gloria Richardson pushing away the bayoneted rifle of a National Guardsman during a 1963 protest in Cambridge, Maryland, may have set the standard. At first Dai Sugano's photo of a young black woman kneeling in front of a line of heavily armed policemen during a protest on May 29 in San Jose, California, doesn't seem to echo the contemptuous anger that Richardson directed at the police. But here kneeling isn't a sign of submission. "Taking a knee" is instead a form of non-violent protest most associated with former professional football player Colin Kaepernick, whose actions cost him his career.

Sugano framed his photo in a way that emphasizes the unidentified woman's vulnerability. Yet her stoic courage is similar to that shown by Ieshia Evans during a protest in 2016 against the police shooting of Alton Sterling, in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Jonathan Bachman from Reuters photographed her as two policemen, clad in riot gear, rushed to remove her from the street in which she stood silent, erect, and alone. The image froze the policemen's motion so they appear to be moving backward, not forward, as if the strength of Evans' convictions had repelled them.

I've come across two remarkable photographs from the current nationwide protests that fall outside of the tropes of black protest photography. At the same time, they point the viewer toward a deeper understanding of the protesters and the protests' underlying causes. Neither was made by a professional photojournalist.

The first is Nathan Aguirre's portrait of Deveonte Joseph. The elements in the portrait are simple. Joseph, a recent high school graduate, stands on a sidewalk in St. Paul, Minnesota. It is night and the space immediately around him is lighted but empty. He is dressed incongruously in the academic cap and gown that he would have worn to his graduation ceremony. Aguirre made the photo at a protest against Floyd's killing, yet little in the image makes that obvious.

In the distance, behind Joseph, we can make out an ambulance with its rear doors open. People dressed in some

~~sort of protective gear are on the edge of the frame. The photo remains something of a mystery even with its~~

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dreams for the future. And, if we continue along these lines, we realize that the thousands of unidentified and almost faceless protesters in the images we see must have families and dreams and stories of their own.

CNN found Joseph's portrait intriguing enough to build an article around. Joseph told the network that he wore his graduation gown that night precisely to challenge racial stereotypes. He said that he was dismayed that "people look at my people like we're down, like we don't have anything. I just don't think we're respected enough." His goal had been "to put positivity in the world."

Aguirre's portrait of Joseph prompts us to see protesters in ways we may not have considered. Similarly, Natalie Murphy's photo of the Robert E. Lee Monument in Richmond, Virginia, after one of last week's protests allows us to see the connections between the police killing of George Floyd and some of the deepest and most painful aspects of American history. Murphy made her photo at twilight. Orange tinges the sky above the monument, which occupies most of the frame. Above, Lee's effigy sits, untouched, astride its horse. The lower half of the monument's massive base, however, is covered with graffiti. Much of the language is crude, reminding us that the edifice is less a memorial to Lee than a monument to white supremacy.

John Mitchell, the editor of the city's African American newspaper in 1890 when the monument to the Confederate general was erected, would have sympathized with the sentiment of the graffiti, if not the language. He believed that the monument symbolized "a legacy of treason and blood" and the myth of the "Lost Cause," which claimed that the Southern rebellion was just.

Mitchell was surely right. In 2016 and 2017, I served on a city commission in Charlottesville, Virginia, that researched the history and meaning of our own statue of Lee and made recommendations to the city council about its fate. In our report, we concluded that the statue "embodied the Lost Cause interpretation of the Civil War, which romanticized the Confederate past and suppressed the horrors of slavery and slavery's role as the fundamental cause of the war, while affirming the enduring role of white supremacy." Most contemporary historians agree. On June 4, Governor Ralph Northam announced that he would order the statue in Richmond to be removed and placed in storage.

Murphy's photo suggests that the police murder of George Floyd and the protests that it sparked are, in the deepest sense, continuations of the Civil War. The fundamental issues are the same. Will the nation recognize the full humanity and citizenship of African Americans? Will the promise of democracy become real for all?

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