

ON PHOTOGRAPHY

The Superhero Photographs of the Black Lives Matter Movement

By Teju Cole

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As soon as the photograph of Ieshia Evans began to circulate online, people said she looked like a superhero. There she stands, slim and straight, on a street in Baton Rouge. Her dress, abstractly patterned in black and white, swirls around her. She seems almost to be levitating. Opposite her are the cops, clad in black. They are only two, walking ahead of a phalanx of more than a dozen others. But because of the storm-trooper get-up — the shoulder pads, helmets and what look like rocket-booster backpacks — the two seem like three or four. Their legs advance while their upper bodies lean back, as though recoiling from an unseen force. She is unarmed and unafraid (the open space behind her emphasizes her singularity); they are militarized and unindividuated. The image told such an apparently clear story that when it hit social media, it went viral.

The photograph, by the Reuters journalist Jonathan Bachman, was made at an inauspicious time. The rally at which it happened was in response to recent killings of black men by the police, particularly the death of Alton Sterling in Baton Rouge. But just two days earlier, the nation was shocked by the murder of five police officers in Dallas by a lone gunman. Our collective grief, always complicated, took on wicked new fissures.

Nevertheless, in spite of, or because of, its simple narrative, Bachman's photograph became an icon. It joined a small group of other images connected to the Black Lives Matter movement. There was Robert Cohen's nocturnal photograph of Edward Crawford in Ferguson, Mo., clad in an American-flag shirt as he readied himself to throw a flaming tear-gas canister, like Thor launching his hammer. In 2015, Adam Anderson photographed Bree Newsome at the South Carolina State House as she shinned up a flagpole with the agility of Spider-Man to remove a long-contested Confederate flag. And on the same day that Ieshia Evans stood in the street, a leader of the movement, DeRay Mckesson, was photographed as he was arrested in Baton Rouge, a glowering look on his face, as though he possessed Cyclops's "optic force blasts." These stills from the American racial passion play all deployed the visual language of the comic-book superhero.

Superheroes have become more popular since the turn of the millennium. The movies made around characters that originally appeared in comics are some of the highest-grossing ever made. Particularly stupendous is the track record of the sprawling franchise called the Marvel Cinematic Universe, which, in 13 movies over the past eight years (beginning in 2008 with “Iron Man”), has grossed more than \$10 billion. The movies are not the most subtle world cinema has to offer, but superheroes are a cultural force. They fill a psychological need in a world of drift and inchoate war. They have also, along the way, become powerful elements in any contemporary sense of visuality.

The relationship between superhero movies and the photographs from Black Lives Matter is not a matter of photographers trying to make protesters look like superheroes. It is that when such photographs emerge from the countless thousands taken at rallies and similar events, they are immediately recognized by a crowd already sensitized to their formal qualities. The most successful of these images have relatively simple compositions, featuring a single protagonist alone or contending with a number of adversaries. The images, which play into our collective desire for defiance, look like things we’ve seen before. They are conceptually neat, perhaps even Manichaeian.

Black Lives Matter photographs also have a deeper genealogy. In their basic trope of the individual confronting terrible power, one of their most striking antecedents is “Tank Man,” from June 5, 1989, near Beijing’s Tiananmen Square. These images (there are at least four variants, in addition to video footage), of an unknown solitary protester standing in the way of advancing tanks, encapsulate the plight but also the greatness of an individual taking extreme personal risk. But unlike the photos of Evans and others from Black Lives Matter, there’s an air of gloom around Tank Man. Given what we know happened in Tiananmen Square, we presume he was doomed in some way. A closer emotional comparison to the pictures from Black Lives Matter might be found in certain images of the civil rights movement, like Fred Ward’s photograph of the activist Gloria Richardson pushing her way past a National Guardsman’s bayonet in Cambridge, Md., in 1963. But even there, the mood is of dignity intruded upon rather than of outright victory.

Images trigger our memory of the history of images. Ieshia Evans, standing full-length, in profile, calm, carrying something, her robes billowing from an unseen gust, reiterates almost perfectly the form of a nymph that the early-20th-century scholar Aby Warburg described in his “Mnemosyne Atlas.” Warburg, undertaking a historical study of repeated forms, showed that figures matching this description were present in works by Ghirlandaio, Botticelli and Raphael, as well as in Roman bas-reliefs. The immediate legibility of images like those of Evans cannot be separated from the way their dynamism, evocative of ancient painting and sculpture, honors the black body.



The famous “Tank Man” photographed near Beijing’s Tiananmen Square on June 5, 1989. Stuart Franklin/Magnum Photos

Black Lives Matter as a movement originated in images: the video clips showing the extrajudicial killing of black people. The “superhero” photographs of protesters, with their classic form and triumphal tone, are engaged in a labor of redress. They bring a counterweight to the archive. Against death and helplessness, they project power and agency.

It is possible to recognize the relative semantic flatness of these images — they tend not to be as complex as photographs from the '60s by Charles Moore or Bruce Davidson — and still value them. In the American media landscape, black heroism is rarely portrayed. The press will often accompany an article on a murdered black man with a mug shot, while his murderer is presented in uniform or in some other neutral or flattering guise. Black women are often seen not at all. The stage of the street, the drama of protest, the theatrical image caught on the fly: These become means of seizing back the visual initiative.

Of course, life is not like comic books. People are beaten, charged, arrested, jailed. No one is actually a superhero; nobody can fly or catch bullets. Iron Man, Wonder Woman, Captain America: They are no more real than Achilles or Arjuna. We know this. But the role of fantastic stories of battle has not changed in the millenniums we have been telling them. Images of supernatural heroism don't confuse us about what the human body can accomplish or endure. What these images do is make elaborate internal states like patience,

fearlessness, anger and dignity temporarily visible. Edward Crawford handles fire in Ferguson, Bree Newsome goes airborne in Columbia and Ieshia Evans generates a force field in Baton Rouge. We read in these images the necessity of justice. For the brief moment immortalized by a photograph, the impossible happens, and we are encouraged.

Or so I thought. But one morning in mid-July, news began to filter in of an attack on police officers in Baton Rouge. Three officers were killed. I was stunned, but also startled: I had just finished the latest draft of my essay, which read essentially as it appears above. Surely, following this horrific news, I would have to pull it.

I called my editor. Looking at the line of cops in the picture featuring Ieshia Evans, I now saw them differently. Perhaps among them were those who were to die just days after that picture. The image was now doubly shadowed by death: Alton Sterling's, as well as that of the officers. Any reading of the image would be affected by this double shadow, which I didn't see coming and which my argument had not accounted for. My editor understood my conundrum, but she didn't think the essay should be pulled. She asked me to think of a solution.

The easy thing would have been to fix it: put in a sentence here or there, take out the unfriendly term "storm trooper," adjust the essay's tone to make it more sympathetic to the plight of the police. But I did not want to smooth away what was now an interesting problem. I decided instead to leave the essay as it was, but to write, below it, about this question of reception.

My essay interpreted an intriguing but comparatively minor photographic phenomenon. But it was also, implicitly, an argument for the continued relevance of Black Lives Matter. I stand by the argument. Rightful protests against murder are not to blame for other murders. I had written, after the horror in Dallas, that "our collective grief, always complicated, took on wicked new fissures." The word that began the next paragraph was "nevertheless." That was a word that, in the wake of the new killings in Baton Rouge, now troubled me. The word referred to photographs, not murder. But I knew that it might be read as a too-quick moving along. "People died; nevertheless I want to discuss photographs." It was unseemly.

And yet ("nevertheless"), the things we think of as "intriguing but comparatively minor" must also be attended to, in part because of how they illuminate what is not at all minor. These celebrated photographs of black superheroes are actually about something more important and more real: the existence of many unacknowledged everyday black heroes. When I write about these images or about anything else, I do so without knowing how unanticipated events will alter the reception of my words. But the words must be set down anyway. The duty of critical writing is to listen to the noise of life without being deafened by it.