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The Suppression and Othering of Black Lives Matter Protests Through Tear Gas

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Abstract

Following its formation in 2013, Black Lives Matter (BLM) has evolved into an important social and political movement. However, the organization's efforts to oppose racial inequality and police brutality through protest routinely have been met with a violent response by law enforcement, including the employment of various "less-lethal" weapons. This article aims to explore and analyze the ways in which tear gas has been used to discipline BLM protesters between 2014 and 2020. Drawing upon themes of race, empire, identity, war, and biopower as they coalesce within metropolitan protest sites, this article argues that colonial logics, power structures, and hierarchies inform the deployment of tear gas on BLM protesters today. While the eras of slavery and Jim Crow may have formally ended, their legacies and exclusionary structures continue to influence the way movements for Black advancement are suppressed using tear gas.

Keywords

Black Lives Matter, less-lethal weapons, tear gas, state violence

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Introduction

From its initial formation to a global network, Black Lives Matter (BLM) has evolved "from a moment to a movement" (Hillstrom, 2018, p. viii). However, the organization's efforts to oppose racial inequality and police brutality through protest routinely have been met with a violent response by law enforcement. While various "less-lethal" weapons ranging from flash-bang grenades to rubber bullets have been utilized to subdue BLM protesters, this article will focus on tear gas. Initially discovered toward the end of the 19th century (Jackson & Jackson, 1935), tear gas became increasingly popular during World War I. It was first used in 1914 by the French against German soldiers at the Battle of the Frontiers (Jones, 1978). Over the years, tear gas would become a choice weapon for colonial administrators seeking to repress dissent in territories abroad. Tear gas would ultimately be deployed domestically by law enforcement officials across the world, thus securing its place as the instrument of policing we see today (Feigenbaum, 2017). A discussion of tear gas as a means of suppression is especially pertinent to the racialized policing being experienced by protesting Black bodies in the US.

The aim of this article is to highlight a particular way tear gas is used, analyzing the weaponization of this chemical agent for disciplining BLM protesters between 2014 and 2020. While there is extensive literature on the significance of BLM covering its role in the longer struggle for Black liberation (Francis & Wright-Rigueur, 2021; Hillstrom, 2018; Lebron, 2017; Taylor, 2016; Weissinger & Mack, 2018), its representation (Banks, 2018; Lane et al., 2020; Leopold & Bell, 2017; Reid & Craig, 2021; Umamaheswar, 2020), and its similarities/differences with other racial protest movements (Chernega, 2016; Clayton, 2018; Jones-Eversley et al., 2017), the teargassing of the movement's activists is yet to be explored in detail. Drawing upon themes of race, empire, identity, war, and biopower as they coalesce within metropolitan protest sites, this article argues that colonial logics, power structures, and hierarchies inform the deployment of tear gas on BLM protesters today. This article is one of very few, if not the first, to demonstrate the systematic and punitive use of tear gas against BLM protesters in the US. This article makes an original contribution by revealing how tear gas has been employed by state authority to dehumanize and govern certain populations (protesting Black Americans/those protesting in solidarity). Through investigating the deployment of tear gas, the dynamics between citizenship status, history, and power that serve to justify the use of this weapon become clearer.

This article will begin by exploring the history of US policing in order to contextualize the racialized treatment experienced by BLM protesters in the modern era. Building upon a longer process of dehumanization that has

facilitated violence, the next section will analyze the ways Black bodies have been othered, with a particular focus on the construction of false and degrading narratives/discourses. The third section will assess the portrayal and treatment of BLM protesters, whose framing as disruptive and criminal has given way to the sanctioning of tear gas as a means of control. Having analyzed the manners in which the dehumanization of Black Americans (including BLM protesters) is enabled, the fourth section evaluates the employment of tear gas by law enforcement in American cities. The final section compares the tear-gassing of Lafayette Square with the Capitol to underscore that the threshold for acceptability of this weapon's use has varied against different groups. From being referred to as animals by police to counter-protesters dressing as apes, racism and statuses shaped by colonial histories persist. While the eras of slavery and Jim Crow may have formally ended, their legacies and exclusionary structures continue to influence the ways in which movements for Black advancement are suppressed using tear gas.

Policing of Black Americans

One of the earliest methods of policing can be found in the Southern region of the US during the beginning of the 18th century. The motivating force behind the development of policing in America was the disciplining and subordination of slaves (Feagin, 2012; Hadden, 2003). First founded in South Carolina, slave patrols became infamous for their ruthlessness and extensive scope of power (Bryant Jr., 2019). A slave patrol, also known as paddy rollers and night watchers (Moore et al., 2018), was a "government-sponsored force [of about 10 people] that was well organized and paid to patrol specific areas to prevent crimes and insurrection by slaves against the white community" (Turner et al., 2006, p. 186). Formed of mostly unwealthy and young White men, these watchmen would devote their days and nights to terrorizing, brutalizing, and capturing runaway slaves (Wintersmith, 1974). As Wintersmith (1974) argues, "slavery and the omnipotent police mechanisms were synonymous" in that "the former could not have existed without the latter" (p. 21).

While the American Civil War may have brought a formal end to slavery, violent, racialized policing practices were far from over. For example, Slave Codes were superseded by Black Codes, Vagrancy Laws, and Jim Crow during Reconstruction. From violating curfews to loitering, the police punished Black Americans for such transgressions (Hattery & Smith, 2021; Robinson, 2017). Scholarship further suggests that police officers replaced slave patrols as a means to regulate Black bodies (H. L. Cooper, 2015; Moore et al., 2018; Robinson, 2017). Alongside this evolution in law enforcement was the rise of

White supremacist groups whose violence was ignored or even facilitated by the police. Not only did law enforcement officials allow lynchings but they also partook in them such as during the Red Summer of 1919, Tulsa in 1921, and Rosewood in 1923 (Weissinger & Mack, 2018). As Francis and Wright-Rigueur (2021) express, "white people banded together and used lynchings and mobs to enforce a post-emancipation racial order that protected white supremacy" (p. 444). According to the Equal Justice Initiative (2017), approximately 4,084 Black Americans were lynched from 1877 to 1950.

The unprecedented expansion of police departments from the 1960s onward has supported this agency in becoming a key mechanism for control (Bonilla-Silva, 2001). With a move toward an "escalated force" response that "relied on ever-increasing amounts of force to disperse protesters and break up demonstrations" (Gillham & Noakes, 2007, p. 342), it was commonplace for officers to wreak pain through tear gas, bullets, and beatings (Gillham et al., 2013). Given that certain "demonstrations were a 'threat' to the stability of the state, an affront to respected institutions, and an attack on their legitimacy" (Bryant Jr., 2019, p. 53), strides toward racial equality were repressed. The 1990s then brought significant militarization to the force resulting in the "cross-fertilization of what should be two very different operational cultures" (Wright, 2001, p. 226). While this shift began with the formation of the Special Weapons and Tactics team in Los Angeles following the Watts Riots of 1965 (Hughey, 2015), the militarization of law enforcement only escalated. In 1990, the US government awarded state and local police agencies approximately $1,000,000 in military gear/equipment. This allowance increased to $324,000,000 in 1995 (ACLU, 2014). This manner of conducting policing has contributed to the othering of Black lives in the US and set the stage for the use of tear gas against domestic BLM protests.

The Othering of Black Bodies

The way Black bodies have been dehumanized since the nation's conception has functioned to underpin the exercise of state-sanctioned violence. Although institutional structures such as slavery and Jim Crow have formally ended, their legacies remain influential, altering how Black Americans are perceived and treated (Owusu-Bempah, 2017). Prejudicial depictions characteristic of the 19th and early 20th century endure to this day (Jardina & Piston, 2021). Effectively, dehumanization which has become "an enduring feature of the African American experience" continues to impact "experiences with crime and the law enforcement agencies charged with tackling it" (Owusu-Bempah, 2017, p. 24). The process of othering that began many centuries ago,

alongside the degrading and false narratives it produced, has enabled the persistence of racialized policing and violent law enforcement responses–including teargassing–against certain types of protest.

As Goff et al. (2008) note, negative depictions of African people are about as old as Europe's first encounter with the continent itself. As a result of European maritime voyages throughout the 13th to 15th century, beast-like portrayals of Africans were reiterated and further entrenched into public imagination. The US would not be immune to adopting the racial taxonomies fabricated by European powers. While White skin became equated to superiority, development, and liberty, Africans became the antithesis. Seen as possessing an aggressive nature and barbaric qualities, the perceived danger of Black people's "incivility" served as rationalization for their enslavement (Desmond & Emirbayer, 2009). Additionally, "scientific evidence" which claimed to substantiate the biological inferiority of an entire race became increasingly accepted (Jardina & Piston, 2021). One example is the work of Cartwright (1851) who diagnosed slaves with two diseases: "drapetomania" (causing slaves to run away) and "dysaethesia aethiopica" (causing "rascality"). The notion that Blacks were inherently "bestial," "lazy," and "defiant," supported by "empirical findings," was used to dehumanize and reaffirm the importance of slavery (Montagu, 1942).

While these early racist discourses were damaging, they derived legitimacy from the state itself. As law was interwoven with race-making, the state was intimately involved in the legitimization of violent subjugation. From legislation dating back to 1669 with the Casual Killing Act, Black lives were made disposable. The act stated that "if any slave resist his master (or other by his masters order correcting him) and by the extremity of the correction should chance to die, that his death shall not be accompted felony" (Hening, 1823, p. 1). Laws such as these become routine. With little accountability for White violence, as it was legally authorized, certain human life was rendered negligible. The Three-Fifths Compromise served to continue the dehumanizing experiences of the enslaved. The compromise detailed that for every five slaves, only three would count toward the state's total population. In effect, this "reestablished the legal category of the enslaved as less than fully human—as three-fifths of a person" (Hattery & Smith, 2021, p. 6). Their subhuman status was further entrenched by the *Dred Scott v. Sandford* (1857) verdict which upheld that "the Black man has no rights which the White man is bound to respect [. . .] He may justly and lawfully be reduced to slavery [. . .] and treated as an ordinary article of traffic and merchandise" (p. 1).

Carrying on into the late 20th century, tropes relating to the "criminality" and "indolence" of Black Americans, peddled particularly by the media, bolstered degrading narratives (Entman & Rojecki, 2000; Gilliam & Iyengar,

2000). With the 1980s and 1990s came an increasingly powerful association between predominately Black cities and drugs/crime (Jardina & Piston, 2021). This period also bore the "superpredator" theory (coined by John Dilulio) where "a superpredator is a young juvenile criminal who is so impulsive, so remorseless, that he can kill, rape, maim, without giving it a second thought" (Boston University, 2020, p. 1). From the "symbolic assailant" (Skolnick, 1966) to the "criminalblackman" (Russell-Brown, 1998), colonial-era stereotypes have positioned Black Americans, especially men, as a danger to the rest of society. As a result of these racially charged discourses, the Black population became the primary target for law enforcement in the government's war on crime and on drugs (Owusu-Bempah, 2017; Welch, 2007). It has even been revealed that throughout the 1990s, Los Angeles police officers described cases concerning young Black men or Black communities with the acronym N.H.I.–No Humans Involved (Wynter, 1992).

Dehumanizing stereotypes are not unique to more contemporary times but rather intertwined with a lengthier practice of race-making where certain individuals have been categorized as fully human while others as quasi-human (Jardina & Piston, 2021; Mills, 1997). Viewed by the White gaze as outcasts, non-White bodies have been designated as "undesirable." The way Black lives and communities are perceived is far from inconsequential, informing how they are treated and, in this case, policed. As evidenced, the pre/re-criminalization as well as degradation of Black Americans has persisted for centuries (Weissinger & Mack, 2018). After a particular population has undergone dehumanization, it is placed beyond the "universe of obligation"–meaning a "circle of individuals and groups toward whom obligations are owed, to whom rules apply, and whose injuries call for amends" (Fein, 1979, p. 4). Deprived of empathy and left vulnerable, the violence experienced by specific groups is not regarded as significant (Kelman, 1976). Through the othering of Black bodies, racialized policing and law enforcement practices such as teargassing against particular protesters have been facilitated.

Portrayal and Treatment of BLM Protesters

Having explored the policing of Black American bodies as well as their dehumanization, these two topics can now be brought together to examine the portrayal and treatment of BLM protesters. As argued by Reid and Craig (2021), protests started by a racial minority tend to be framed as threatening by mainstream media–even if they are non-violent–which in turn incites more forceful law enforcement action. While those of various backgrounds and races across the country participated, this does not negate that the

protests themselves were in solidarity with racial equality. In fact, it was only after the murder of George Floyd in 2020 that there was a demographic shift in BLM protests that saw a significant rise in White participation (Washington, 2020). The BLM movement has become a powerful force within American social and political spheres, being affiliated with over 11,000 protests between January 2020 and April 2021 (ACLED, 2021). Nevertheless, assessing how protesters have been othered, which has in turn sanctioned state-sponsored violence, is essential for explaining the instrumentality of tear gas as a weapon with an inherently biopolitical function.

Despite the majority of BLM protests being peaceful (Chenoweth & Pressman, 2020; Leopold & Bell, 2017), the movement has been consistently regarded in a disparaging way by the media (Umamaheswar, 2020). While not always invoking blatantly racist language, the use of terms such as "race-hustler" or "thug" to describe activists does not disguise prejudicial overtones (Banks, 2018). With the movement itself being labeled a "Black militant uprising" and Black Americans described as "criminal," "suspicious," "lawless," and "demanding" by news outlets (Lane et al., 2020), individuals and the organization have been othered because of these tropes. From the images and the headlines chosen to plaster news articles, a discourse is spread in which BLM is dangerous and disobedient. By overshadowing the "good" protesters in favor of covering the "bad" as well as conflating rioters with actual activists, there is an effort to delegitimize the movement (Banks, 2018). However, in view of the geographic scale and participation size of the protests, they were rather peaceful and non-destructive. As Chenoweth and Pressman (2020) reported "96.3% of events involved no property damage or police injuries, and in 97.7% of events, no injuries were reported among participants, bystanders or police" (p. 1).

Pertaining to the media's portrayal of BLM, Banks (2018) makes a noteworthy argument. She states that one of the most popular criticisms of this newer movement by news outlets is that it does not follow the seemingly non-violent methods of the 1960s. The romanticization of public memory in which "the Civil Rights movement is framed as being worthy of remembrance according to socially acceptable discourse on non-violent advocacy" (Banks, 2018, p. 713), has rendered BLM less legitimate. Yet, one is left to question the extent to which this revered public memory is accurate, given that at the time activists were subjected to violence and tear gas much like BLM is today. Nevertheless, the narrative that there are protests that deserve respect and those that do not has tangible effects. For example, the ACLED (2021) found that the probability of intervention by authorities in BLM protests was three times higher than in other demonstrations. Furthermore, the likelihood of violence being used by the police against BLM demonstrators

was 52% compared to 26% during other protests. These statistics withstand regardless of whether the protests were peaceful.

Even the Federal Bureau of Investigation has gone so far as to label Black activists as "Black identity extremists" (Levin, 2017). Whether or not a viable threat exists, this categorization is informed by colonial stereotypes which have criminalized Black bodies throughout history. Perceived as a threatening and radical force, the violence taken up by law enforcement against BLM becomes "justified" in the name of national security. From being called animals by police officers to counter-protesters dressing in ape costumes, wearing monkey masks, throwing bananas at protesters, and carrying nooses (Jardina & Piston, 2021), it is clear that the racism born from early maritime expeditions to West Africa is far from over, prevalent in various aspects of society including the news media. Dehumanized and placed beyond the pale of civilization, protesters advocating for racial equality within a nation that constitutionally guarantees it have been met with violence on behalf of the police. Provided that such protests, in this case BLM, are "the most visible of conflicts between the state and its citizenry" (Bryant Jr., 2019, p. 44), the deployment of tear gas by law enforcement serves to force the other into submission.

Teargassing of BLM Protests

The murder of Michael Brown by officer Darren Wilson on August 9, 2014 reignited longstanding feelings of injustice, frustration, and fear throughout the Ferguson community. The following day, a candlelight vigil was held to honor Brown's memory as well as protest his untimely death (Chernega, 2016). Many also participated in a non-violent demonstration outside the Ferguson police department's headquarters (Hillstrom, 2018). Protests, mostly peaceful, went on for days as more people took to the streets. However, these protesters were quickly met with armored vehicles, rubber bullets, riot gear, tear gas, and flash-bang grenades (Clayton, 2018). One activist recalls not being able to "believe that the police would fire tear gas into what had been a peaceful protest. I was running around, face burning, and nothing I saw looked like America to me" (Kang, 2015, p. 1). Another individual shared how "you smell the teargas, it goes in. It is not even air what you are breathing in. So you are actually choking and then you don't know and you panic . . . Then you try to scream and can't breathe" (BBC, 2014, p. 1). As tensions and violence escalated between both protesters and law enforcement as well as rioters and law enforcement, a state of emergency was declared. The National Guard was then sent in on August 18th (Clayton, 2018; Hillstrom, 2018).

As Attorney General Eric Holder stated, "amid a highly toxic environment, defined by mistrust and resentment, stoked by years of bad feelings, and spurred by illegal and misguided practices, it is not difficult to imagine how a single tragic incident set off the city of Ferguson like a powder keg" (BBC, 2015, p. 1). While referring to "a highly toxic environment" as it pertained to community relations with the police, this "toxicity" is also evident by the contamination of the air the protesters were forced to breathe. From residents' yards to nearby innocent children, tear gas was fired by officers into various zones beyond the protests themselves (Dakwar, 2018). Due to the indiscriminate nature of tear gas, this chemical agent becomes an even more dangerous tool of governance, lumping together and anonymizing the bodies made to suffer its effects. Furthermore, as Jacks and Stocker (2014) reported, the tear gas deployed was from the Cold War era. While seemingly trivial, expired tear gas has many risks. Some of these dangers include being more prone to accidental fires, not being up to par with current safety regulations, and the canisters or grenades becoming faulty – all of which increase the likelihood of injury (Feigenbaum, 2015). Employed to police the atmosphere (Feigenbaum & Kanngieser, 2015), tear gas was ultimately used against Ferguson protesters to reinforce authority en masse.

For many, such weapons and "the presence of militarized police to control protesters in Ferguson, Missouri, in 2014 evokes painful memories of watching television footage of protests in the 1960s" (Aymer, 2016, p. 368). As Cobbina et al. (2019) raise, protesters felt the utilization of rubber bullets and tear gas in particular were the epitome of police militarization. Seen as reckless and disproportionate, many felt this response only inflamed relations with law enforcement. The combative nature in which officers confronted BLM protesters was not unique to Ferguson or to other demonstrations in 2014. Following the murder of George Floyd by officer Derek Chauvin in May 2020, BLM protests were yet again met with an overtly war-like police response. When describing the scene in Minneapolis, the town where Floyd was killed, photojournalist Victor Blue recalls Minnesota State Police "dressed like they were going to drop into Waziristan" (Amnesty International, 2020b, p. 24). During a BLM protest in Seattle, Aubreanna Inda remembers the police looking like "they were really geared up to go to war almost" (Amnesty International, 2020b, p. 23). Ironically, as an Amnesty International (2020a) representative notes, "the unnecessary and sometimes excessive use of force by police against protesters exhibits the very systemic racism and impunity they had taken to the streets to protest" (p. 1). Even more so, the undue deployment of certain weapons including chemical irritants is part of the larger problem – unaccountable and unnecessary violence on behalf of law enforcement (Amnesty International, 2020b).

While Ferguson police representatives assured that tear gas was deployed on crime committing demonstrators (Institute for Intergovernmental Research, 2015), this account does not match that of protesters or news outlets. Tear gas was not simply used to overpower a small group of criminal dissenters but exercised as a means of domination more broadly. As Yildiz (2018) notes, the adversarial manner of viewing protesters was not new or inconsequential. In fact, the company which had been providing the Ferguson police department with its target practice was placing pictures of actual protesters on the target. The target practice is part of a more perverse environment that has conditioned and enabled the treatment of certain marginalized civilians as illegitimate, hostile combatants – and tear gas is an extension of this adversarial view. By toxifying the air, Ferguson police exerted biopolitical control to manage and subdue Black Americans through debilitation, underscoring this population's "undesirability." This form of governance was not only exercised in Ferguson but against BLM demonstrations at various other metropolitan sites.

From Minneapolis to Orlando to Oakland, the summer of 2020 saw BLM protesters in at least 100 cities teargassed (Lai et al., 2020). While many of these sites were bigger cities, tear gas was also deployed in smaller towns such as Murfreesboro, Tennessee and Sioux Falls, South Dakota (Amnesty International, 2020b). Reported bodily damage from this chemical agent included but was not limited to leg injuries, loss of an eye, and skin burns (Lai et al., 2020; Swaine, 2014). Stuart Schrader at John Hopkins University found that even though this period of time was short, it saw the largest scale employment of tear gas against protesters in the US since the Civil Rights era (Lai et al., 2020). From May 25th to June 5th, there were 89 unwarranted tear gas incidents in 34 states (Amnesty International, 2020b). Paralleling the last words of Eric Garner, George Floyd, and others ("I can't breathe"), the state response to protest likewise has been one of suffocation. At a BLM protest on June 1st in Philadelphia, Lizzie Horne remembers how there was

> someone who was right in the front – who had a tear gas canister hit his head and started running back. We were trying to help him, flushing his eyes and then he just fainted and started having a seizure . . . As we were finally lifting him up and getting him out of the way, they started launching more tear gas. That's when people started to get really scared . . . People started putting their hands up – but the cops wouldn't let up. It was can after can after can [of tear gas]. We were encapsulated in gas. We were drooling and coughing uncontrollably . . . They were dragging people down the hill and forcing them down on their knees, lining them up – and pulling down their masks and spraying and gassing them again (Amnesty International, 2020b, p. 30).

Unable to freely exercise rights of assembly and expression without fear of violence, the ideals of America and citizenship begin to erode. For protesters, tear gas makes "an assumptive question about your citizenship in America . . . After being teargassed for a couple of days you no longer feel American" (BBC, 2014, p. 1). Despite being granted citizenship in 1868, a struggle persists for Black Americans to be valued as citizens with rights that must be upheld and respected. For some scholars (Hooker, 2016; Makalani, 2017; Rogers, 2014), White democracy and the violence it inflicts will continue to deny Black Americans of full citizenship. As Ong (2006) argues, the nature of citizenship has become differential, ever shifting, and no longer guaranteed in its entirety. The utilization of "less-lethal" weapons such as tear gas has allowed state actors "to selectively protect human safety while managing and controlling certain populations" as well as generate "varieties of citizenship that are always and already partial" (Anaïs, 2011, p. 547). Teargassing not only violates the protection against cruel and unusual punishment, but also pollutes the air in the name of governance (Nieuwenhuis, 2016). Thus, the implementation of such weapons works to distinguish those whose lives have political value/worth from those that do not (Anaïs, 2011). An embodiment of the process of othering, the ease with which particular groups are gassed is representative of both their lack of belonging and perceived lower level of humanity.

Following a BLM protest in Baltimore, Clayton shares that tear gas

> burned and they [the police] was just throwing it . . . And the tear gas hurt and they just, you know, was throwing the tear gas for no reason. That was the only time where I felt like, "OK, they don't care, they don't care who they hurting, they don't care if its kids or they don't care if you out here to protest in a positive way" . . . They was treating us like we're animals (Cobbina et al., 2019, p. 421).

Serving to manage, dehumanize, and repress Black bodies through the employment of tear gas, colonial logics are still very much active. Believing that two separate worlds – one White and one Black – occur simultaneously within the US, Du Bois (2005) asks, "how does it feel to be a problem?" (p. 1). Many scholars (Allen, 2005; Gutiérrez, 2004; Hayes, 2017; Pinderhughes, 2011) have analyzed how Black Americans are subjected to a process of colonization by the nation of which they are meant to be equal citizens. From the criminal justice system to "urban ghettos," these scholars argue that "the black community [is] politically, economically, and militarily subjugated to white America, much as colonies in Africa or Asia were colonially subjugated and under the direct control of European powers" (Allen, 2005, p. 4).

This differential treatment as it pertains to the relationship between Black bodies and law enforcement is echoed by Hayes (2017) who argues that "one (the Nation) is the kind of policing regime you expect in a democracy; the other (the Colony) is the kind you expect in an occupied land" (p. 32).

Colonial structures and racial hierarchies have been allowed to thrive through the policing–on the ground and in the air–of Black bodies. It is through this colonial lens, "that Blacks are conceived as out-of-control captives in need of taming" (Williams, 2021, p. 285). In Ferguson, law enforcement is reported to have used expletive and racist language, shouting for protesters to "get the f*ck off the street, ni*ger. B*tch move. F*ck you" as well as calling them "monkeys and ni*gers" (Cobbina et al., 2019, p. 420). An officer was even caught on video yelling "bring it, all you f*cking animals bring it" (Terkel, 2014). These beast-like portrayals clearly can be traced back to a centuries-old process of racial othering that remains salient. The repressive police response only served to reinforce the disparate treatment, discrimination, and racism Black Americans experience by state institutions (Cobbina et al., 2019). As Hattery and Smith (2021) argue, while "we saw Black people fighting for the right to live freely, and we saw (mostly) white police officers, fully militarized, firing rubber bullets and tear gas at the protesting bodies . . . what we *saw* was RACE" (p. 2). The deployment of tear gas on BLM protests was far from exceptional (Nieuwenhuis, 2016) as it functioned to suppress those challenging the current power structure in which Black Americans face inequality and brutality. In fact, the very nature of tear gas upholds an asymmetric relationship between police officials and those demonstrating, weakening the power of those who oppose established order (Jones, 1978). In many ways and through the aid of tear gas, the notion of empire persists, allowing racialized violence to be perpetuated.

Teargassing of Lafayette Square v. the Capitol Riot

On January 7, 2021, Vice President Kamala Harris tweeted: "We have witnessed two systems of justice: one that let extremists storm the U.S. Capitol yesterday, and another that released tear gas on peaceful protestors last summer. It's simply unacceptable" (K. Cooper, 2021, p. 1). While tear gas was employed against both groups, the threshold and acceptability of its use was very different. Furthermore, the deployment of this weapon on the demonstrators in Lafayette Square must be contextualized alongside the larger pattern of forceful law enforcement practices against BLM. As Borger (2021) states, "the contrast between the law enforcement reaction to the storming of the Capitol on Wednesday and the suppression of peaceful protests in the

summer is not just stark – it is black and white" (p. 1). Not only categorically opposite, the black and white nature of these cases is also quite literal as it relates to the identity of the groups in question. Illuminating how tear gas upholds racialized, colonial orders, the disciplining of certain bodies through the atmosphere works to maintain asymmetric power dynamics.

On June 1, 2020, following the murder of George Floyd, a large yet peaceful crowd gathered in protest at Lafayette Square in Washington DC. That afternoon, a meeting of high-ranking military officials and law enforcement officers was held at a Federal Bureau of Investigation command center. Attorney General William Barr directed various government agencies ranging from Homeland Security to the Marshals Service to increase law enforcement presence around the area. Officers were also instructed to implement "surges" to disperse the protesters (Chason & Schmidt, 2021). Before the 7 p.m. curfew and with little warning (debate over whether the warning was audible), officers moved in on the crowd. Peaceful demonstrators were confronted with pepper spray, tear gas, riot shields, batons, horses, and rubber bullets (BBC, 2020; Rupar, 2021). Various agencies including the Washington police, National Guard, US Park police, and Bureau of Prisons took part in this coordinated effort which included the dispatch of an army helicopter (Borger, 2021). One demonstrator recalls their "throat was burning. I was out of breath, breathing in and out this toxic air" (Chason & Schmidt, 2021, p. 1). After the clearing, President Trump walked across the square to take photos in front of St. John's Episcopal Church (Chavez, 2021).

On January 6, 2021, supporters of Donald Trump, many of whom were White men, stormed the US Capitol. Breaching the building's perimeter, they stole, defaced, and destroyed property as well as injured officers (Chason & Schmidt, 2021; Hauck & Barfield Berry, 2021). Participants included members of right-wing extremist groups such as Proud Boys, Oath Keepers, Alt-Right, and Boogaloo Bois (Thompson & Fischer, 2021). In contrast to BLM protests, there was significantly less police presence and preparation despite security concerns (Borger, 2021). The DC National Guard was not deployed until after the Capitol was attacked and arrived at the scene hours later (Chavez, 2021). In the meantime, some officers reportedly moved barricades out of the way, opened doors, and took photos with rioters (Eligon, 2021). As a member of Proud Boys shared, "there were thousands of people in there - [the police] had no control of the situation. I didn't get stopped or questioned" (K. Cooper, 2021, p. 1). Unlike the approach taken with the BLM protest, tear gas was deployed only once the rioters were inside the building in an effort to clear them out (Rushe, 2021; The New York Times, 2021). The Capitol was eventually secured after more than 4 hours (Sterling, 2021).

In contrast to the overmilitarized response –including teargassing–peaceful BLM protesters faced, law enforcement was less prepared for the Capitol rioters. As Sterling (2021) comments, "the protests share an inverted relationship, as if reflected in a funhouse mirror" (p. 456). Chief of the US Park Police asserted in a congressional hearing that "the use of force that we utilized on June 1 was in direct correlation to the level of violence that we were subjected to" (US Committee on Natural Resources, 2020, p. 1). However, sharing the opinion of several others, a DC National Guard official testified that

> the events I witnessed at Lafayette Square on the evening of June 1 were deeply disturbing to me, and to fellow National Guardsmen. Having served in a combat zone, and understanding how to assess threat environments, at no time did I feel threatened by the protesters or assess them to be violent. And based on established U.S. military protocols concerning proportionality of force in dealing with civil disturbances both within the United States and overseas, it was my observation that the use of force against demonstrators in the clearing operation was an unnecessary escalation of the use of force. From my observation, those demonstrators–our fellow American citizens–were engaged in the peaceful expression of their First Amendment rights (US Committee on Natural Resources, 2020, p. 1).

Through a comparison of these two cases, it is demonstrated that there is a lower threshold for condoning/accepting violence and teargassing against the BLM movement. While those posing a security threat were teargassed only once inside the Capitol, those peacefully exercising their constitutional rights were teargassed without legitimate cause. Rooted in a "presumption that folks who were protesting racial justice were dangerous" (Chason & Schmidt, 2021, p. 1), the assembly of predominately non-White bodies was treated as more threatening. Invoking a similar sentiment, a statement was released by the BLM Global Network to express how the Capitol riot was

> one more example of the hypocrisy in our country's law enforcement response to protest. When Black people protest for our lives, we are all too often met by National Guard troops or police equipped with assault rifles, shields, tear gas and battle helmets. When white people attempt a coup, they are met by an underwhelming number of law enforcement personnel who act powerless to intervene, going so far as to pose for selfies with terrorists, and prevent an escalation of anarchy and violence like we witnessed today. Make no mistake, if the protesters were Black, we would have been tear gassed, battered, and perhaps shot (Chavez, 2021, p. 1).

This double standard is enabled by the historical dehumanization of Black Americans which has lent itself to state-sanctioned violence by way of tear gas. The unnecessary use of this weapon on peaceful BLM demonstrators continues to function as a mechanism for suppression and authority.

Conclusion

This article has provided an analysis of the distinctively violent ways in which tear gas has been deployed against BLM protesters between 2014 and 2020. Weaponized to discipline, rank, and oppress certain bodies, tear gas was used to coerce submission from those collectively opposing police brutality and racial inequality. Through invoking themes of biopower, race, empire, war, and identity, this article has argued that racialized rationalities and structures from the colonial era continue to inform the systematic use of tear gas on BLM protesters. The article began by providing an overview of the relationship between law enforcement and Black Americans dating back to the first slave patrols of the South. The subsequent section went on to examine the processes by which Black bodies have been othered as well as how dehumanizing discourses have been manufactured and perpetuated. The third section explored the portrayal and treatment of BLM protesters, who have been framed in a negative light in order to dimmish the legitimacy of the organization. The fourth section has analyzed the use of tear gas in Ferguson as well as other American cities. Finally, to exemplify the disparate police response, specifically teargassing of BLM, the last section compared the cases of Lafayette Square and the Capitol. The employment of tear gas by law enforcement at BLM protest sites has underscored the biopolitical function of this weapon which seeks to govern and dehumanize through atmospheric means.

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