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Gestural Legacy

Bridging the gap between the Black Church and the Black Lives Matter Movement

Abstract

On August 9, 2014, Michael Brown, a black teenager in Ferguson, Missouri, was shot and killed by white police officer Darren Wilson. Wilson was not convicted for the shooting despite reports that Brown was not armed or dangerous. As part of the fight against socially sanctioned black death, the Black Lives Matter movement adopted “Hands up!” as both its verbal and gestural symbol for the beginning of a national racial justice revolution. This image is not new to black consciousness; raised hands in the Black Church have symbolized submission, strength, and redemption through what has come to be called “praise hands.” Through an exploration of the two gestures in juxtaposition, “Hands up!” maintains cultural capital and geo-social transience – transmission across geographical space and social spheres – because the gesture itself is embedded in the collective memory of some black folk through the frameworks of *performative vulnerability* and *surrogation*. By rethinking the role and shape of vulnerability, particularly that of the body to larger social constraints as displayed through surrogated gestures like praise hands and “Hands up!,” modes of resistance must also be renegotiated to include these acts of vulnerability as imperative to socio-political change.

Then, 'blam!' the officer took his second shot, striking Brown in the back. At that point...Brown stopped, turned with his hands up and said, 'I don't have a gun, stop shooting!'

—Trymaine Lee, "Eyewitness to Michael Brown Shooting Recounts his Friend's Death"

Introduction

Standing next to Michael Brown when the first shots were fired, Dorian Johnson recalls hands raised and a cry for armistice, a plea that was vehemently disregarded as six shots tore through black skin. On August 9, 2014, Michael Brown, a black teenager in Ferguson, Missouri, was shot and killed by white police officer Darren Wilson. Wilson was not convicted for the shooting despite reports that Brown was not armed or dangerous.¹ The event sparked an intensified resurgence in the national, political recognition of black bodies as vulnerable to police brutality and state violence. Groups such as the Black Lives Matter network bastion this movement by challenging and expanding what constitutes as state violence in relation to the ways black bodies have been treated by American socio-political ideology. As part of the fight against socially sanctioned black death, the Black Lives Matter movement adopted "Hands up!" as both its verbal and gestural symbol for the beginning of a national racial justice revolution that continues on through M4BL (The Movement for Black Lives). The gesture purposefully refers to the last moments before Brown's death, and is a physical evocation of vulnerability that traditionally conjures images of a lack of agency – hands raised just above the head, arms bent at the elbows, empty palms facing forward and unable to be used, chest and abdomen exposing a direct path to the heart and other vital organs. Raised hands signal a lack of power, a diminished sense of protection, a lack of threat, and an invitation for action whether that be malignant or protective. In this context, however, it has also come to symbolize resistance: raised hands resist the hail² of police, white hegemonic society, and oppressive structures of power by subverting the stereotyped image of the violent black body. This image is not new to black consciousness, despite its specific use in this context. Raised hands in the Black Church³ have symbolized submission, strength, and redemption through what has come to be called "praise hands." The gesture in the Black Church often mirrors that of the Orant posture in Christianity: "arms raised and bent to the sides with palms facing up" (Orlin 2016, 676). Through an exploration of the two gestures in juxtaposition, "Hands up!" maintains cultural capital and geo-social transience – transmission across geographical space and social spheres – because the gesture itself is embedded in the collective memory of some black folk through the framework of *performative vulnerability*, a term developed by black feminist writers within the realm of minoritarian identity making. I define the term as an act of exposure, openness, or susceptibility that calls into being a new social order and signifies the construction of a marginalized identity. Performative vulnerability informs "Hands up!" and praise hands as simultaneously enmeshed in and resistant of hegemonic systems of power.

Power, discipline, and identity are mapped onto black bodies through every iteration of the raised hands gesture in contested spaces (e.g. in streets during protests, on congress floors, on basketball courts, etc.). Exploring this gesture through the lens of performative vulnerability challenges traditional narratives of black

resistance, often stereotyped as violent, to contribute to the formation of the nuanced and intersubjective black self through non-verbal communication. The black community does not only form itself in relation to or in opposition of its vulnerability within oppressive systems of power, but it also comes to define itself through an embrace of that vulnerability used strategically to fight those systems. Black bodies are able to negotiate their own practices and durable structures of being to tactically respond to the socio-political conditions presented to them. Often, these dispositions in minority communities fall within the realm of embodied rather than written or spoken language due to the lack of agency afforded to them by hegemonic structures of power. Due to this, the physical representation of the body in submission, as presented by both “Hands up!” and praise hands, opens up a space for resistance in a way that words have not always had the power to or when a voice is not allowed. That space has been filled before, through gestures such as the Black Power fist and, as I argue, praise hands in the church. This process of “space-filling” through gestures of performative vulnerability is a performance of surrogation as collective memory over time, across generations, in black communities – a notion attributed, here, to Joseph Roach and the concept of *surrogation*. Surrogation, according to Roach, is a process through which culture is able to re-create itself over time and it “does not begin or end but continues as actual or perceived vacancies occur in the network of relations that constitutes the social fabric” (Roach 1996, 2). Through this doubled lens – collective memory or surrogation through gestures of performative vulnerability – “Hands up!” is a reoccupation of praise hands, particularly as it relates to gestural salience in public consciousness and communal recognition. By rethinking the role and shape of vulnerability, particularly that of the body to larger social constraints as displayed through gestures like praise hands and “Hands up!,” modes of resistance must also be renegotiated to include these acts of vulnerability as imperative to socio-political change. Therefore, the performance of vulnerability through this gesture is a mode of resistance in the fight against racial oppression.

Contentions between the Black Church and BLM

During a time in which systematic racism against African Americans is increasingly condemned by larger society, the role of the Black Church within the secular sphere has become a fraught topic. This conversation between sacred and secular is essential when moral, cultural, and physical lives are on the line. The Black Church was physically active in the fight against racism during the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s: creating meeting spaces for activists, organizing community outreach programs, congregationally marching with protestors for governmental change, and placing an emphasis on recovering black agency in church teachings. However, it is currently criticized by contemporary activists for falling short of what the contemporary social sphere needs in the fight against oppression. Eddie Glaude, Jr., a Professor of Religion and Chair of the Center for American Studies at Princeton University, is among the many voices criticizing the Black Church for becoming increasingly irrelevant in a secularized society, and for no longer having the same impact on the social and moral fabric of African American communities that it once had. Glaude’s 2010 analysis claims, “The death of the black church ... occasions an opportunity to breathe new life into what it means to be black and Christian. Black churches and preachers must find

their prophetic voices in this momentous present...on behalf of those who suffer most” (Glaude 2010). He contributes to an ongoing call for the restructuring of black faith in the United States in response to growing racial tension, socio-economic oppression, and violence against marginalized bodies. In particular, the Black Lives Matter network exemplifies Glaude’s call to the church to fight on behalf of those who need it most. By expanding what “black bodies” look like in a way that the church historically has not – founded by queer women of color Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi – BLM critiques some church leaders for their inability to place the revolution in the hands of young trans and queer people, a contention that has historically plagued the Black Church.⁴ Additionally, BLM highlights the labor on the part of queer, feminist bodies that continue to sustain the movement, clashing within ideological spaces. I argue that the “Hands up!” gesture can act as a platform that has the ability to begin breaking down the bifurcation between the church and contemporary activists through the visceral nature of embodied practice.

Black Lives Matter (BLM) activists, who believe that the systemic oppression of African American bodies is not being condemned enough, have criticized several Black Church denominations for their lack of involvement in the organization’s goals to “(re)build the Black liberation movement” (Black Lives Matter 2015) and legitimize black bodies as political subjects. Many believe that a majority of the Black Church, which was once an epicenter for social change, has become passive in its public involvement and that “protesters patently reject any conservative theology about keeping the peace, praying copiously, or turning the other cheek... [which are] viewed as a return to passive respectability politics” (Cooper 2015).⁵ While individual religious leaders of color⁶ and even denominations, such as the African Methodist Episcopal church, have been active on the ground, there has been no concerted effort amongst all denominations of the Black Church to “think beyond the bounds of a physical structure or traditional worship...[or] reimagin[e] what notions of faith and church look like” (ibid.). As the violent subjugation of an entire people and the devaluation of black lives continues, contemporary activists are asking the Black Church to take a more substantial role in secular reform.

Rather than following in the footsteps of individual leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X, BLM focuses its attention on collective engagement, particularly that of minority youth. BLM, as an organization that continues through its national network, contributes to the narrative of youth involvement in civic activism and places itself in discursive opposition to previous generations of black activists, particularly leaders in the Black Church faulted for falling prey to respectability politics, creating a generational gap that is not entirely unprecedented in the history of black activism. For example, the Southern Negro Youth Congress “organized protests against segregation and police brutality” as early as 1937 and young people in the Congress of Racial Equity “led some of the first antisegregation sit-ins” (Connor et al. 2016, 26). Much like BLM, “there was a clear generation gap [in 1990s activism] between young activists and the older generation” (ibid., 26), due to the latter group rarely identifying certain demands as youth focused – there was a sense that older activist leaders were turning a blind eye to the needs of youth, an issue that BLM has attempted to combat as well. It is important to note this history; it speaks to a larger trend within black activist tradition – a cyclical rift between generations and what they fight for informs the consciousness of black youth as they attempt to navigate their own

temporal, socio-cultural spaces, influencing what activism is deemed legitimate. There is a clear parallel between the generational rift that arose during activist movements of the late twentieth century and that exemplified in BLM rhetoric. The BLM movement and its constituents actively refuse to play a role in continuing the tactics of past black civic leaders who often used religion as a fallback for inaction.

Raised hands, praise hands, “Hands up!”

Despite the generational divide in activism that contributes to the fissure between the Black Church and BLM, a bridge can be reimagined through “Hands up!” and its performative power. This link between “Hands up!” and praise hands has not been made before, but it is essential to an understanding of how black communities form socio-political and racial identities. If “Hands up!” is read specifically in relation to contemporary events and social movements such as BLM, the gesture’s signifying power is misunderstood; its transience lies in its ability to cross time and space through various iterations. While I do not make the claim that the BLM movement is in any way directly or intentionally using gestural performative vulnerability or that they consider the “Hands up!” gesture to be the secular afterlife of religious ritual, I do argue that these constructs can be placed upon an understanding of the gesture in order to analyze its lasting political force. Additionally, in the juxtaposition of these two gestures, the theories of performative vulnerability and surrogation can be explored on a more in depth level; the gesture itself highlights concepts that have become integral to performance studies as a field.

The discourse on praise hands in the Black Church has often been associated with worship practices deemed “charismatic” in nature and cast with disparaging light as inauthentic or irreverent rather than a sign of vulnerability and promise. This type of engagement “expresses a colonial disposition towards black people according to which black bodies signify chaos” (Connor et al. 2016, 188). During the formation of the Black Church and its practices, hegemonic society (in this case the white colonizers of the black body and mind) deemed black religious expression as inauthentic due to its disavowal of passive, often bodily restrictive, traditional religious practices. This type of discourse delegitimizes black expressions of worship as excessive and not worthy of academic research. Dominant research regarding black worship expressivity does not look at the physical gesture of praise hands; I argue that this is because it is regarded as part of the performance of religiosity rather than as a gestural performative with a complex history. If one were to assess the “Hands up!” gesture through this paradigm of the “secular as an organic outgrowth of religious life” (ibid., 179), a larger hermeneutical project must be undertaken, one in which praise hands as a religious gesture is fleshed out and legitimated as relevant to the study of black worship practices; this is a project that I briefly begin in the following section of this paper.

Though not referred to explicitly by name, this gesture of surrender, need, and worship is seen throughout scripture, from the Psalms of the Old Testament (“lift up your hands to the holy place, and bless the Lord”) (Psalm 134:1-2, KJV) to the First Epistle of Paul to Timothy in the New Testament (“I desire, then, that in every place the people should pray, lifting up holy hands without anger or argument”) (1 Timothy 2:8). A quintessential example from the seventeenth chapter of the book of Exodus

describes a time when the Amalekites attacked the Israelites and Moses had to defend his people. The passage narrates:

As long as Moses held up his hands, the Israelites were winning, but whenever he lowered his hands, the Amalekites were winning. When Moses' hands grew tired... Aaron and Hur held his hands up... so that his hands remained steady until sunset. So, Joshua overcame the Amalekite army with the sword... [Moses] said, "Because hands were lifted up against the throne of the Lord, the Lord will be at war against the Amalekites from generation to generation." (Exodus 17:11-16, NIV)

This excerpt highlights several important aspects of raised hands symbolism in Christian religiosity, specifically notions of solidarity, tangible outcome, and surrender. Moses would not have succeeded if his companions were not there to hold up his hands. The very gesture of raised hands becomes a communal act in which everyone present is implicated in the outcome, and without that camaraderie, the war would have been lost. The stakes are high in this instance: there are tangible outcomes and bodies on the line if Moses's hands were to fall.⁷ The consequences of those fallen hands are collectively felt and require interpersonal responsibility – costs similar to that of the violence against black bodies in a Western society that has become increasingly hostile towards those who do not fit the white hegemonic ideal. Raised hands, through a surrender to God's will and an invitation to be filled with the strength of God's love, bring about the outcome that the gesture itself calls for. Moses's hands, in this context, become "weapons of the weak" (Braddick 2009, 28), a tactic employed when all else fails and one that is common not only to acts of benediction, but also as praise within the church; hence, the emergence of praise hands.

Praise hands follow this same biblical lineage as a gestural expression of both submission and gratefulness to God. James Etta Hughes, in *The Power and Purpose of Praise and Worship*, explains this phenomenon: "In the natural realm, raising the hands is a sign of surrender. In worship, it is a sign of sacrifice and surrender. It is a reaching out and thirsting after God. It also means an act of blessing God, an expression of prayer and supplication" (Hughes 2012, 41). These various significances of praise hands in the sacred sphere are not often explored in academia aside from a few brief instances. Reverend D.S. Russell describes "the body language used in some forms of charismatic worship where pent-up emotions are released, hands are raised to heaven, eyes become glazed, and bodies are 'stricken by the Spirit'" (Russell 1999, 124). As a biblically sanctioned practice of prayer in the Black Church, hands raised to heaven are often associated with the Holiness movement and Pentecostalism, a return to emotional worship as a way to be overcome by the Holy Spirit and sanctified in the eyes of God. Praise hands, because of its association with Pentecostalism, is often viewed generally as inauthentic, frenzied "ecstatic bodily comportment" (Hart 2016, 188), and therefore under-represented in historical accounts of black religiosity. The gesture in the Black Church represents one of black bodies being open to the will of the divine and this willingness to be acted upon by God is what constitutes the worshipping body in sacred space – the enactment of the gesture and its meaning is contingent upon a representation of surrender. Most instances of raised hands in the Bible and in expressions of black worship practices present an openness to being touched by God, a yielding of the body and soul so as to be shown mercy or justice through prayer. There is a simultaneous submission and confrontation mapped on the

body through performative gesture; hands raised in worship submits the physical and metaphysical body to God's will while also calling upon God to act, a confrontation that requires direct response from the divine. It is an acceptance of God's power into the body, an invitation for imbued strength in the face of adversity; through the gesture of submission, there is a space to be filled with strength. This space filled with power is the root of resistance through submission. There is a connection, then, between embodied prayer and social justice.

Why gesture?

The gesture, then, becomes the vehicle through which the two theories – surrogation and performative vulnerability – collide; gesture is a platform for the exploration of marginalized communities that have not been historically afforded a voice by hegemonic societies such as the white, Anglo, hetero-patriarchal structures of power in the United States. Despite the fact that BLM enacts a strategic refusal of past forms of activism and religious affiliation to imagine a new kind of community, the kinesthetic signs that the group utilizes to make its position known to broader audiences (i.e. “Hands up!”) follow recognizable patterns carried over from the church into the streets. By doing so, the intertextual gaps between a reading of praise hands and the “Hands up!” gesture can begin to be filled; a relationship between the narratives created by the life of the gesture in two spaces allows for interdiscursivity on a national scale. In *The Politics of Gesture: Historical Perspectives*, Michael Braddick discusses gesture as acts of power that come to shape reality through contextualization and attention to what plays out silently on bodies of the oppressed. He states, “By the politics of gesture we mean here how power relations, cultural or partisan identities and divergent social interests were expressed and contested non-verbally” (Braddick 2009, 12). Through an analysis of the relationship between politics and aesthetics, grounded in speech act theory, the authors claim that gestural language is action as utterance. Gesture has just as much communicative power as speech, a power that allows gesture to cross the boundaries of class, gender, and generational relationships to codify the experiences of the disempowered. I contend, then, that gestures such as “Hands up!” densely communicate meaning and the possibilities for solidarity through “what lies behind the silence of the disempowered in societies marked by sharp inequalities” (31). Marginalized communities are able to use gestures such as “Hands up!” when verbal speech is not available to them, which results in the politics of social encounters played out through embodiment rather than verbal language. Placing the body at the center of analysis allows for a restructuring of everyday cultural performances to have the power of legitimation; everyday struggles for power and authority are enforced by gestures of vulnerability, making the non-verbal a crucial site for performative enactment. Gestural communication, because of its inherent power in socio-political constructs, can come to shape interactions between marginalized people and the larger social structure.

Contemporary theorists such as Juana María Rodríguez and José Muñoz have already engaged in this work to bridge gesture as identity formation with social reform, particularly as it relates to the laboring minoritarian body. Through Rodríguez's work in queer gesture and public policy, “gesture can signal both those defined movements that we make with our bodies and to which we assign meaning, and an action that extends beyond itself, that reaches, suggests, motions” (2014, 2). She claims that a

gesture has the ability to both signify immediate meaning and also move beyond itself to “cite other gestures...and extend the reach of the self into the space between us” (2). This extension is the basis for the ways in which I explore the transience of gestures such as “Hands up!” and its citation of other gestures such as praise hands in the church; the gesture itself has the ability to cross social strata to connect black folk to one another. The body politic is informed by the gestures that inhabit it. Muñoz investigates gesture within the same vein, placing an emphasis on the historical archive of gesture as “a type of affective excess that presents the enabling force of a forward-dawning futurity” (Muñoz 2009, 23). The signal towards the future becomes essential in his understanding of queer belonging and community building; gesture is at the forefront of shaping what could be or what society could look like. In this way, bodily acts and an aesthetics of the Other are connected to political justice and cultural criticism just as readily as they are to the formation of societal status.

Gesture does not only alter one’s social position – i.e. raised hands as an act of strategic submission in the face of social injustice – but it also uses the physicality of the body to alter its own subjectivity. For example, “Hands up!” as a protest act both symbolizes the revolution while also tangibly opening up the black body, particularly the cis-hetero male black body, to a vulnerability that is not afforded to it within common stereotypes. Rather than the hardened, closed off, and unavailable stigma attached to the black male body, the “Hands up!” gesture allows that image to be broken. When hundreds or thousands of black bodies are enacting the same gesture across the United States, “Hands up!” takes on a sacral tone in the same way praise hands raised together in a church pull together a community: they are charged with the same values and societal critiques, and produce a sensation that “brings into being the possibility of a ‘we’” (Rodríguez 2014, 2). Gesture has the power to not only potentially change the socio-political status of minority bodies, but also create community through ideological and corporeal collective identity making.

Theories collide: Surrogation and performative vulnerability

The repeated action of raised hands in the sacred and secular contexts have the ability to be recognizable across time and space; “Hands up!” is identifiable across the country as a symbol of resistance whether enacted by Congress on the house floor or football players on a field in St. Louis, just as praise hands can be enacted in many religious spaces both in and out predominantly black denominations and still be discernable as a symbol of faith. The gesture has a type of cultural traffic and capital that gives it the power to display the vulnerability of the black body while also rallying those around it in solidarity. As mentioned earlier, the importance of the Black Church in black neighborhoods has arguably become diminished in an increasingly secular age, its role reoccupied by alternative sources of community building. However, Roach’s conceptualization of collective memory and surrogation is an apt lens through which one can come to understand the afterlife of the religious in the secular, which allows the power of the church to be reassessed and reconstituted.⁸ He places this concept within the specific historical framework of modernity and intercultural exchange in the circum-Atlantic. This focus highlights the way in which the collective memories of colonized groups, particularly that of the African diaspora, “retains its consequences” (Roach 1996, 4); that is, the memories of groups such as African Americans translate

across time and space because they have real-world stakes for black bodies and black minds in the face of oppression.

This same logic can be applied to the intertextual exchange between praise hands and “Hands up!,” in which one can “regard the secular as the dialectical other of the religious, an internal other that over time differentiates and becomes external to its religious habitat” (Hart 2016, 179). The gesture in the BLM context, through the group’s effort to become something other-than religiously bound, comes to preserve and carry forward the submission and surrender performed by praise hands into the secular sphere. The afterlife of the religious in the secular is a surrogation of praise hands for “Hands up!”: because the black community is sensitized to the gesture and can call upon collective memory, the latter gesture feels natural or familiar. Through the process of surrogation in which contemporary activism has attempted to negate or push back against religion, the notion that the “Hands up!” gesture did not begin with the death of Michael Brown can be easily overlooked. BLM’s rejection of Black Church history is both an act of strategic refusal, one that allows the movement to designate what activism means on its own terms, as well as an act of surrogation in which the secular has come to take the place of the church in political activism. Gestures of performative vulnerability were found in the church long before they were found in the streets. “Hands up!” is an attempt to fill the perceived gap in cultural memory. The act of surrogation and cultural fluency becomes essential when looking at both gestures as acts of performative vulnerability in which the subjugated body is consciously put on display to enact a form of social change, whether sacred or secular.

I contend that raised hands in worship has the force of presenting the submissive body to God in order to be heard and recognized (the very act of raising one’s hands in worship is an act of surrender) while also having a contingent effect through believed endowment of salvation, the gift of the Holy Spirit, etc.. There is an inherent vulnerability involved with this type of performative gestural utterance – the speaker, or in the case of praise hands, the body, risks the internal conditions of the speech act and the possibility of its failure or “infelicity”⁹ by putting power in the hands of the hearer (i.e. God). Derrida also discusses the inherent risk in performative utterances in *Signature Event Context*; his notion of quotability and context relies upon the pervasion of risk. The social and historical context of a performative can be altered through its citeability, allowing the utterance, writing, or gesture to go beyond cultural boundaries and signify various meanings at once. Derrida’s focus on text in response to Austin’s focus on speech also opens up the possibility of the performative to break from homogeneous notions of the archive, leaving space for gesture and gestural communication to be read as acts/documents. If Derrida is able to break the performative from speech, the performative has the capacity to be explored in other forms of communication (i.e. gesture).

Judith Butler furthers the discussion of performativity through her approach to precarity as the “politically induced condition of maximized vulnerability and exposure for populations exposed to arbitrary state violence, to street or domestic violence, or other forms not enacted by the states but for which the judicial instruments of states fail to provide sufficient protection or redress” (Butler 2009, ii). She introduces the model of vulnerability into precarity in order to expand notions of exposure to violence, particularly for underrepresented groups whose subjectivity is often dictated by society writ large. Communities or populations such as these are misrecognized in many ways

according to their position in society's hierarchy rather than their own agentic choices. In her later work, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, Butler uses these notions of precarity and performativity to explore mass public gathering, placing the site of political transformation at the center of particular group dynamics such as the Black Lives Matter network (Butler 2015, 48). She discusses the mobilization of precarious bodies and their ability to utilize strategic actions of the body – demonstration rallies or gestural protest for example – in order to form solidarity outside of one's direct community.

The notion of performative vulnerability underlies both praise hands and the "Hands up!" gesture; each one utilizes the presentation of surrender in minoritarian spaces to make bodies legible to institutions of power, articulate intersubjective identity, and in the case of the gesture in BLM, serve as the impetus for the reformation of political order. Akin to the black queer feminist foundations for the Black Lives Matter network, the concept of performative vulnerability has been cited and utilized by women of color to explore the ways in which Othered bodies negotiate their social realities. H. Nanjala Nyabola, a contributor to *African Women Under Fire: Literary Discourses in War and Conflict*, uses performative vulnerability to describe how refugees will position their testimony and written documentation in the most vulnerable light possible to elicit the sympathies of those who determine their safety status. For Nyabola, "performative vulnerability, is, therefore, the process of constructing a narrative of vulnerability around phenomena which the putative refugee...believes the fact-finder will be most responsive to, in the context of the refugee status determination" (Nyabola 2017, 179). These people are able to assert some level of control over their future by altering their present state of vulnerability. Similarly, Athena Athanasiou uses performative vulnerability to describe the ways in which dominant norms are positioned as vulnerable to aberrant or dangerous communities of people in order to keep the larger society in line (Butler et al. 2016, 256). However, The Serbian Woman in Black, Athanasiou's subject community, use the "double valence of vulnerability" to subvert that logic (9). Additionally, critical feminist social theory has taken up the notion of vulnerability as inherent to strategies of resistance. Judith Butler, for example, positions the body as discursive and never operating outside of language systems; bodies are constituted by language just as the subject is formed through acting and being enacted upon by the ritual aspects of language and gesture (Butler 1997, 5). Butler uses the example of hate speech to depict how this takes place, applying a multiplicity to derogatory speech that positions the body as vulnerable to language; it can be defined by the speech act outright or utilized to self-fashion one's subjectivity through subversion of the utterance's intention. According to Butler, the speech act "exceeds itself in past and future directions, an effect of prior and future invocations that constitute and escape the instance of utterance" (3). The body and its selfhood are dependent upon its vulnerability to speech acts (both spoken and gestural), but that allows for the rearrangement of social hierarchies through cooptation, recuperation, and re-ascription of meaning to the utterance or gesture. Due to this, a speech act has the possibility to change over time and come to signify something other than its original intention; in this case, the gestural act of raised hands changes over time to take on new meaning, from praise hands to "Hands up!" the gesture itself comes to occupy various forms of cultural relevance over time.

The vulnerability of the body to language takes new shape in theories of resistance when that vulnerability is “imagined as one of the conditions of the very possibility of resistance” (Butler et al. 2016, 1). This is the crux of how I am constructing performative vulnerability as a political and social force: vulnerability is not only a form of action, but it also carries implications for how one thinks about the subject of political agency. Praise hands, as an act of surrender to divine power, has an afterlife in the secular world in the shape of “Hands up!” due to the iterability of the gesture in various contexts within predominantly black spaces as well as the gesture’s power in the social sphere beyond semiotic representation. According to Anusha Kedhar, “submission and fear have become embedded in the black body, a part of its daily habitus¹⁰ [and] through repeated enactments, the hands up don’t shoot gesture has become part of the black body’s repertoire of survival” (Kedhar 2014). Raised hands become an enactment of submission, survival, and resistance because of its resonance in black consciousness across spatial and temporal contexts.

Similarly, if one positions “Hands up!” as emerging from the gestural rhetoric of praise hands in the Black Church, the gesture itself becomes a “strong connection between belief and behavior” (Witherington 2009, 21). The ritualization of raised hands in the church and its traces in the BLM gesture allow bodies to become the site for the codification of social practices and the intersubjectivity of gestural interactions. By putting these two spheres of influence (activism and religion) in conversation with one another, the body can be read as subject to the state through systems such as police enforcement, just as it is subject to God by systems such as institutional religion. The physical bodies of black folk frame social encounters with each gestural iteration of raised hands, whether that be in prayer or protest. Jane Rhodes claims, “[Hands up! is] a universal symbol of surrender...it’s also a very simple gesture, and that’s part of what makes something resonate” (Grinberg 2015). Rather than take this at face value, I find the heart of Rhodes’s statement to be in her recognition of the resonance that gestural surrender has in black activist communities. This universal symbol *does* something – it “*compels* us to confront the aliveness of the black body as a force of power and resistance” (Kedhar 2014) even in this display of surrender. The physical embodiment of vulnerability is a speech act that “produce[s] certain consequential effects upon the feelings, thoughts, or actions of the audience” (Austin 1962, 101), which in turn produces social change. However, by discussing the resonance that Rhodes indicates solely through a secularist lens, there is an erasure of the importance that the same sign of surrender and vulnerability has when mobilized in black religious expression. By connecting the gesture to raised hands in the Black Church, I argue that “Hands up!” draws upon a lineage of religious gestural memory in order to have performative power as a signifier of black struggle and political activism. A simplification of raised hands as emerging out of secularist activism reduces the power of the gesture itself throughout time, particularly the power it has in faith-based identity formation.

Conclusion

Similar to Roach’s understanding of circum-Atlantic memory, “Hands up!” is a performance of remembrance just as much as it is a performance of resistance. Black bodies have been implicitly deemed disposable or dispensable by hegemonic systems of power that have historically positioned that same body as criminal or reprobate.

Each iteration of “Hands up!” provides an echo of Michael Brown’s body and the pain that it endured – a pain emblematic of black bodies writ large. A BLM protestor who raises their hands in the face of a police line, Harvard students who raise their hands against ‘business as usual,’ and a high school football team lying down with hands in the air all symbolize resistance, but one that was fought for with the literal lives of minority people. It is a resistance fraught with loss and the surrender of one’s corporeal being to the violence of an oppressor. The enactment of “Hands up!” allows for a slippage between forgetting and forging a path; as the gesture moves further from its original impetus (the death of Brown), it forges its position as cultural capital. Roach claims, there are “pleasures and torments of incomplete forgetting” (Roach 1996, 7). As the gesture moves through time and space, activism takes hold of its power and pushes forward the fight for equality and civil justice, but with the knowledge that it is built upon the backs of the fallen. Praise hands follow this same sentiment: each enactment of raised hands in sacred space allows for the recognition that one has to lose something in order for something else to be gained. As hands rise in prayer, the body invites the will of God to embolden and supply strength, but it also presents the body in surrender to that will; the religious body submits itself as a canvas. In both cases, the body is both reduced and reassured, providing a space for change. “Hands up!” as a surrogation of praise hands can be discussed in this same light – in order for the former to succeed, recognition has to be paid to the latter, a simultaneous remembrance and resistance.

An analysis of these gestures in juxtaposition with one another provides a platform to discuss the futurity of racially charged activism and how it relates to and is potentially influenced by the religious sphere. Performative vulnerability works to critique neo-liberalism and its tendency to position minority bodies as vulnerable and therefore in need of dominant society to survive. In this vein, *gestures* of performative vulnerability place bodies on the frontline in that fight against injustices towards marginalized communities and subvert the vulnerability of those minority bodies to constitute power. Physical acts such as “Hands up!” and praise hands present the body as vulnerable to an outside actor, but subvert that vulnerability to assert control and agency in various spaces. This specific gesture of performative vulnerability – raised hands – maintains cultural relevancy across time and space because it capitalizes on the collective memory of black consciousness. Black people have historically had to find ways of subversion towards ideologically enforced systematic oppression; accounts of resistance have included the body as a site for socio-political change, which pushes back against the modern mind versus body divide and delves into the embodiment of transgressive ideals. A mobilization of performative vulnerability in spaces of oppression allows black communities to draw upon the symbolism and strength of gesture throughout generations of resistance.

Leah Francis Gunning, author of *Ferguson & Faith: Sparking Leadership & Awakening Community*, provides a pragmatic step in this fight for black bodies. She states, “We must awaken to the awareness of our own privilege, build relationships in our own communities, and connect this awareness to the corresponding action in order to effect change for a more radically just world” (Gunning 2015, 158). This is the larger project to which this work is contributed: to build and bolster African American communities spatially and temporally in order to form systems of change. There are limitations, of course, to the discussion of performative vulnerability that have to be

explored in the continuation of this larger project. For example, the gesture as used in the Black Lives Matter movement is often accompanied by the phrase: “Hands up! Don’t shoot!” While I argue that the gesture itself has more performative power than the verbal utterance, it is an aspect of the cultural power of the movement as a whole that must be considered. However, I argue that the gesture as a performative action of vulnerability, has the power to cross boundaries and maintain cultural capital in a way that the phrase does not. The physical body, exposed and open, is innately political and the “Hands up!” gesture, through an assessment of performative vulnerability, has the power to ascribe new meaning to marginalized bodies. This type of work opens the field to future discussions of gestures such as the raised fist during the Black Power movement, the laying of hands during church services, etc. Communities are not insular and the formation of self in relation to the whole is performed intersubjectively, through an understanding of the body as it is perceived in more than one space. This requires a non-linear theoretical construct such as surrogation, which posits the sublimation of one gesture for another with the awareness that it will never be a perfect fit and therefore never a complete surrogacy. The incompleteness of “Hands up!” as a surrogation of praise hands allows performative vulnerability to fill in the gaps between the sacred and secular in ways that have yet to be explored by academics. Layering these two spheres illuminates new knowledge production that raised hands as a gesture contributes to. I do not claim that this is a project expected of the church or activists, but I do argue that it is one that requires attention nonetheless. The gestures themselves and the political moment in which the United States is currently situated require this type of work to be done.

“Hands up!” has become the contemporary national symbol for black resistance just as praise hands have come to be associated with black religiosity. Both operate within systems of cultural recognition beyond the bounds of the gestures themselves. The physical gesture of raised hands has come to signify submission and resistance simultaneously – to hegemonic power structures, police brutality against black bodies, and centuries of systematic oppression. The vulnerable black body is on display and it invites action; while the gesture calls forth a response from its recipients, it also opens up the space for bodily harm and injury at the hands of those interlocutors. The gesture *does* something in a way that is not just a memorial to Brown, but performs an action of resistance through the vulnerable body. An attempt to explore the history, embodiment, and transmutability of raised hands through theories of surrogation and performative vulnerability broadens one’s understanding of what constitutes as legitimate forms of research. BLM, though it pushes back against the Black Church, can be read as part of a larger narrative through the examination of “Hands up!” and praise hands as acts of submission, resistance, and perhaps most importantly, acts of solidarity.

Notes

¹ For further information on the event itself and the controversy surrounding it, see Buchanan et al 2014.

² The utilization of hailing here refers to Louis Althusser’s concept of interpellation, a process in which ideology engenders or constitutes individual subject identities by hailing them into social interactions. Additionally, certain situations, contexts, and

events call for specific types of action. According to Althusser, “all ideology hails or interpellates concrete individuals as concrete subjects” and claims, “ideology ‘acts’ or ‘functions’ in such a way that it ... ‘transforms’ the individual into subjects.” In this way, social forces rather than personal agency form subjects (Althusser 2006, 105).

³ The historical Black Church is composed of seven major black denominations that make up roughly 80% of religiously identified black citizens in the United States – African Methodist Episcopal, African Methodist Episcopal Zion, Christian Methodist Episcopal, National Baptist Convention, USA, Inc., National Baptist Convention of America, Unincorporated, Progressive National Baptist Convention, and the Church of God in Christ.

⁴ E. Patrick Johnson’s *Sweet Tea: Back Gay Men of the South* highlights the hyper-masculinity that pervades the Black Church, particularly the homophobia and demonization of homosexuality by some African-American church leaders. While Johnson acknowledges that this is not always the case, he provides ethnographic narrative accounts of instances in which the church and southern heterosexual/hyper-masculine idealism worked around issues of direct homophobia by condemning promiscuity and using “the rhetoric of gay promiscuity [as] a tool...to justify institutionalized discrimination” (Johnson 2008, 430). Johnson’s exploration of gay culture within the context of the south reveals much of the biases and prejudices of the Black Church towards queer and female identifying people.

⁵ Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham coined the term “politics of respectability” in her book *Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church* to describe the ways in which black people – women in particular – would attempt to enhance the respectability of their communities in the eyes of white society by building schools, integrating into white culture, and disassociating themselves from negative stereotypes. However, this methodology has come to be associated with assimilationist ideologies and the condemnation of black people who do not fit the stereotypes placed upon them by society writ large, delegitimizing those experiences as expressions of black life.

⁶ For example, Rev. Traci Blackmon (Christ the King United Church of Christ), Rev. Starsky Wilson (St. John’s Church the Beloved Family – Church of Christ), and Rev. Osagyefo Sekou (Friendly Temple Missionary Baptist Church).

⁷ I do not attempt to make a truth claim about the validity or invalidity of the *Bible*, but rather position this excerpt as part of the historical lineage of raised hands in the church.

⁸ William D. Hart’s article, “Secular Coloniality: The Afterlife of Religious and Racial Tropes,” explores “the religious constructions of racial identity and their reproduction in secular discourse of colonial tropes that are common in both scholarly and popular accounts of religion” (Hart 2016, 179). While Hart focuses on the tropes of voodoo, fetish, and frenzy, I use his notion of the secular “afterlife” of religious and racial imagery as a framework to explore the idea that secular activism has come to reoccupy the role that religious activism had in the late 20th century.

⁹ The failure of a performative utterance is in reference to Austin’s notion of “felicitous” and “infelicitous.” The rules that Austin considered necessary for a performative to be “felicitous” required the utterance to be (1) uttered by a person designated to do so, (2)

be within the appropriate context, and (3) take the intention of the utterer into account. If these aspects were not present, then the intended act would be deemed “infelicitous,” or an unsuccessfully achieved performative. (Austin 1962, 14).

¹⁰ Habitus, as used here, is “the way society becomes deposited in persons in the form of lasting dispositions, or trained capacities and structures propensities to think, feel and act in determinant ways, which then guide them” (Wacquant 2005, 316).

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