<u>**Attributing Linguistic Authority to the Phrase "I Can't Breathe,"**</u>
<u>**as Authentic to the Movement for Black Lives**</u>

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<u>Intro</u>

Breathing is a biologically involuntary response to the need for air. Air is an essential component to preserve life, but more than that, air is life (Ingold, 2020; Apata, 2020). You don't *need* to actively think about breathing until your very existence depends on it. To some, breathing is perceived as a mundane process, a process that tends to go unnoticed, but not for anthropologists. In recent years, social scientists have wondered if air functions more than just elemental bonds (Apata, 2020), have commented on air's material value (Ingold, 2020), and have poignantly researched the enduring urgency of Black breath (Jolaosho, 2021). Air as a cultural attribute is a topic that continues to see academic production, however recent events have led this concept to profoundly deepen its social indexicality.

Last year was met with humanitarian disparities encompassing the global coronavirus pandemic and a global revitalization for the movement for Black lives. The intersection of the two movements has created a particularly visible social phenomenon: the objectification of Black breath and its socially suffocating effects. In May 2020, George Floyd was killed at the knee of ex-Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin. It was documented that George Floyd cried "I can't breathe," at least twenty-two times[1]. As Chauvin kept George Floyd's neck pinned down for 8 minutes and 46 seconds, every plea for air went unnoticed. I hope to anthropologically analyze these immortalized words further to demonstrate their authentic relationship within the Black Lives Matter movement. I aim to correlate my understanding of how the objectification of

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[1] Minnesota Judicial Branch. *Axon_Body_3_Video_2020-05-25_2008.* PDF file. Accessed 11/28/2020. https://www.mncourts.gov/mncourtsgov/media/High-Profile-Cases/27-CR-20-12951-TKL/Exhibit207072020.pdf

air perpetuates the functions of contemporary racism as a form of erasure to the origins of the Black Lives Matter movement and its social continuity through the mobilization of the phrase "I can't breathe." These distinguishing social factors serve to support an articulative stance that the phrase "I can't breathe," is socially iconic and linguistically authenticates the Movement for Black Lives.

1. BLM as a Social Movement Specific to the 21st Century

The Black Lives Matter movement was initiated out of a need for social reform, sparked by the 2013 murder of Trayvon Martin by George Zimmerman. An infamous adjuration was expressed the day after the acquittal of Zimmerman through Alicia Garza's words: "#blacklivesmatter is a movement attempting to visualize what it means to be black in this country. Provide hope and inspiration for collective action to build collective power to achieve collective transformation. rooted in grief and rage but pointed towards vision and dreams," (as cited in Chase, 2018: 1096). Mr. Martin's death event catalyzed academics, professionals, and community members at large to further dissect and question the deeply rooted systems of racial biases. But what the American society experienced was much more meaningful than a 'great awakening'. It represents a true socio-cultural breakthrough and the ability to empathize collectively to identify and dismantle the truly malefic cultural weakness of anti-Blackness: Black Lives Matter.

This era progresses the legal challenges of socially instituted laws that are meant to guide the accurate depiction of the civil standards expected from the American dream. Although we can confidently recognize that social scientists record the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement as a continuation of the Civil Rights era (Clayton, 2018), some academics suggest it to be a new

type of social progress for the 21st-century [2], completely separate from what the 1960s

accomplished in terms of social justice (Riley and Peterson, 2020). But the intentional

suppression of racialized cultural groups is not a new conundrum, especially when we account

for the historical processes and effects of colonization, something that American history is all too

familiar with. The unequivocal ways of BLM acting as an extension of what was accomplished

in the Civil Rights era can be simply proven by how racio-implications are being modernly

exposed. As sociologist Jean Cohen describes, "the old patterns of collective action certainly

continue to exist. In some movements they may even be statistically preponderant. It would thus

be futile to speak of *the* new identity of [such] movements," (1985: 665). Additionally, Cohen

engages paradigmatic functions of particular social structures to qualify potential movements as

contemporary (postindustrial). The "postindustrial society" represents new forms through which

cultural processes take place, especially the production, distribution, and storage of knowledge.

These shifts in social functions are indicative of specific sociocultural forms that are efficacious

in its particularities, like producing its own social norms. In point, a postindustrial society cannot

stand alone as a concept that has a definite beginning and a definite end. Contemporary societies

are social systems that have gone through structural shifts that are dependently adapted from

preindustrial societies. As it may evoke *newness,* social movements that occur do so within the

confines of specific societal contexts. So, Black Lives Matter should then be regarded as an

extension of the Civil Rights movement *specific* to the 21st century. Scholars who may suggest

Black Lives Matter as just a social consequence of these highly publicized fatal encounters with

the intent to create a new type of social movement would be perpetuating delinquent attitudes

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[2] Riley and Peterson frame their work in the 2020 research publication titled "I Can't Breathe: Assessing the Role of Racial Resentment and Racial Prejudice in Whites' Feelings toward Black Lives Matter," in a way that encompasses the notion that Black Lives Matter was manifested and is happening during a *post-racial America.* Post-racial America is defined by social scientists as being a concept indicative of a society where racial prejudice and discrimination no longer exist. It can be critiqued in a way that this data set is derived from an ideology that believes racism does not persist in 21st century America, thus validating a claim that the research regards BLM as a unique social movement separate from the Civil Rights Era.

towards the fighting communities. The failure of appropriate acknowledgment of historical racial subjugation would be to, as Riley and Peterson state, "[suggest] that white Americans have had some sort of racial epiphany and are ready to dismantle [at least] four hundred years of white supremacy," (2020: 498). But then, social scientists need to ponder the question as to the specific social parameters the movement for Black lives is acting within or rather, how BLM is a social movement specific to the 21st century.

2. The Shift from Overt to Covert Subjugation through Racialized Objectification

Social scientists have utilized hard historical approaches to understand systems of overtly racial subjugations. American history is known for the explicit oppressor, oppressed relationships and systematically suffocating and unjust institutions: Christina Swarns gives us just one example of the many historical instances, "between 1877 and 1950, nearly 4000 people- mostly Black- were lynched in the American south. Tragically, law enforcement officers were all too often involved in these atrocities," (2016: 1023). The outwardly acted subjugation of Black bodies didn't culminate with Juneteenth[3] but rather took on a systematically structured form to further enforce racialized social boundaries through subjectively legal social positions such as law enforcement and social policies like the Jim Crow laws. The statutes of true limitations inundated the sociopolitical standards of "separate but equal" all throughout the states to seemingly unite them on the social premise of an anti-Black America. But the Civil Rights Era (1950-1963) challenged those overt racial biases through, most notably, protests, marches, and public speeches[4]. 1964 was met with the passing of the Civil Rights Bill which essentially instituted public desegretion,

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[3] Oxford Dictionary defines Juneteenth as a holiday celebrated on 19 June to commemorate the emancipation of enslaved people in the US. The holiday was first celebrated in Texas, where on that date in 1865, in the aftermath of the Civil War, the enslaved were declared free under the terms of the 1862 Emancipation Proclamation.
[4] "The Civil Rights Act of 1964: A Long Struggle for Freedom." n.d. Library of Congress. https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/civil-rights-act/civil-rights-era-timeline.html.

protected the right to vote, and prohibited race and sex based discrimination within employment opportunities. The timeline of this resistance against social inequity is important to better understand the institutional intricacies at play. The endurance of The Civil Rights Era acted as a tremendous force in the wake of overt brutality against Black life. However pivotal, the unseen influences of the internal mind then became even more emphatic because taking away lawful authority doesn't subsequently alter the intrinsic attitude or implied bias of the social actor. Implied racial biases can take on many social forms including those of linguistic structures like mock speech (Hill, 1998), health care structures and their outcomes (Hall et al., 2015; Page and Thomas, 1994), and political structures like gerrymandering. What social scientists have come to understand is that these socio-cultural institutions are representative of particular sets of values, or ideologies (Kroskrity, 2004; Rosa and Burdick, 2016; Van Dijk, 1995; Hughey, 2015). But as ideologies are guided perspectives of the individual, what social scientists have then suggested is how the continuation of racialized biases in a covert, or veiled, manner can overtake a collective perspective, as is the case with the concept of White public space (Hill, 1998). Jane Hill conceptualizes White public space as being constructed in part by indirectly indexical racial messages, or covert racist discourse (1998: 684). Helán Page and Brooke Thomas define *White public space* as "a morally significant set of contexts that are the most important sites of the practices of a racializing hegemony, in which Whites are invisibly normal, and in which racialized populations are visibly marginal," (as cited in Hill, 1998: 682). Essentially, this concept is a social phenomenon that produces and perpetuates the normative expectation of White racist attitudes because of how *whiteness* is privileged or socially favored over *non-whiteness* in public spaces. That's to say that within White space a *non-white* person would be covertly, or even overtly, categorized as "not belonging" or "out of place" like they are

"committing a crime" for simply existing in that White space (Hughey, 2015). Thus, public

spaces are sites for hegemonic practices in which social collusion permeates, as if it has an

authoritative stance on who can breathe and who cannot based on specific phenotypes. Under

these suggestions, the concept of race[5] can then be universally recognized as a socially

constructed ideology and space can then be recognized as subjectively racialized. So then, if

White space is racially subjective what is the objective? Essentially, the objective of White space

is to objectify.

The process of objectification occurs alongside thingification[6] wherein things, including

ideas, thoughts, and non-physical concepts, are given physical materiality. This is conceptualized

in a way that applies a ubiquitousness to a thing or object but does so in a way that manifests

directly from the consciousness of the social actor. In this way, actions within White space

transform its essential component of air or breath into a meaningless, mundane, and trivial object

(Apata, 2020). Under this definition, the perspective or reality of being subjugated to the

objectification of air or breath, as is the case with Black bodies, means that social events that

occur within White spaces have the possible propensity to conclude with a suffocating effect. A

supporting example to these suggestions can be evidenced from speech events between law

enforcement officers and unarmed Black men that involve the initial verbal expression of the

phrase "I can't breathe," and a subsequently suffocating effect (see section 4). In this discourse

pattern[7], the Black body is subjugated to the objectification of air. So, when the phrase "I can't

breathe," is vocalized into the White space, breathing air becomes the object of attention. Treated

[5] In this context *race* is referred to as the idea that the human species is divided into distinct groups on the basis of inherited physical and behavioral differences.

[6] Thingification refers to the process of turning something into a thing, and exists alongside objectification in materialist theory.

[7] I refer to this type of discourse as a pattern because it has been recorded and documented as occurring at least 70 times since 2013. Future research endeavors include the detailed examination, comparison, and analysis of these observed patterns of discourse.

as an object, breath and air then become trivial and these pleas are disregarded. As Gabriel Apata argues, "the concept of suffocation is then introduced as a theoretical basis for focusing on contemporary racial injustice," (Apata, 2020: 242). This discourse pattern is indicative of contemporary anti-Blackness because of the intricately covert racial implications that are systemically hidden by the normalized systems of *whiteness*. The invisible objectification of modern racism is not *new* but merely a shift of tactics originating from a historical lineage of overtly racist ideologies. These structural disparities represent the *specific* social parameters that Black Lives Matter acts within. So then, we need to analyse the role that contemporary racism has within the movement for Black life.

3. Contemporary Racism as Erasure and Why That Matters

Jane Hill's observations can be used to distinguish how erasure and socio-cultural contradiction systems sustain the immensely intricate nuances of modern racist culture. "Racist culture is organized in such a way that white racism can persist, and yet be deniable or even invisible to those who participate in it," (Hill, 2008: 178). Hill details the utmost importance of folk theory on the erasive effects that are observed with covert racist discourse. Folk theory of racism is defined as believing "race" to be a primitive biological category rather than a social construction. This approach tends to hold that people naturally assume "social levels on racial lines," (Hill, 2008: 178) conforming to the idea that "racism" is what happens when marginalized populations regard some races as inferior to others while acting on behalf of those beliefs. The folk theory of race as a biological category divides the fact that race is both a socio-cultural concept and a socio-political implication and perpetuates notions of "kind" as "race" with, as Hill states, unspoken precision (2008: 179). However, this theory itself cannot explain *why* racism persists,

rather, we should ask the question of *how* this theoretical framework endures. "In folk theory, a racist is a person who believes that people of color are biologically inferior to whites, so that white privilege is deserved and must be defended," (Hill, 2008: 6) while racially resentful ideologies aim to justify actions of racially charged attitudes by taking defense. Riley and Peterson's quantitative research on *the Role of Racial Resentment and Racial Prejudice in Whites' Feelings toward Black Lives Matter* cites that scholars depict four themes within the workings of racial resentment, which are: Blacks should try harder, Blacks are no longer the subject of discrimination, Blacks should work their way up without any special favors, and Blacks have already received undeserved advantages. Riley and Peterson explain the framework further, "the racial resentment model posits that Blacks' economic and social conditions are due to their own failures and not to any systematic treatment," (2020: 502). Essentially, racially resentful ideologies act as a substantial force for understanding how folk theory revolves around contemporary racism. Contemporary racism utilizes a racially resentful ideological stance as a justifiable defense mechanism against contradicting discourse of racist actions. The relationship between racial resentment and folk theoretical enculturation works together to passively and aggressively erase contradictions, which can help us further identify erasure as contemporary racism. Irvine and Gal define erasure as a process in which ideology renders some persons or activities invisible, "facts that are inconsistent with the ideological scheme go unnoticed or get explained away," (2000: 38). Erasure can be used as a general term to explain the outcomes of social implications within other socio-cultural concepts as well, just as history has privileged the white narrative allowing for a certain portrayal to resonate through time. There is a lineage of at least 400 years of enslavement to serve as a reminder of how American identity was built and established, however, Americans are rarely taught the extent to which it has inflicted damage.

This is an example of systemic erasure. Contemporary racism is marked by covertly conserving racially encultured ideologies through erasure. Contemporary racism's implicit erasure intends to specifically socially sterilize and culturally assimilate the collective identity to seemingly render any alternate breath or voice useless and meaningless. So why does this matter? Erasure can serve to explain observed patterns of modern racist discourse between law enforcement and unarmed Black men, as well as its outcome which has been observed as inciting social suffocation.

4. Identifying Modern Racist Discourse Between Law Enforcement and Unarmed Black Men

The significance of the historical evidence is paramount to apply appropriate attributions of the authoritative stance of authenticity to the Movement for Black Lives. The phrase of analysis is "I can't breathe." I exemplify the first recorded speech event where this phrase was used contemporarily. This event represents discourse between law enforcement and an unarmed Black man, named Eric Garner. I present and analyze the discourse involving Mr. Garner with the utmost respect. It is important to note my intention to represent these words appropriately, respectfully, and diligently.

Eric Garner, 2014

Officers: Alright, right. Let's stop, he's down. Get ya hands buddy. Garner: [gasps like gurgling sound] Officer: Put ya hand behind ya back Garner: [muffled] I can't br...I can't breathe! I can't... I can't breathe! [officer is pinning Garner's head down on the cement] Garner: I can't breathe. I can't breathe. I can't breathe. Bystander: [recording] Once again, police being up on people I love right here. Garner: I can't breathe. I can't breathe. I can't breathe. I can't breathe. I can't breathe. I can't breathe. Officer [to bystander recording]: Back up. Back up, then get up on those steps. Garner: I can't breathe. I can't breathe. I can't breathe. I can't breathe. I can't breathe.

> I can't breathe.
> Bystander: Okay.
> Officer: Back up.
> Garner: I can't breathe.
> Bystander: All he did was break up a fight and this what happens for breaking up a fight. This shit's crazy.
> Officers: Everybody back up! Everybody back up!
> [at this point there is nothing audible and no physical movements coming from Garner. There's eight officers now surrounding him.]

Eric Garner and the NYPD officers exchange words pertaining to assumptions of Garner selling loose cigarettes, which is understood to only be a minor law infraction.[8] From the perspective of Garner, this is not the first instance in which he believes he has been harassed by the New York Police Department (NYPD). When Garner asked for clarification of the accusations, Officer Pantaleo responded with an attitude of disregard. Pantaleo wasn't able to adequately show or describe the accusations. An interesting stance was taken by the officer talking to Garner, posing the question, "Why you making a scene for?" This questioning could be analyzed as a phrasing to justify his intentions of the situation as if he wanted to rationalize his actions based on Garner being emotionally charged and out of control. One officer proceeded to enact the choke-hold from behind Garner. The officer in front of him proceeds to grab Garner's wrists. Four surrounding officers close in as Garner is thrown to the ground by the officer using the chokehold on Garner's neck. Garner didn't say anything until he was on the ground. Once Garner is on the ground, Officer Pantaleo may have felt that he had gained back some control of the situation by his familiar regard referring to Garner as "buddy". Garner's view on the severity of the event was imminent by the way he continuously stated "I can't breathe."

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[8] Extensive research on the circumstances resulting in Eric Garner's death came up with little to no officiated documents to provide credible evidence. A legal disclosure decision was filed in 2015, denying the public release of the court minutes and documents pertaining to the lawsuit filed on behalf of Eric Garner. I chose to transcribe a video taken from a sharing platform that combined two recordings from two separate perspectives of the event. The total length of the video was 10 minutes 34 seconds, however, the speech event that included Eric Garner's participation only occurred for 4 minutes and 8 seconds.

Again and again, the officers did not acknowledge, understand, or respect his stance. 4

minutes 8 seconds into the video, it exhibited Eric Garner's last words. Eric Garner cried

"I can't breathe" at least eighteen times during this speech event that, unfortunately,

ended in his death. These words are specific to Eric Garner; they represent his experience

and his voice. The only thing we know is that the outcome was deemed justifiable by

legal standards of using less-than-lethal force for the officer(s) to gain and remain in

control of the situation. So then we need to ask the question, how does this event fit into

the culturally suffocating paradigm I describe? This event is directly indicative of a

modern deviation of the racial target from the Black body to the suppression of air.

During the event, Eric Garner was intellectually discredited as the aftermath indicates by

CCRB v. Officer Daniel Pantaleo case no. 2018-19274 that "officers at the scene testified

at trial that they believed Mr. Garner could have been feigning unconsciousness as part of

a ruse to avoid arrest. During questioning, Damico agreed that Mr. Garner might have

been 'playing possum.'" The officers were negligent to the possible outcome of a fatal

interaction without much recourse.

Contradiction engulfs this event, of which can be cross-referenced by a few key points:

> 1. 1993 New York Assembly Memorandum A10170 implements an immediate
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> ban on choke-hold tactics within the New York State police departments. The
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> NYPD patrol guide defines choke-holds as "includ[ing], but is not limited to, any
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> pressure to the throat or windpipe which may prevent or hinder breathing to
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> reduce intakes of air."
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> 2. *CCRB v. Officer Daniel Pantaleo case no. 2018-19274* affirms that after the
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> event that resulted in Eric Garner's death, "[officer] Damico processed the arrest

paperwork. The online arrest report has a field labeled 'Force Used', .. in which [officer] Damico entered 'No.'"

3. *CCRB v. Officer Daniel Pantaleo case no. 2018-19274* states that "at trial, Lieutenant Bannon explained that his intent was not to minimize the significance of a civilian's death, but to put the officers 'mind[s] at ease' after a 'bad situation.'"

4. *CCRB v. Officer Daniel Pantaleo case no. 2018-19274* indicates that "when asked what he [Pantaleo] understood a chokehold to be, he erroneously replied that, 'you take your two hands and you're choking their throat or if you use your forearm grasped with the other hand and you pull back with your forearm onto the windpipe preventing him from breathing.' The investigators then inquired as to whether he had used a prohibited chokehold to bring Mr. Garner to the ground or secure him physically. Respondent answered, 'No, I did not.'"

These key points help to better gauge the possible intentions, implications, and insinuations, as well as their overall understanding of their own cognizant processes of the event. As Pantaleo didn't falter and his claims remained consistent, one could reasonably suggest that he truly didn't believe that what he did was overly forceful, or indicative of being restrictive. This stance in itself contradicts the 1993 New York Assembly Memorandum A10170 which essentially bans choke-holds and any maneuver that restricts breathing for NYPD officers, as well as the autopsy report findings of immense hemorrhaging in the immediate area of question. Pantaleo sensibly articulated what a possible restrictive maneuver entails. Through his required training he demonstrated his understanding of the potential consequences of applying such tactics as well as the reason as to why such tactics are prohibited, *CCRB v. Officer Daniel Pantaleo case no.*

2018-19274 cites the *2006 Recruit Manual for Department Physical Training and Tactics* "this directive is intended to reduce the possibility of in-custody deaths by limiting the tactics that hinder breathing or reduce air intake." This set of evidence can provide the necessary components to discern *how* this physical reality happened, but then we need to examine *why* this event manifested an execution.

Interestingly, contradiction can be attributed if we consider these key points alongside anthropological theory while referencing the speech event. Pantaleo's actions are clearly identifiable. The discourse transcription documents that Eric Garner verbally contradicted Pantaleo's accusations.

> Garner: [...] Are you serious? I don't do nothing, what'd I do? Take me down for what? I didn't sell anything. I didn't do nothing, I've been standing here the whole time minding my business.
> Officer: I watched you.
> Garner: You watch me do what, who'd I sell cigarette to?

Subsequently, this verbal contradiction was cognizantly received as physical resistance to Pantaleo. Pantaleo then perceived Garner's verbal contradiction as physical resistance, which allowed for an intrinsic justification to employ physical restraint. Pantaleo's prerogative was to restrict and negate the contradiction by any means necessary. I could go as far to say that Pantaleo confidently misrecognized the exchange of information within the interaction because of how he cognizantly equated a verbal contradiction and physical contradiction as the same. Pantaleo's justification, acting through his misrecognized perception, can potentially be explained as that he [Garner] deserved it, that he shouldn't have resisted, or maybe that he was already at an advantage because of his large stature. But it's important to remember, as I have indicated in previous sections, the way contemporary racism permeates the social strata is by way of racially resentful ideology acting through erasure by objectification, no longer

subjugating the Black body but rather oppressing Black breath. Key point no. 3 exemplifies that "at trial, Lieutenant Bannon explained that his intent was not to minimize the significance of a civilian's death, but to put the officers 'mind[s] at ease' after a 'bad situation.'" This is an intentionally negligent stance to take. It could be perceived that the continued belief that he [Garner] deserved it, that he shouldn't have resisted, or maybe that he was already at an advantage because of his large stature was the reason why they misrecognized Garner's explicit pleas of "I can't breathe," 18 times. After this point, Eric Garner no longer contributes to the speech event. It is reasonably understood that this represents the time of his expiry. Through their actions and inactions, Pantaleo's misrecognized perceptions, and perpetuated stance of resentment, the officers involved in this event denied Eric Garner his humanitarian right to access air without restriction. Pantaleo's claim of non-guilt may indicate his intentions were not to inflict harm, much less death. However, the metaphysical attributes, as exemplified, can apply a different notion that index an implied nature of erasure, underlined by the veil of contemporary racism.

5. *I Can't Breathe* is Authentically Iconic

Eric Garner's linguistic continuation of "I can't breathe," was rendered voiceless, but not quite meaningless. In 2014, *we,* as a collective American society tethered to and by technoscapes, witnessed Eric Garner's death event through the multimodality of social media platforms. Although Black Lives Matter (BLM) was coined just one year prior by Alicia Garza in response to the acquittal of George Zimmerman in the case of Trayvon Martin's murder, Eric Garner's highly publicized execution fueled the fire for BLM to gain social momentum. The widespread distribution of a bystander video, seemingly overnight, triggered public outrage that helped to establish Black Lives Matter as a tool of cultural connection. The phrase, "I can't breathe," then

became *iconic*, which is defined by Irvine and Gal as "a transformation of the sign relationship between linguistic features and the social images with which they are linked," (2000: 37). The social image of Eric Garner's last words indexed the reality of his lived experience. But, it is the social implementation of his last words that have started a collective identity of shared trauma. We can analyze the global mobilization of the phrase "I can't breathe," as the instant in which it transformed the meaning into a social representation. This linguistic feature used within the context of Black Lives Matter *is* the relationship the movement holds with the oppressive anti-Black American systems. As previous explanations serve, BLM's inherent nature is to voice the voiceless and to breathe for the breathless. It works as a system, immediately necessary, against anti-Black brutality. Irvine and Gal further the process of iconization in which it "entails the attribution of cause and immediate necessity to a connection that may be only historical [or] contingent," (Irvine and Gal, 2000: 37). The circumstances in which the phrase "I can't breathe," has circulated are with historical intent, specific to Eric Garner's existence and it is contingent on the continuity of anti-Black brutality. It signals an immediacy for a modern movement of social activism aimed to disassociate the normative social expectations (Cohen, 1985) of anti-Black spaces, but more importantly anti-Black breath.

"I can't breathe," proposes an opportunity to empathize with the subjugated Black reality. Empathy positions itself within the social strata to collectively identify the cultural weaknesses from which the need for empathy has emerged. Empathy allows for social actors to culturally orient their perspectives within the movement. It serves as an emotionally conscious alignment alongside that of the lived experience, while maintaining a state of self-other differentiation, as Aryn Kelly supports, "this expression of alignment with the onscreen Garner later serves as a

way to claim his pain as a means to position his death as a cultural trauma," (2020: 16). "I can't breathe," is iconic and, by virtue, also holds authoritative veritability.

Kathryn Woolard explains that authority elicits "the right to respect or [the] acceptance of one's words," (2005: 1). Linguistic authority indexes particular systems of ideological concepts, under which certain socio-cultural language phenomena can be attributed to either authenticity or anonymity, as Woolard states "each of these ideological complexes naturalizes a relation between linguistic form and a state of society," (2005: 2). The basic principles of linguistic authenticity are:

> "...It locates the value of a language in its relationship to a particular community, it must be perceived as deeply rooted in social and geographic territory to have value, it must be very much 'from somewhere' in speakers' consciousness, and it exhibits a pragmatic function of social indexicality, rather than semantic reference," (Woolard, 2005).

 Although these principles usually are to be applied to serve as potential explanations for language shifts on a macroscopic scale, I believe these principles can also be applied to micro-systems of language within social movements as has been observed by Black Lives Matter. The phrase "I can't breathe," produces genuine authenticity because of the moment it was globally understood, not just as a factual expression of pain, but as having truly garnered a painful collective identity by the suffocation of contemporary racism and its historical bereavements. "I can't breathe," were the last living words of Eric Garner that externalized his stance of consciousness. "I can't breathe," expresses the history of a continuous fight against a socially unjust America. "I can't breathe," indexes the social functions of the relationship that Black lives have with systems that justify anti-Black brutality. "I can't breathe," is authentic.

Conclusion

As we witness the contested consequences of thousands[9] of public murders of unarmed Black men at the hands of law enforcement, the fight for justice has only begun. The motives behind the Black Lives Matter movement are neither fleeting nor a simple moment in history. I write this the day after a unanimous guilty verdict of the 2020 murder of George Floyd by ex-officer Derek Chauvin. George Floyd fatally succumbed to a suffocating event all too similar to Eric Garner. Black Lives Matter is an authoritative voice that *will* breach the unjust systems of America. By academically authenticating the phrase "I can't breathe," the academic community can provide linguistic sustenance to aid in the fight against systemic anti-Black brutality. Afterall, like anthropologist Jane Hill has stated, "the task of cultural analysis is to penetrate the contradictions and inconsistencies that underlie the seeming coherence and validity of our worlds. When these worlds turn out to be damaged and damaging, [...] cultural analysis can help us understand how to change them." (2008: 180)

Author's note: In an earlier version of this research, I attempted to qualify observed shifts in the usage of "I can't breathe." I *wanted* to explain how the 2020 anti-mask rhetoric was damaging the image of this phrase by rendering it anonymous. But I couldn't because there was no comparison to truly document. It didn't hold any real meaning. The circumstance existed only because of its fleeting intersection within a global pandemic, whereas the iconic authenticity of Black Lives Matter represents a true *movement* in history. Black Lives Matter was manifested as a handle but intended to achieve momentous change within a systemically unjust America. We will witness its continuity until change is had.

[9] Burghart, Brian. "Fatal encounters dot org spreadsheet." Google Sheets. Google, 2020. https://www.fatalencounters.org.

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