

ADDRESSING THE CRISIS: MUGGING, MOBBING, AND MEMORY SCREENS

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“Like structural racism, the underdog has more power than it looks like.”

—Tricia Rose, “[How Structural Racism Works](#)” (a lecture).

“‘Know Your Place Aggression,’ constitutes the flexible, dynamic array of forces that answer the achievements of marginalized groups such that their success brings aggression as often as praise.”

—Koritha Mitchell, “Identifying White Mediocrity and Know-Your-Place Aggression: A Form of Self-Care.”

“*Policing the Crisis* was particularly important because it said you can get into a conjuncture from several different vantage points, and race is an excellent way for getting into the hidden and unconscious – as well as the conscious and explicitly discriminatory – effects of race on the society.”

—Stuart Hall, “The Last Interview.”

A white woman, holding a pair of gardening sheers, calls the police on a Black woman canvassing in a middle-class neighborhood for a congressional candidate; she accuses the Black woman’s candidate choice of trying to “take the country to socialism.” A young Black girl sells bottles of water in front of her building and her mother ends up facing off with a white woman, who calls the police. In a Starbucks coffee shop, two Black males sit quietly, waiting for a third party; a scared, white female barista calls the police. The police detain a Black lawyer in a courtroom and accuse him of impersonating a lawyer. A hotel staff person calls the police on a Black guest, even though said guest had a room key, in fear that he was a trespasser. White bank tellers call the police on Black men and women when they seek to cash payroll checks that are of a sum that they believe a person of African descent could not earn in a legal manner. A white woman tries to prohibit

a Black man from entering a building he lives in, exclaiming that she did not believe he was a resident. She joins him on the elevator to see what apartment he was to enter and watches him use his key to go inside his place. Thirty minutes later, the police show up at his apartment, but soon leave, because the resident's "crime" was non-existent; he was simply #BreathingWhileBlack.

There are unfortunately many more examples like the above incidents, and, under our current national administration, they are increasing, as white people feel licensed and emboldened to publicly express their racist rage and fear. In the opinion piece "Why Do White People Feel Entitled to Police Black People," published in the online publication the *Root*, Monique Judge brilliantly addresses the last incident we mention above with a counter scenario: "Imagine this particular situation in reverse. A ... white woman comes home to her apartment building and finds her entry blocked by a ... Black man ... demanding that she tell him what apartment she lives in [and that she] has to prove ... she lives there." If this scenario seems absurd, we should consider why, in our current cultural climate, the idea of a Black man policing a white woman's behavior in the public sphere is unimaginable.



Figure 1: Surveillance Camera. Royalty free image from Pixabay.com.

Why do white people feel entitled to police Black people? We answer this question by pacing through three critical issues that, for us, are raised by vigilante and state policing: a.) The idea that certain groups are prone to violent, criminal behavior and therefore require surveillance and punishment; b.) "Mobbing," or adult bullying that "involves systematic and repetitive harassment over a period of time" and rallying against individuals out of jealousy or the deep-seated belief

they do not belong (Barnes 3); c.) And, finally, “memory screens,” which entail a perpetuator of injustice re-narrating historical occurrences of discrimination in order to make a claim of innocence. While screen memories, as psychiatrist Sigmund Freud introduced in 1899 involve the partial ways in which an individual remembers the past to their unconscious advantage, we argue that memory screens are the deliberate and collective attempt to make the historical truth impenetrable. All three of these issues permeate international, national, and local events, as well as our everyday lives.

Policing the Crisis: Then and Now

In *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, The State, and Law and Order*, Stuart Hall and his co-authors lay out how regimes of power stir up fear of groups who experience social, cultural, and political marginalization through memory screens, which distort their history of oppression (Hall 1978). These regimes create a constellation of repression, surveillance, and demonization. This tactic of mobbing through moral panics and fear mongering upholds a repressive state. In order to retain power, racist regimes convince the white majority to fear and demonize the racial Other. Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and her cronies in law enforcement sensationalized “mugging” as a rationale to tighten border security, and to harass, ostracize and seek to control and surveil Black and brown bodies to consolidate their conservative base. The state used these tactics as a screen to avoid addressing the racism that undergirds the actual choices of the poor and the push and pull factors of immigration.



Figure 2: A protest organized by the Black Defense Committee in response to the profiling and repression of Black people. Notting Hill, 31 October 1970 (Ian Showell/Keystone/Getty Images).

Written by faculty and graduate students, *Policing the Crisis* was descriptive and prescriptive; it was an exposure of systemic and structural racism. There is much to learn from how a collaborative book like *Policing the Crisis* can transform. If we are going to fight policing, marginalization, and surveillance, *we need to address the fear that animates the process*. This is why writing in proximity, alliance, dialogue, and collaboration is so necessary. We need the space to diverge and converge with synergy. We both know that to overtly and forcibly condemn white privilege can itself be a product of white privilege; to critique it can lead to online trolling, mobbing, extra-legal arrest and state-sanctioned violence.

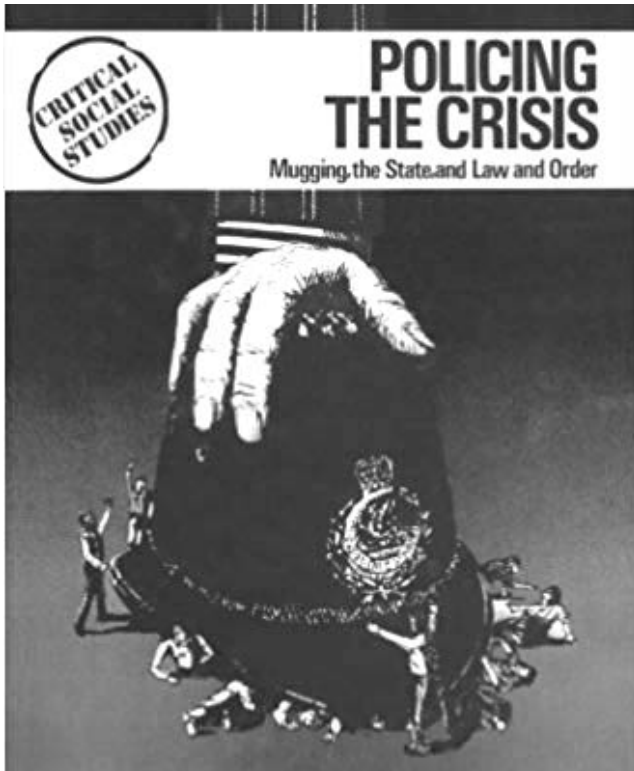


Figure 3: The cover art of *Policing the Crisis* illustrates how the state uses law enforcement strategically as a means of fear-mongering and social control.

In "Our Mongrel Selves," a 1992 essay included in Duke University Press's volume of *Selected Political Writings*, Hall updates W.E.B. DuBois's foundational 20th-century prophecy on the "color line." Noting that the greatest danger that currently faces us arises from "forms of national and cultural identity...that attempt to secure their identity by adopting closed versions of culture or community, and by the refusal to engage with difficult problems that arise from

trying to live with difference,” Hall anticipates that “the capacity to live with difference is...the coming question of the twenty-first century” (281). We are now almost two decades into the twenty-first century, and Hall’s prescience is already clear. Across the United States and the globe, there is a challenge to our capacity to live with difference by the rise of neo-fascist leaders who base their appeal in precisely the “closed versions of culture and community” that Hall saw arising in the nineties. White privilege represents the most pernicious and persistent iteration of a closed version of culture and community, since it sutures cultural insularity to political power.

In an [op-ed](#) and a recorded panel discussion on white privilege (social, economic, and cultural advantages for members of the white majority) and white fragility (defensive responses to racism) in 2016, we argued that one must name and address these formations directly in order to envision change. However, while we shared the same objective, our approaches differed in significant ways determined by our different positions relative to our topic. Our original op-ed worked to define the problem, situate the stakes, and dream anew in ways that readers might identify with or learn from at its conclusion. Yet the paradox was that a white, heterosexual, cis-male, felt licensed to attack anti-Black racism head-on and a heterosexual, cis-female Black woman was more cautious and contemplative, both in the op-ed and in the televised discussion on the University of Iowa’s [World Canvas Podcast Series](#). Since men and women of color are inherently seen as angry by white people and therefore become the objects of the white fear that fuels racial fragility, taking the latter approach reveals the different positions from which we speak truth to power. Ongoing surveillance and micro-aggressions are a part of the everyday experience of historically marginalized groups and they customarily face punishment for directly addressing inequality and racism. In this treacherous environment, liberal whites feel freer to speak out against structures of power from which they continue to benefit. Paradoxically, this very speaking out can become an instance and iteration of white privilege.

This paradox is particularly perilous and pertinent, as the twenty-first century is witnessing a variety of authoritarian populisms that make Margaret Thatcher and former US president Ronald Reagan – two political figures written as congruent in many cultural studies works – look like liberals. As we write this piece, our US president, along with Vladimir Putin, Xi Jinping, Rodrigo Duterte, Jair Bolsonaro and other overtly xenophobic and nationalist leaders, are accruing and amassing power rapidly, exploiting the rising tide of refugees and stateless populations produced by what looks like the collapse of the nation-state system. These ascendant authoritarian regimes strengthen the pessimism of the intellect and sometimes stymie our ability to imagine alternative futures. Where can we find the optimism of the will necessary to face the urgent challenge of living with difference?



Figure 4: WorldCanvas Podcast Series on “White Privilege, Structural Racism, and the Dream of America.” Pictured here from left to right: Joan Kjaer (host), Deborah Elizabeth Whaley, Rachel Williams, and Loren Glass. 15 December 2016.

Policing the Crisis remains crucial to our current conjuncture. One could simply point to our political era of Brexit in Europe (the United Kingdom’s withdrawal from the European Union) and in the United States the proposition of a border wall by our current administration, as examples. Brexit and border walls illustrate how neoliberalism requires the labor of people of color, but without equal opportunity, voice, or empowerment. Macro-political policies must remain in conversation with how such policies work at micro levels and mirror the actions of everyday people. We must attend to everyday life because seeds of discrimination are perhaps most dangerous not in the bodies of those who spew hate in obvious and egregious ways, but in the bodies of those who propose to support anti-hate rhetoric and practices. Crucial work on [white fragility](#) by cultural critic and sociologist Robin DiAngelo and scholarship on mobbing helps us to examine the ways in which habits of exclusion exist in those who decry more egregious forms of racism. We thus move the discussion away from Thatcherism’s screen of mugging to mobbing.

In Crisis: From Mugging to Mobbing

Though well known in organizational and business theory and psychology, mobbing is less known by name outside of those fields, even though the practice itself is common. “Mobsters” – or the initiators of adult bullying – create a culture of targeted isolationism and they may elect and manipulate others to carry out the actual work of bullying the Other. In so doing, their bullying is often indirect, though it has direct consequences, and because the mobsters elect others to carry out the punishment that the target receives, they may easily claim their innocence, create a memory screen, and gaslight the target. As we write elsewhere, “gaslighting is a technique of psychological manipulation that denies

discriminatory behavior or environments by trying to convince victims of abuse into believing that their mistreatment is subjective and imaginary” (Glass and Whaley, 2016). Adult bullying and gaslighting does not always involve the intent to outright bully; rather, the intent is to neutralize anyone who is a threat to the power base. For mobbing to succeed, the mobster must first generate informal agreement, or consent among a critical mass to help them seize or seek power, often with the promise of future power. There is a direct correlation between mobbing and memory screens, then, as policing depends upon the former for power (i.e., hegemony) to remain invisible and appear like the natural order of things. In 2019, many believe there is a bully holding the highest office in the nation. Notwithstanding, mobbing and memory screens also support smaller power bases.

Robin DiAngelo argues in the book *White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism?* that while white women respond with passive aggressive, weaponized tears, or their experience of gender and sexual discrimination to claim innocence of their own discriminating practices, white men respond with aggressive deflection, anger, and sometimes, violence. In an [interview](#) with columnist Sandy Doyle for *Elle Magazine*, DiAngelo explains how liberal, middle class whites respond to accountings of their racist behavior and create climates that are not inclusive or equitable:

Middle-class white women [and men] in general are taught to avoid conflict, so we can be passive-aggressive in a range of ways. We could withdraw, we could start to avoid the other person, we could talk behind their back, we could galvanize resources offline to punish them. There's a lot of ways that white women [and men] undermine ... [people] of color.

Since racism is structural and systemic, it encourages such deflecting behavior and it encourages epistemological solipsism, which entails claiming to not see historical or current forms of discrimination. This epistemological solipsism lays the groundwork for an environment that allows mobsters to provide a rationale for their behavior. To admit to discrimination is to admit that one is complacent with discrimination and discriminators. Although carrying out discrimination and mobbing is common, calling out a discriminator is threatening to mobsters. Thus, people will comply with mobbing, simply because they will empathize given that they too do not wish to see themselves as racists or discriminators. It is only within the distorted logic of mobsters and their memory screens that the Black female reporter Yamiche Alcindor of the *PBS Newshour* could be called a racist. At a presidential news briefing in 2018, she posed critical questions regarding white nationalists' support of the current administration and she asked whether our current political climate emboldens racist behavior. Alcindor dared to affirm her right to ask about and expose injustice. The response to her by the sitting president

was to interrupt her questioning, suggest she was a reverse racist, and cast a memory screen to hide the truth.



Figure 5: Washington, DC, 7 November 2018: Yamiche Alcindor of PBS *NewsHour* asks the U.S. President a question about his administration's connection to white supremacy. Photo by Mark Wilson/Getty Images.

Conclusion: From Hashtags to the Dream of Transformation

Since there are many examples within the past few years of mobbing, memory screens, policing, profiling, and surveilling people of color, one can easily feel inundated. Signifying hashtags like #BrooklynBecky, #BarbecueBecky, #PermitPatty, #LivingWhileBlack, and #SittingInStarbucksWhileBlack constitute a counter-public, disseminating news that bears witness to everyday racial slights rooted in denial and fear, which mobile devices can now document with video recordings. Some of these can seem amusing or tongue-in-cheek, but the belief in the always-already marginal person as a mugger, white fragility, and the response of mobbing and memory screens on both a macro political and micro individual level, is no laughing matter. Jordan Davis, a Black male who was murdered in his car because he was playing music a white male felt was too loud, and Renisha McBride, a Black female who was murdered by a white male for knocking on the door of a house because she was seeking help after her car accident, are unable to laugh. Such examples underscore why we need to speak simultaneously about every day racism – in egregious and micro-aggressive forms, and to not use our current US president as a deflection from the insidious operations of racism and white privilege in our everyday lives.



Figure 6: "Youth demand justice in the shooting death of an African American girl in Dearborn Heights during the early morning hours of November 2, 2013." 7 November 2013. Photographer: Abayomi Azikiwe.

To attend to these problems, we argue for a move that is, in some ways, a return to [classic Birmingham School cultural studies](#) from which Hall was a key founder, and, in other ways, a divergence from this school. Like Western Marxism more generally, cultural studies, as its name so clearly indicates, turned to culture as a realm of struggle both semi-autonomous from and tightly articulated to the economic and political structures that shape everyday life under capitalism. Their method was also Marxist in nature, consisting in the continuous dialectical untangling of reification and utopia, domination and resistance, the people and the power bloc, in the proliferating products of the culture industry. A change since then is the relationship between the culture industries and political power. If, in the later twentieth century, we could assume a close and complex articulation between political power and cultural hegemony, which it is our job as Americanists and intellectuals to expose, there is now in the twentieth century an increasing divergence between those who hold the reins of state power and those who finance and create global culture.

While this may seem bleak, in this gap there are opportunities for collaboration, especially across identities and experiences, which can inspire a collective optimism of the will in our writing and in our everyday lives. Collaboration itself -- thinking and writing together to transform -- is a method and an intervention for us to bring to the fore and dream of a more just society. We seek to, as Paul Gilroy writes in the preface to bell hooks and Stuart Hall's group of essays *Uncut Funk: A Contemplative Dialogue*, "provide a pedagogic

example to a ... culture ... less able to manage the internal disagreements that inevitably arise along generational, gendered and tactical lines" (Gilroy x). And like Hall and his co-authors in *Policing the Crisis*, we hope that such collaboration leads to larger transformations and that, instead of creating barriers and walls, we can build bridges and open doors.

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