Achille Mbembe coined the term *necropolitics* as a corrective to Michel Foucault’s concept of biopolitics to account for “those figures of sovereignty whose central project is . . . the material destruction of human bodies and populations” most evident on the plantation, in the colony. Melissa Wright has added that the politics of gender is central to the politics of death. She highlights state officials’ efforts to assign meaning to the bodies of the slain as critical to the successful operation of necropower and argues that activists can contest attempts to mark the dead as subjects deserving of death. Mbembe’s and Wright’s delineation of necropolitics illuminates much about contemporary US racial politics. This article examines how black activists and others challenge official efforts to assign meaning to the bodies of the slain. It also examines the difficulties feminist activists confront in their attempts to decenter the cis-male body in recent necropolitical struggles. In a context in which spectacular violent deaths have been crucial in moving black death from the margins to the center of political debate, black feminists must reckon with the fact that, because of significant differences between homicide and femicide, black women suffer from a spectacular violent death deficit. What can drive concern toward these more private deaths?

**Keywords: Death, Femicide, Lynching**

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**North American Necropolitics and Gender: On #BlackLivesMatter and Black Femicide**

Feminists (Spelman 1982: Young 1990: Gatens 1996) have long concerned themselves with Western approaches to the body – with how societies think about the body - as well as the relationship between the body and politics and the impact of both on the standing of women in society. While these approaches and ways of thinking about the body are important and worthy of black feminist exploration, I think the most important issue regarding the relationship between the body and politics today is the growing concern with how that body politic produces its dead: that the body that we are thinking about, the body that receives the most attention in contemporary racial politics, is a deceased one. Contemporary racial politics is most focused on the politics of black death, on necropolitics, and relatedly on the very important work of
exposing the state’s efforts—often, as activists have fairly successfully pointed out, with considerable assistance from the mainstream press—to assure its citizens that it has produced the “right kind” of dead. In practice this means that the body around which blacks can most easily rally members to the cause of racial justice in this moment, the body around which we can organize, is a dead one. It is crucial that those concerned with the status of black women in society reckon with how we should respond to the centrality of necropolitics on the contemporary political stage, to this focus on the politics of death and the ensuing contests over the meaning of the bodies of the dead in the wake of the production of dead black bodies. There are benefits and burdens, inclusions and exclusions, in centering the politics of death within black politics, in giving dead bodies pride of place in black politics, and even within that necropolitics to centering the slain body. A focus on the slain body privileges how cis men die, how young men die, how able-bodied blacks die, over all other black dead.

In what follows I consider the ways that the Black Lives Matter movement and those sympathetic to its narrative regarding the production of the bodies of the black dead have brought strategies employed in an earlier US necropolitical struggle, the US antilynching campaign, together with technological innovations. They have achieved considerable success in comparison to a fairly recent necropolitical struggle, the struggle against femicide at the Mexico–United States border outlined by Melissa Wright, which preceded the advent of those innovations the Black Lives Matter movement has used to great effect. However, while I recognize and celebrate these successes, I am deeply concerned that the movement may ultimately fail black women. I would therefore like to reflect on how this necropolitical movement, if it is not properly intersectional, may do little to change the problematic ways that state power intersects with the black female body as well as the production of the bodies of black female dead.
As may now be clear, I have reservations about privileging the slain black body in politics. For one thing, blacks have more than the bodies of the slain around which to organize, even within a strictly necropolitical sense. On this point, I have stated elsewhere (Threadcraft 2016a) that residential conditions in black neighborhoods are described as “pathogenic” in themselves, producing “excess death.” Public health scholars (Williams and Collins 2001: 405) have acknowledged that “racial residential segregation is the cornerstone on which black-white disparities in health status have been built in the US.” They argue that “segregation is a fundamental cause of differences in health status between African Americans and whites because it shapes socioeconomic conditions for blacks not only at the individual and household levels but also at the neighborhood and community levels” (405). Consider, as well, the points Clint Smith (2016) makes in an essay titled “Racism, Stress, and Black Death”:

According to a study by the American Psychology Association, “more than three in four black adults report experiencing day-to-day discrimination and nearly two in five black men say that police have unfairly stopped, searched, questioned, physically threatened or abused them.” Living under the perpetual and pervasive threat of racism seems, for black men and black women, to quite literally reduce lifespans. Black people face social and economic challenges—often deriving from institutionalized racism—in the form of disparities in education, housing, food, medical care, and many other things. But the act of interfacing with prejudice itself has profound psychological implications, resulting in the sorts of trauma that last long beyond the incidents themselves.

Perhaps just as important, according to research published this past December in the journal *Psychoneuroendocrinology*, simply perceiving or anticipating discrimination contributes to chronic stress that can cause an increase in blood-pressure problems,
coronary-artery disease, cognitive impairment, and infant mortality. Black Americans do not have to directly experience police brutality to experience the negative health ramifications of its possibility. And that fear is not something grounded in paranoia. As President Obama noted in his speech after the deaths of Alton Sterling and Philando Castile, these disparities in treatment at the hands of the police are well-documented.

There is a great deal to be said about the health effects of discrimination. First, blacks do not have to be physically injured by police to be brought closer to death. Second, blacks do not even have to encounter police to be harmed by their presence. Third, we must consider racism as part of the environmental conditions in black neighborhoods. The health data reveal a great deal about the operation of this form of power, how its impact extends beyond the discrete encounter to touch the bodies of all in the space. Naa Oyo Kwate and I address this health threat in a separate piece (Threadcraft and Kwate, 2018). In what follows, however, I would like to return to a point I have also made before regarding gender and necropolitics.

Black women have been subject to a host of practices that have much more in common with Achille Mbembe’s necropolitics than with Michel Foucault’s biopower and normalization but are nonetheless not identical to the phenomenon Mbembe describes (Threadcraft 2016a). Black women are subjected to disproportionate sexual assault, community violence, and public sexual aggression. They are disproportionately targeted for long-acting contraceptives and child removal policies. Power, specifically white power, intersects with the black female body to produce its preferred forms of racialized feminine embodiment—the assaulted and terrorized body, yes—but when held in comparison to how power intersects with the black male body, far more rarely does it produce a dead black female body. I would like to return to an examination of how power intersects with the black female body below as, given this and the extraordinary
amount of attention given to the dead body in contemporary racial politics, we must decide how black politics can/should be reformulated in light of the existence of gendered power intersections.

**Sex Worker, Narco, Thug: Resisting Contemporary North American Necropolitics**

Protests against recent police murders of unarmed black men have brought questions that have long been topics of conversation within black communities to the forefront of mainstream politics. The visibility of these issues was evident in events like the #BlackLivesMatter debate during the 2016 Democratic presidential campaign, as well as a White House town hall meeting on the topic (Hirschfeld Davis 2016). Notably, criminal justice reform topped Democratic presidential nominee Hillary Clinton’s “racial justice” platform ([Hillary for America 2016b](#)). After the #BlackLivesMatter movement brought considerable pressure to bear on both her campaign and that of her rival Bernie Sanders, Clinton pledged to bring “law enforcement and communities together to develop national guidelines on the use of force by police officers, making it clear when deadly force is warranted and when it isn’t and emphasizing proven methods for de-escalating situations” ([Hillary for America 2016a](#)). She also stated that it is important to acknowledge that “implicit bias still exists across society.” She promised to use executive power to combat said implicit bias and pledged to commit “$1 billion in her first budget to find and fund the best training programs, support new research, and make this a national policing priority.” She also pledged to collect and report national data—as at this point it is concerned citizens who have collected what data exist—in order “to inform policing strategies and provide greater transparency and accountability when it comes to crime, officer-involved shootings, and deaths in custody.” Members of Clinton’s campaign team, and specifically her “deputy millennial vote director” Jamira Burley, explicitly credited #BlackLivesMatter for this
shift, saying, “The fact that the Black Lives Matter movement and other criminal justice reformers have held her feet to the fire has helped her become a lot more sensitive to how she shows up in those spaces” (quoted in Beckett and Lartey 2016).

What these debates, town halls, and Democratic presidential platforms demonstrated is that, finally, the nation, and not simply blacks, now questions how state power intersects with the black body in this country and why that power so often produces a dead body. Critically, in all of this discussion, a media-savvy group of protesters began to convince others of their understanding of the meaning of the bodies of the dead the state produced. The loose structure of Black Lives Matter activism—as, to take part, one can do as little as compose a tweet and as much as take nonviolent direct action that may lead to arrest and detention—is both a benefit and a curse. The movement has benefited from the rise of phenomena such as “black Twitter,” and the fact that many members of that community concur with the meaning Black Lives Matter assigns to the bodies of the dead rather than the state’s assertion of what the bodies mean—that they are thugs deserving of death—black Twitter, like #BlackLivesMatter, accepts that the dead are the product of the disproportionate and illegitimate use of police force against black bodies. They have thus gone on to disseminate the Black Lives Matter narrative regarding the meanings of the bodies of the dead. But, as the movement also depends on the ability of each dead body to resonate with the wider black community, it has become clear that all black bodies do not produce equal amounts of community outrage. It is thus not clear how the movement can respond to existing hierarchies and prejudices in the wider black community regarding the meaning of the living, which holds fast to bodies, even in death.

Mbembe (2003) examines the importance of the politics of death in the exercise of power in his article “Necropolitics” and notes that this power is particularly salient in the control and
management of subject peoples and marginalized populations. He holds that “the ultimate expression of sovereignty resides, to a large degree, in the power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die” (11). Mbembe goes on to say: “Hence, to kill or to allow to live constitute the limits of sovereignty, its fundamental attributes. To exercise sovereignty is to exercise control over mortality and to define life as the deployment and manifestation of power” (11–12).

He asks readers, then, “What place is given to life, death, and the human body (in particular the wounded or slain body)? How are they inscribed in the order of power?” (12). Mbembe’s impressive analysis of the politics of death considers how necropower intersects with a generic body and remains silent on how the phenomenon intersects with male and female bodies, respectively.

Wright (2011), in her examination of the gendered necropolitics at the Mexico–United States border, grapples with Mbembe’s important question and argues, first, that the politics of gender and the politics of death go hand in hand and, second, that states often play a decisive role in assigning meaning to the bodies of the dead in the successful operation of necropower. States engage in efforts to convince those within their borders that the proper body for the subjects in question is, in fact, a deceased body. I wholeheartedly agree with Wright’s first point and see it as especially relevant in the US case. Wright is also correct in drawing attention to the fact that the successful operation of necropower requires the work of assigning meaning to the bodies of the dead. The state expends effort, uses its resources, to define how the subject lived and therefore what the subject was, thereby labeling a given subject as deserving of death, a subject whose proper embodiment is, in fact, a deceased body. In the Mexican case Wright probes, state officials did so both with the death the state itself produced and with the deaths it failed to stop,
assigning subjects the labels of sex worker and narco and thereby legitimizing their deaths. In the US context, the same was true of lynching, with efforts to affix the mark of the rapist to the body of the dead; with contemporary police slayings we also see concerted efforts to affix the mark of the thug to the black body.

In the incidents Wright examines, as dead bodies piled up, the question became this: Do the dead bodies in Ciudad Juárez demonstrate that the state is failing, as activists contend, or that the state is that much stronger, as government elites contend? With femicide and the male victims of narcoviolence, the state asserted that the female dead were simply sex workers and the male dead were involved in the drug trade, respectively. In both circumstances, the dead bodies were certainly no cause for alarm and were even cause for celebration—their deaths were, then, evidence of a strong state.

A few words on femicide. It refers to the murder of women because they are women. Diana E. H. Russell heard the term as early as 1974, used it publicly at the First International Tribunal on Crimes Against Women in 1976, and originally defined it as the hate killing of women by men. Russell eventually settled on the killing of females because they are female. In her testimony she stated: “From the burning of witches in the past, to the more recent widespread custom of female infanticide in many societies, to the killing of women for so-called honor, we realize that femicide has been going on a long time” (Russell 2011).

It has indeed.

Mexican activists concerned about the female dead challenged the state’s claims that all dead women were sex workers, but, in this, they confronted the very strong association between working women and “working women,” between female workers and sex workers. Because of these associations, of the tendency to see a woman in public as a “public woman,” state officials
could readily explain the women’s deaths as a kind of public cleansing that rid the body politic of their contamination, their deaths helping to restore the moral and political balance of society. The logic, drawing heavily on the gendered divisions between public and private and a notion that public space is properly male space, operated this way: a woman who was dead must have been in public, out of her proper place in private, for a woman in public is a public woman, a sex worker, and thus now properly embodied in the dead body she possessed, deserving her death, possessing a dead body indicted the subject as a sex worker—death was all the proof one needed of her transgressions into public space and sex work, and her death should not trouble women who are not sex workers, women who did not transgress, should not trouble properly private women. Officials also asserted that keeping women at home would keep them safe—and here ceded any role for the state itself in protecting them, since women were by definition safe at home. The activists countered that the subjects, the women, were not sex workers—not that there was anything wrong with that—but were good daughters, working in factories to support their families, and therefore lethal violence against them was evidence of a severely weakened, if not failed, state. The activists, however, mounted this challenge largely without the benefit of social media and smartphones.

In the US context, it appears that the #BlackLivesMatter campaign has gained considerable ground in one aspect of a long-standing necropolitical struggle: it has gained ground not in stopping the production of dead bodies, as that continues apace and may yet increase, but in the extremely important contest over the meaning of the bodies of the black dead. It has gained ground, and now a growing number of people ask, “Is the proper body for the subject who finds himself in the grip of state power a deceased one?” In comparison to struggles between the state and activists over meaning around femicide and narcoviolence, the
The #BlackLivesMatter campaign has been more successful in challenging the state’s preferred meaning regarding the bodies of the dead. It has also gotten many who once opposed it to make at least verbal concessions to the Black Lives Matter cause. It has been able to do this in part due to technological innovations, such as smartphones and social media, but in particular because of the rise of black Twitter. But while technology has been important, I see the movement’s successes as a result of its ability to blend old and new, new technology with strategies deployed in an older US necropolitical campaign, the antilynching campaign, specifically; it has, whether consciously or not, brought together many of the strategies employed by the United States’ most iconic necropolitical warrior, one Ida B. Wells, along with the aforementioned technological innovations.

**From the Antilynching Campaign to #BlackLivesMatter**

Wells’s pioneering necropolitical activism lives on in the contemporary #BlackLivesMatter movement in three very important ways. First, in challenging the meaning assigned to the bodies of the black dead in her time, Wells (1991) outlined the consecutive excuses white supremacists offered for why they murdered blacks, and by doing this alone she managed to trouble the meaning assigned to the bodies of the dead. She asked her readers to recall that white supremacists asserted that the lynched black dead were race rioters. When that was proved false she reminded her audience that white supremacists then claimed that the dead were “negro dominators,” attempting to subordinate whites politically. This excuse also did not hold. Finally, she pointed out, the murderers and their apologists hit on rape, and this meaning stuck. With “rapist” attached to the dead black body, the subject’s status as dead was legitimized, and those who slay the subject were shielded from criticism. In death, the subject, the rapist, was now appropriately embodied. Second, Wells (1991) not only pointed out the suspect nature of this
moving-meaning target—as obviously the murderers and their supporters were simply justifying what they had done after the fact and attempting to see what excuse worked—she also called out “the malicious and untruthful white press” for its role in perpetuating lynching by circulating false stereotypes of black people. Third, she documented the actual circumstances of lynching to present a story far different from the narrative those in power circulated. The murders were much harder to justify once she documented and compiled evidence of blacks lynched for infractions such as stealing chickens and “sassing” whites.

The Black Lives Matter campaign and those sympathetic to its cause have made use of all these strategies. They have challenged white attempts to attach the meaning “thug” to the body of the black slain, understanding the work that this word was doing and how it functioned to justify police killings, much as Wells challenged the meaning “rapist.” They have also challenged the state’s assertion that thug should mark the line between he who lives and he who must die, here going a step further than femicide activists who have simply argued that the deceased female subjects were hardworking women not working girls. They have called out the mainstream press for aiding and abetting the state’s efforts to affix this meaning to the bodies of the dead. And they have documented the circumstances of blacks’ deaths at the hands of police, in a context in which the state has long refused to do so.

They have done the above aided by technological innovations, including smartphones and social media. Smartphones, in particular, have helped to amplify what turns out to be the important phenomenon of witnessing in evoking outrage over the production of dead bodies. Social media has been particularly important in disseminating Black Lives Matter’s counternarrative regarding the bodies of the dead. Alicia Garza first uttered and disseminated the phrase “black lives matter” in response to the acquittal of George Zimmerman in the murder of
Trayvon Martin. Yet recall the massive social media campaign that led to the eventual arrest and prosecution, if sadly not the conviction, of Zimmerman, after police initially failed to arrest him. I dare say that without social media there would be no Black Lives Matter.

Consider the phenomenon that is “black Twitter.” Black Twitter may represent a virtual black counterpublic, rising again after a period of decline, as noted by Michael C. Dawson (1994). Twitter itself is a technological innovation all but tailor-made to accommodate black oral traditions such as signifying and playing the dozens. The contemporary necropolitical struggle has had the good fortune to arise in a cultural context in which a higher percentage of blacks use Twitter (26 percent of all black Internet users as compared to 14 percent of whites [Duggan and Brenner 2013]); use Twitter more times per day than whites (Jones 2013); and, arguably, though I would venture objectively, use Twitter far better than all other groups. On the last point, in the words of André Brock (2012: 545), “Black Twitter came to online prominence through creative use of Twitter’s hashtag function and subsequent domination of Twitter’s ‘trending topics.’” Brock writes: “Twitter’s discourse conventions, ubiquity, and social features encouraged increased Black participation; Black Twitter is Twitter’s mediation of Black cultural discourse, or ‘signifyin.’ In particular, Black hashtag signifying revealed alternate Twitter discourses to the mainstream and encourages a formulation of Black Twitter as a ‘social public’; a community constructed through their use of social media by outsiders and insiders alike” (530). Blacks’ exceptional use of Twitter has allowed black counterdiscourse on a variety of topics to register and register consistently within mainstream discourse. Among the topics to register is blacks’ long-standing counterdiscourse regarding police brutality and lethal state violence against blacks. Black Twitter has been so successful at driving the conversation, by dominating trending topics each week, that the mainstream media has often been forced to respond.
Whereas Wells took aim at white supremacists’ and the mainstream press’s attempts to attach the meaning “rapist” to the body of the black dead in the Jim Crow era, the current black necropolitical insurgency has set its sights on the mark “thug” and how this mark serves as a justification for death. Rashad Robinson, executive director of Color of Change - the nation's largest online racial justice organization, committed to creating "a more human and less hostile world for Black people in America," - summed up the problem and why it is such an important front in the current necropolitical contests: “‘These young people have their bodies criminalized even after death.’ Criminalization occurs when images chosen by media consciously or unconsciously create a justification for why people of color are killed” (quoted in Lewis 2014).

The campaign has taken on the malicious stereotypes regarding blacks circulated by the mainstream press, and here CNN and even the New York Times become Wells’s Evening Scimitar. According to the Root’s Yesha Callahan (2014a):

The vicious slaying of Michael Brown by Ferguson, Mo., police has once again shown that the narrative the media paints surrounding black people in America more often than not includes depicting us as violent thugs with gang and drug affiliations . . .

Trayvon [Martin], who was killed by George Zimmerman, was depicted as a gold-grill-wearing, weed-smoking teenager in the photos used by the media. There were no photos of Trayvon smiling with his family members or being just your average happy teen, which his family members said he was. Similarly, the photos of Brown that have been picked up by the media included him throwing up a peace sign, which conservative media has translated into a “gang sign.”

You’d be hard-pressed to find mainstream media showing Brown at his high school graduation or with members of his family.
In response to the above, Callahan reported the creation of the hashtag #IfTheyGunnedMeDown to make a statement regarding how the media circulated a biased narrative when it came to reporting the slayings of black men and women. Twitter users responded to the hashtag and posted photos of themselves in respectable clothing—that is, in formal wear, including military uniforms and graduation gowns—alongside photos of themselves in less respectable attire and, not coincidentally, in clothing that is closely associated with “urban” youth, although it is also worn by broader segments of the US population. The campaign posed the question: “If police gunned me down, what photo of me would the media circulate after my death?” (Callahan, 2014a).

The question resonated. Lewis reports that the campaign drew nearly two hundred thousand responses to the hashtag. It was followed by the hashtag #NoAngel in the wake of John Eligon’s New York Times profile of Brown. Eligon (2014) wrote, “Michael Brown, 18, due to be buried on Monday, was no angel, with public records and interviews with friends and family revealing both problems and promise in his young life.” Callahan’s (2014b) response to the article is emblematic of the outrage it evoked on social media:

What the f——k is wrong with the New York Times? I’ll tell you what’s wrong: In most mainstream media, victims of color continue to be victimized and criminalized even in death. As I read the article, my anger rose—not only as a parent of a young black man but also because just two weeks ago I wrote a blog post about #IfTheyGunnedMeDown, which discussed the imagery the media choose to use when it comes to black men. And this New York Times article is clearly a prime example of that.

Eligon’s article birthed the hashtag #NoAngel. The #NoAngel backlash led to a fairly weak but decidedly Times “mea culpa.” The BBC reported that, at first, the Times stuck by its account, but
after the hashtag #NoAngel got three thousand mentions in less than a day, the Times public editor, Margaret Sullivan, admitted that the piece was not “ideal” and that “‘no angel’ was a blunder” (quoted in Waldman 2014). Forcing the Gray Lady to change her tune is no small tune and demonstrates the power black Twitter has been able to yield in amending the narrative in the mainstream press.

That was not the only time that reporting sparked controversy. The Huffington Post’s Kimberley Richards (2015) wrote that CNN faced a backlash for describing Freddie Gray as “the son of an illiterate heroin addict,” in the second paragraph of an article on the trial of one of the police officers charged with Gray’s death. Richards went on to report that “a torrent of people on social media pointed out that such a description has nothing to do with the allegations against the officers, but instead demeans Gray’s family.” The social media backlash was successful, as the company removed the description and acknowledged its “mistake.”

Online activism against media representations have also led to questions regarding how whites, and often white perpetrators of mass violence, are portrayed in the press. For example, Twitter responded when CNN referred to a Planned Parenthood shooter as an “older gentleman” (@ThomboyD 2015). The Washington Post’s Janell Ross (2016) wrote of Cliven Bundy and his followers:

As of Sunday afternoon, The Washington Post called them “occupiers.” The New York Times opted for “armed activists” and “militia men.” And the Associated Press put the situation this way: “A family previously involved in a showdown with the federal government has occupied a building at a national wildlife refuge in Oregon and is asking militia members to join them.”
Not one seemed to lean toward terms such as “insurrection,” “revolt,” anti-government “insurgents” or, as some on social media were calling them, “terrorists.”

It is hard to imagine that none of the words mentioned above—particularly “insurrection” or “revolt”—would be avoided if, for instance, a group of armed black Americans took possession of a federal or state courthouse to protest the police. Black Americans outraged about the death of a 12-year-old boy at the hands of police or concerned about the absence of a conviction in the George Zimmerman case have been frequently and inaccurately lumped in with criminals and looters, described as “thugs,” or marauding wolf packs where drugs are, according to CNN’s Don Lemon, “obviously” in use.

Ross calls out a clear double standard for reporting on whites and blacks.

US necropolitical activists have thus gone further than their Mexican counterparts, who did not challenge the status of sex workers as a justification for death, instead asserting that the women were not that. Even if the word thug successfully attaches to the body of the slain, activists in the US context have worked to ensure that this meaning is no longer sufficient to mark the line between he who lives and he who must die—they have challenged this particular claim of sovereignty. Some have gone so far as to assert that thug is the new N word, with all its implications. As Jamelle Bouie (2014) has observed, “The word ‘thug’ has become an ‘accepted way of calling somebody the N-word.’ You saw it, for instance, during the Trayvon Martin controversy, where defenders of the shooter, George Zimmerman, were quick to label Martin a ‘dangerous thug’ for ordinary teenage behavior, like cursing or smoking marijuana.” This is an excellent point, for if the mark “thug” legitimizes death and thug simply means “black,” all with black skin are premarked for death. If thug and black are collapsed and all black bodies are
thereby always marked for death, their deaths are prelegitimized. With blackness the proper packaging for all dead bodies, the death factory can continue its production at current levels, and the state can simply stamp them “thug” after their production.

Finally, like Wells, activists have collected the actual circumstances of each death at the hands of police in order to advance activists’ narrative regarding the meaning of the body of the dead. For example, lists of all the reasons blacks can be killed often circulate on social media platforms to make the larger point that it is blackness itself that makes one worthy of death in the US necropolitical order. But there are also more systematic efforts to document black death. In the Mapping Police Violence project and the Campaign Zero initiative, an organization committed to ending lethal police violence, we have nothing if not a modern Red Record (Sinyangwe 2016). Mapping Police Violence tracks the number of blacks killed by police each month, compares the percentage of those who were unarmed at the time of their deaths to that of white unarmed victims, and documents blacks’ greater likelihood of being killed by police each month (at the time of this article it was three times greater). In a further effort to destabilize the state’s narrative regarding the meaning of the bodies of the dead, the website also presents statistics that demonstrate that blacks’ greater likelihood than whites of death at the hands of police is unconnected to higher crime rates and reports that, for example, levels of crime are not correlated with the likelihood of police killings. Newark and St. Louis are cases in point. They have similar populations and similar demographics and murder rates, yet police have killed no black men in Newark since 2013 and sixteen in St. Louis in the same period. The activists have thus made great strides by adapting Wells’s’s strategies to the social media age.
When and Why We Should Say Her Name

I am impressed by all that #BlackLivesMatter activists have accomplished and how successfully they have been able to intervene in the politics of death in the United States. However, I would like to turn to some of the challenges they have faced and also to what I see as potential problems with centering the politics of death and the body in black politics. Although much of the above demonstrates that the Black Lives Matter movement has been able to capitalize on the ways that members of the black community have proved to be genuinely, objectively exceptional, the discussion below will show that the movement has also had to contend with the ways that blacks are not, in other words, how they are also ordinary, completely run-of-the-mill, like every other community, that is, homophobic and sexist. As I have stated elsewhere (Threadcraft 2016a), possessing a female body can be problematic in the US necropolitical context, as female embodiment itself appears to work against activists recognizing one’s body as a body with which necropower has intersected. Female embodiment (as well as gender-nonconforming embodiment and trans embodiment) heightens the risk that any given subject’s dead body will not be counted, will go unrecognized (Threadcraft 2016b). Those concerned with violence against black women, like the members of the #SayHerName campaign, have pointed out that women’s deaths receive less attention and activism. The deaths of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people of color and trans persons of color also receive less attention and activism. But while this is disconcerting, the lack of said recognition provides an opportunity to reflect on whether joining in the struggles surrounding the politics of death is actually best suited for bringing attention to the problematic ways that state power intersects with the black female body.
I would add that if, after reflection, those concerned with the status of black women concede that—given this moment—it makes sense to take part in the necropolitical struggles receiving so much attention, they must take seriously the significant distinctions between homicide and femicide and what that will mean regarding an intersectional approach to confronting black femicide. It is not obvious that those concerned with the forces endangering black women’s lives must adopt a strict “what happens to men also happens to us” approach to the politics of death, and they should not. If activists concede to centering the politics of death in black politics, they will have to find ways to overcome the challenges presented by the public/private divide and how that divide deprives their cause of a key resource that Black Lives Matter activists have been able to mobilize to great effect: witnessing. The spectacle of public, violent death, where technology facilitates the multiplication of witnessing so that a nation sees the lethal violence, when before it had only heard about it, and is therefore motivated to act, has been invaluable to the success of #BlackLivesMatter. Much of the extraordinary guerrilla power of Black Lives Matter in the face of a much more powerful meaning-making apparatus—the US state—has come from the ability to transmit images of the slaughter. This has served to rally others to accept the #BlackLivesMatter movement’s narrative regarding the meaning of the bodies of the dead. Activists concerned with stemming black femicide should reflect on the fact that the movement has relied on amplifying the spectacle of death in a context in which black women suffer from a severe spectacular violent death deficit. Femicide does not lend itself to being captured in the same way. Therefore, they must ask themselves what can stand in the place of this public spectacle, when what they will be dealing with are a greater number of wholly private murders. What, then, will motivate people to rally around the bodies of our black female dead?
I do not want to suggest that #BlackLivesMatter members are unaware of the issues I raise here. Garza, Patrisse Cullors and Opal Tometi (all of whom identify as queer women of color) along with Opal Tometi are recognized as founders of the #BlackLivesMatter movement (Cobb 2016). Officially, the movement is committed to black women and trans-affirming. The #BlackLivesMatter (2016) website states, “We are committed to building a Black women affirming space, free from sexism, misogyny, and male-centeredness.” It also states, “We are committed to being self-reflexive and doing the work required to dismantle cis-gender privilege and uplift Black trans folk, especially Black trans women who continue to be disproportionately impacted by trans-antagonistic violence.” Their stance is unsurprising, as Robin D.G. Kelley writes of the three, "Black Lives Matter founders Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi are veteran organizers with a distinguished record of fighting for economic justice, immigrant rights, gender equity, and ending mass incarceration." (Kelley, 2016). What's more, the organizing aims of the Movement for Black Lives are radically comprehensive and call for nothing less than a total transformation of American society; the process by which the collection of organizations that make up the formal movement arrived at these aims almost unassailable. Kelley writes:

On August 1 the Movement for Black Lives (M4BL), a coalition of over sixty organizations, rolled out "A Vision for Black Lives: Black Power, Freedom & Justice."… It lays out six demands aimed at ending all forms of violence and injustice endured by black people; redirecting resources from prisons and the military to education, health, and safety; creating a just, democratically controlled economy; and securing black political power within a genuinely inclusive democracy. Backing the demands are forty separate proposals and thirty-four policy briefs, replete with data, context, and legislative
Kelley points out that the document calls for nothing less than the radical transformation of American society. Kelley continues:

It was the product of a year of collective discussion, research, collaboration, and intense debate, beginning with the Movement for Black Lives Convening in Cleveland last July, which initially brought together thirty different organizations. It was the product of some of the country’s greatest minds representing organizations such as the Black Youth Project 100, Million Hoodies, Black Alliance for Just Immigration, Dream Defenders, the Organization for Black Struggle, and Southerners on New Ground (SONG). As Marbre Stahly-Butts, a leader of the M4BL policy table explained, “We formed working groups, facilitated multiple convenings, drew on a range of expertise, and sought guidance from grassroots organizations, organizers and elders. As of today, well over sixty organizations and hundreds of people have contributed to the platform. (Kelley, 2016).

Kelley acknowledges, however, that the document above is not meant to be the blueprint for a mass movement, but rather a long term organizing goal. Here his point is well taken. As well, the movement depends very much on others accepting and disseminating the movement’s preferred narrative regarding the overreach of state power and pushing for change in light of it. Observers have noted that, although the movement was founded by queer women of color and many of the movement’s most prominent activists identify as queer, black communities around the country have shown differing levels of concern based on the gender, sexual orientation, and gender identity of the slain (Crissle West 2016). The movement now struggles with the ways that the communities to whom it appeals evince different levels of concern that map onto existing
social hierarchies vis-à-vis violence, including lethal violence against black men, black women, black trans men, and black trans women. And in this struggle, it has confronted the hierarchies of social status that contribute to how people respond to murder. So blacks face the problem not only of relative white indifference to black death, of whites caring less about murdered blacks, but also of black men and women caring less about murdered black women, of cis blacks caring less about slain trans blacks, and so on. Beth Richie (2012), for example, says that black community members have long tolerated direct physical assaults, sexual abuse and aggression, emotional manipulation, and social alienation of black women that they do not countenance against black men. Cis blacks also tolerate high levels of harassment and violence against trans blacks, just as they tolerate the disproportionate murder of trans women of color.

The activists who launched the #SayHerName campaign, like those in the broader #BlackLivesMatter movement, also attempt to intervene at the level of socially accepted meanings given to the bodies of the dead, but they struggle to have names such as Sandra Bland, Rekia Boyd, Tanisha Anderson, and those of other women who have been murdered by police repeated as often, and in truth carry as much meaning, as the names of Martin, Gray, Castile, Sterling, and Brown. Indeed, Brown’s name carries so much meaning that it can stand as a synonym for the entire Black Lives Matter movement. But black women will be disadvantaged in trying to win recognition by arguing that the same thing that happens to black men happens to them, as that is not entirely the case. Far fewer black women, for example, than black men are killed by police; however, black women are being slain at an alarming rate, alongside a host of other challenges they face. That is, the problem is far more complex for black women. #BlackLivesMatter activists have derived benefit from the stark simplicity of their most memorable and widely disseminated goal—ending the disproportionate murder of blacks by
police. Black women will benefit from no such simplicity, as the issues of police violence and murder themselves are far more complex for women. Activists concerned with black women can never articulate the situation simply. The intersectional complexity means that if those concerned with how power acts on the black female body want to keep the focus on the state and state violence in a way that is gender inclusive, they cannot focus exclusively on death and the production of dead bodies. However, if activists want to keep the focus on death, they must heed earlier feminist critiques regarding mainstream liberalism’s blind spots and biases that regard the state as the only dangerous force in a woman’s life; if they are going to take part in the politics of death, they cannot privilege the state as the death-distributing mechanism. Often the state is not the biggest threat of violence in a woman’s life. That is not to let the state off the hook, as this does not mean that the state cannot be indicted and that women are not endangered by the state’s inaction in the face of violence against them.

#SayHerName activists attempt to enter the conversation around the politics of death and at the same time broaden the conversation around how power intersects with the black body. Kimberlé Crenshaw and Andrea J. Ritchie (2015) wrote the report Say Her Name: Resisting Police Brutality against Black Women. Crenshaw says that “although Black women are routinely killed, raped, and beaten by the police, their experiences are rarely foregrounded in popular understandings of police brutality.” Ritchie adds, “Black women are all too often unseen in the national conversation about racial profiling, police brutality, and lethal force. . . . This report begins to shine a light on the ways that Black women are policed similar to other members of our communities, whether it’s police killings [or] ‘stop and frisk’” (Crenshaw and Ritchie quoted in African American Policy Forum 2015).
The report’s name is something of a hook to seize the moment of concern with lethal police force, however, as Crenshaw and Ritchie immediately move to broaden the discussion to include gender-specific forms of police violence. Ritchie points out that the report “also pushes open the frame to include other forms and contexts of police violence such as sexual assault by police, police abuse of pregnant women, profiling and abusive treatment of lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and gender nonconforming Black women, and police brutality in the context of responses to violence—which bring Black women’s experiences into even sharper focus” (quoted in African American Policy Forum 2015). Therefore, they are attempting to seize the moment of considerable interest in the use of lethal force by police officers to drive attention to other forms of police misconduct against women. Here Crenshaw, Ritchie, and others who are concerned about violence against black women have seized on an extraordinary moment given the amount of attention police killings have received, to drive attention to the problem of violence against black women. But the entry point they have chosen may put them in a bind.

If activists must emphasize the similarities between black men’s and black women’s experiences over their differences to get others to care about what happens to women at all, and thus join in struggles within this variant of the politics of death—by calling attention to police murders of women to get activists to care about women at all—then they risk not having the right kind of resources devoted to ending the things police disproportionately do to black women. Ritchie is right about the broader issues facing black women. And here the scope of the problem is enormous. Consider the following: police sexual misconduct is the second-largest category of reported police misconduct after police brutality. It is also an underreported crime—a hidden crime, routinely unreported, where identified cases are recognized as only “the tip of the iceberg.” It is thus quite possibly the largest category of police misconduct. Scholars (Stinson et
al. 2015), report that “the sexual nature of these offenses and the absence of official data have hampered the study of the phenomenon.” Matt Sedensky and Nomaan Merchant (2015), writing for the Associated Press, state: “In a yearlong investigation of sexual misconduct by US law enforcement, the Associated Press uncovered about 1,000 officers who lost their badges in a six-year period for rape, sodomy and other sexual assault; sex crimes that included possession of child abuse images; or sexual misconduct such as propositioning citizens or having consensual but prohibited on-duty intercourse.” The article goes on to point out: “The number is unquestionably an undercount because it represents only those officers whose licenses to work in law enforcement were revoked, and not all states take such action. California and New York— with several of the nation’s largest law enforcement agencies—offered no records because they have no statewide system to decertify officers for misconduct.” It may go without saying that in a context in which blacks and other communities of color are overpoliced, this misconduct disproportionately affects women of color. In an essay titled “The Color of Lawlessness: Sexual Abuse by Police, Nationwide,” Chagmion Antoine (2016) points out that “racial profiling also takes gender-specific forms that often lead to sexual assault.” Antoine cites a 2006 report by the United Nations Human Rights Committee (Ritchie and Mogul 2007), which found that “women of color experience particular impacts of current law enforcement policies and practices across the U.S.” The report states:

For instance, women are routinely profiled as drug couriers by law enforcement officers in the context of the U.S. government’s “war on drugs,” leading to arbitrary stops, strip searches, and detentions. The high prison sentences meted out for drug-related offenses in the U.S. also provide law enforcement officers with increased leverage for extortion
schemes such as those in which officers routinely demand sexual acts in exchange for leniency.

. . . Additionally, racial profiling of women of color has branched out from streets and airport lounges to more gender-specific contexts, including delivery rooms across the nation, where drug-testing of pregnant women fitting the “profile” of drug users—young, poor, and Black—has given rise to a new race-based policing phenomenon of “giving birth while Black.” Similarly, “mothering while Black” gives rise to more frequent allegations of child abuse and neglect against Black women, be it for perceived neglect resulting from poverty or for alleged failure to protect their children from witnessing abuse against them [the mothers] in the home. (31, 32)

This profiling extends to domestic and intimate partner violence in other ways as well, as the report notes:

While racial profiling and use of force against women of color takes many of the same forms as it does with men of color, racial profiling also takes place in gender-specific contexts—such as implementation of mandatory arrest policies, in which women of color are disproportionately perceived to be perpetrators of domestic violence rather than survivors—and takes gender-specific forms. (32)

So if resources are funneled solely to ending the lethal use of force by police, it may do little to change how this form of state power intersects with the black female body.

However, if those concerned with black women also decide against extending the scope of protest over the problematic deployment of state power against the black body to encompass gender-specific forms of abuse and instead concede what I agree is the extraordinary power of
this necropolitical moment and therefore remain most focused on the politics of death, then they run up against the distinctions between homicide and femicide and what those distinctions mean for what is necessary in stemming the production of dead black bodies and, furthermore, what I see are the problems this distinction will present for rallying others to end black femicide.

Crenshaw and Ritchie are keen to drive attention to fatal black intimate partner violence, yet this issue is missing one important component that #BlackLivesMatter activists have used to great effect: spectacle.

Homicide masquerades as a general, sex-blind phenomenon covering all murder, but in some ways the androcentrism of the term is warranted. First, men are, disproportionately, victims of murder. The US Department of Justice (Cooper and Smith 2011: 3) reports that between 1980 and 2008, men were 77 percent of murder victims. Second, men and women are killed in different ways, by different people, with men more likely to be killed in what are quite literally more “spectacular” circumstances, in ways that are public and in view. Scott A. Bonn (2015) reports: “Men are most likely to be killed by a friend or an acquaintance in a public place such as the street or a sporting event. This is due in part to the fact that men are more likely than women to be in public places that increase their victimization risk such as a bar or pool room.” Their deaths are therefore more likely to be witnessed—and in the twenty-first century, filmed—and perceived as disruptions to the public order and, as such, perceived as part of a problem that society should devote collective resources to solving. Third, men are much more likely to be killed during concurrent illegal activity; they were 90 percent of drug-related and 95 percent of gang-related homicides between 1980 and 2008, and, again, these are the kinds of deaths that register as threats to the public order. Significantly, they are killed by nonintimates, although they are often killed by acquaintances. In this broader context—with men more likely to be killed
period, to be in a public space when killed, and to be killed during criminal activity—men are far more likely to be killed by police and today are more likely to be killed by police on tape.

Femicide is a different phenomenon. The term may strike some as feminist linguistic overreach, but *femicide* is as apt as *homicide*. First, as the above makes clear, only 23 percent of those murdered are women, and women are not killed in the same contexts that men are, nor are they killed by the same people. They represent 63 percent of those killed by intimates and 81.7 percent of those killed in sex-related murders. They are, therefore, killed in the course of things that have come to define the private sphere in many cultures, not least of all our own. They are also likely to be killed during an argument and not during the commission of a felony. Women are killed in private, without witness or only witnessed by politically voiceless minors; they are killed in the home, that space long considered a man’s castle. Their deaths are unlikely to register as threats to the public order. Their deaths are unlikely to register at all.

More broadly, Russell (2011), one of the earliest adopters of the term *femicide*, states:

Examples of femicide include the stoning to death of females (which I consider a form of torture-femicide); murders of females for so-called “honor”; rape murders; murders of women and girls by their husbands, boyfriends, and dates, for having an affair, or being rebellious, or any number of other excuses; wife-killing by immolation because of too little dowry; deaths as a result of genital mutilations; female sex slaves, trafficked females, and prostituted females, murdered by their “owners,” traffickers, “johns” and pimps, and females killed by misogynist strangers, acquaintances, and serial killers.

The above does not necessarily mean that those concerned about the lives of black women have to abandon the politics of death. The bodies of black female dead are being produced. The black female dead are also being produced and produced at a rate as impressive as the most arresting
Black Lives Matter statistics. This is the case because, if murder is something of a male problem, it is also a black problem in the United States, with blacks six times more likely to be murdered than whites. In fact, despite murder’s status as a male problem, black women are killed at higher rates than white men and have been for decades (Miller 2014). It may come as little surprise that—in a context where blacks are more likely to be killed, women are more likely to be killed by intimates, and police disproportionately profile, sexually assault, and arrest black female victims of domestic violence—black women make up a disproportionate percentage of those who are slain in the course of domestic and intimate partner violence. The Bureau of Justice Statistics reports that black women were four times more likely than women of other races to die at the hands of a current or former boyfriend. And while it may be alarmingly true that a black man is killed by police, security guards, police moonlighting as security guards and other vigilantes every twenty-eight hours, it is also true that every twenty-one hours a black woman is killed by her intimate partner. (Eisen-Martin, 2013, Lee, 2014, Violence Policy Center, 2015).

What this means is that if those who are concerned with the status of black women agree to take part in necropolitics, this necropolitics cannot continue to privilege spectacular public murders at the hands of state agents. That will not stem the production of dead black female bodies.

The reader might reasonably ask: Is not the above a black-on-black crime deflection? No, it is not. First, the problem of impunity is a major factor here, much as it is for lethal police violence. That is not the case with black homicides and the crimes leading up to said homicides, all of which are punished and punished severely by the state. Intimate partner murder is the most predictable form of murder, and the perpetrator often escalates his abuse in ways that go unpunished until the final lethal act of violence. Experts (Women’s Justice Center 2010) have found that if prior acts of violence are evaluated using a “lethality index,” it is fairly easy to
determine whether or not someone will ultimately murder his partner. Prior incidents of choking, for example, are a huge red flag. Let me state that again: lethal intimate partner violence is predictable; we can know if it will happen in advance. These deaths, then, are the result of police (and prosecutorial and judicial) inaction in response to violence against black women. As the United Nations Human Rights Committee noted, often black female victims of domestic violence are punished themselves, either by being arrested or by having their children taken away, decreasing the likelihood that they will ask for help when they experience violence. They are punished because someone has enacted violence against them.

I also want to be clear that I see this situation as a problem of state failure and not of black male deviance. I believe the solution lies in state building, in confronting the problems of racialized uneven development. Alongside police, prosecutorial, and court inaction, there are further inactions that endanger black women’s lives. Carolyn M. West (2004: 1487–89) writes:

The race of abusers and victims was not associated with partner homicide risk after controlling for demographic factors. Instead, the strongest sociodemographic predictor was the abuser’s employment. . . . Black men are overrepresented among the unemployed, which may contribute to black women’s elevated murder rate.

Alternatively stated, a consistent demographic profile of victims and perpetrators has emerged: African American couples who are young, undereducated, impoverished, unemployed urban dwellers Based on these findings, it should not be concluded that Black Americans are biologically or culturally more prone to violence than other ethnic groups. Rather, these results suggest that African Americans are economically and socially disadvantaged, which places them at greater risks for IPV [intimate partner violence].
Therefore, the problem of disproportionate black intimate partner femicide is a complex problem at the intersection of black community and police relations—which include disproportionate police physical and sexual violence against blacks, combined with the ongoing reluctance of state agencies to prevent forms of violence that involve a man and his woman in his castle and that do not threaten the public order. There is the problem, as well, of relying on police officers to end intimate partner violence, given police officers’ own documented greater likelihood of domestic and intimate partner abuse and therefore their greater willingness to condone the abuse of intimate partners. There are also larger problems of unemployment and underemployment as well as gun control.

**On Making the Private Public**

I have mentioned the problem that a lack of spectacle presents in rallying people to act against femicide. A potential solution may be to draw attention to how the private can become public. Feminists who seek to do so have begun to demonstrate the links between domestic and intimate partner violence and terror. When it comes to terror, those most concerned with threats to the public order are being forced, however slowly, toward conceding feminist critiques regarding the danger of evaluating public and private violence differently. Salamishah Tillet, Soraya Chemaly, Melissa Jeltsen, and Pamela Shifman have pointed out that some of this private violence eventually goes public, and they have pushed to redefine domestic and intimate violence as the terror it is. This move is strategically brilliant, as terror is a problem toward which we are completely comfortable devoting considerable resources.

For example, in the wake of recent mass shootings and public terror and major concern regarding their apparent randomness, feminists long involved with the issue of violence against women and girls saw an opening. They pointed out, first, that most mass shootings were actually
instances of domestic and intimate partner violence: 57 percent of mass shootings between January 2009 and June 2014 involved a perpetrator killing female intimates and their children, 70 percent of mass shooting incidents occurred at home, and 42 percent involved a current or former intimate partner (Jeltsen 2015). Second, they noted that those who went on to commit acts of random public violence—what we generally think of as terrorism—had practiced by terrorizing the women and children around them first (Shifman and Tillet 2015). In the wake of Omar Mateen’s mass murder at Pulse, an Orlando LGBT nightclub and onetime community safe space, Chemaly (2016) not only wrote about Mateen’s history of intimate partner violence but also reported that “while the world watched in horror as news poured out of Orlando, a man in New Mexico was arrested in the fatal shooting deaths of his wife and four daughters.” Feminists bringing attention to the links between domestic violence and intimate partner violence and “public terror” can help drive more resources toward solving the problem of femicide. The #SayHerName campaign might consider how it could join with or make strategic alliances with efforts to connect intimate partner violence and terror to direct more resources to the problem of the black female dead.

Of course, this approach is not without drawbacks, given the racialized nature of the war on terror. For that reason, the feminists who seek to link intimate partner violence and terror might also benefit from the coalition I suggest and from discussions with pioneering intersectional feminists such as Crenshaw as they, too, foray into the complex waters of the politics of death in North America.
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