Racial Optics of Escalation

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Arguments about escalation incite and condone racial violence by denying constitutional rights to critique and protest the government during police-civilian interactions and acts of free assembly. To understand how racial minorities are coerced into giving up these rights to save themselves from being perceived as escalating agents and being at the receiving end of excessive force, one must examine the legacies of slavery and genocide and the role of video surveillance in US policing. We argue that escalation does not characterize the pace of events but is instead a language ideology buttressed by interdiscursive processes shaping social personae across discrete communicative events. We discuss how the racial optics of the military-police-entertainment industrial complex transform video surveillance into potentially harmful technologies by reaffirming the belief that visual and aural signs of escalation are measurable markers of conflict. We analyze Black-aligned voices engaging in communicative acts of protected speech and free assembly to offer a theoretical framework for understanding White supremacy as upheld by diverse communicative practices related through the logics of escalation. We conclude by considering how the video discourse analysis of speech, gesture, and movement can elucidate the interactions, ideologies, and institutional structures that justify the scaling up of police responses.

White Americans exercise their First Amendment right to critique the police without fear of being read as escalating an interaction. Yet when Black Americans insult a police officer or object to their arrest, these actions are glossed as escalation to justify the excessive use of force as a tactical defensive response. Surveillance videos, body-worn camera (bodycam) footage, and reality television, through their technologically mediated images and sounds of Black persons, can depict them as erratic and suspicious, overemotional and irrational, and potentially escalating into violence (Johnson 2007). Police officers also evoke arguments about escalation to justify the scaling up of weapons used against Black-aligned voices exercising their right to free assembly. Yet when White-aligned voices engage in visibly armed protest, their rights are protected. In other contexts, invocations of escalation are arguments in justification of warfare. Few wars are first waged without leaders' rhetorical calls for violence, citing external threats of escalation by foreign agents that need to be subdued through the use of even greater force. The neglect paid to the unequal burden placed on asymmetrically positioned and raced interlocutors to maintain peace justifies escalation, all the way up to warfare. Does the argument of escalation get thus deployed to incite and condone incidences of racial injustice by upholding the interactional norms, institutions, and ideologies of a racial caste system (Alexander 2012; Ralph 2020*b*)?

"Escalation," defined by *The Oxford English Dictionary* as "an increase or development by successive stages; spec. the development of 'conventional' warfare into nuclear warfare, or the use of successively more powerful types of weapons in war," purports, through the imposition of a temporalized logic, that acts of interpersonal conflict will inevitably "scale up" in affective charge or change "scales" completely (Højer 2021) to engender violence and achieve the mass destruction of life and property. Heeding Carr and Lempert's (2016) call to "attend to power in the pragmatics of scale—that is, how some positions and perspectives are privileged at the expense of others as scales are institutionalized" (9), we problematize efforts to provide a precise definition of "escalation" as reproducing the reifying effects of state power and racial violence. In the United States the invocation of escalation by police or military when identifying a perceived threat translates into the denial or suspension of First Amendment rights. For example, *Chaplinsky v. New Hampshire* (1942) and *Watts v. United States* (1969) established that "fighting words" or "true threats" (i.e., face-to-face speech intended to cause psychic harm [Greene 2011] or act as a precursor to physical harm [Dolzani 2014; Rothman 2001]) are exceptions to free speech protections. Given the potential for civil rights injustices to ensue from using the "true threats" doctrine, it is surprising how few theoretical and ethnographic engagements with escalation there are (see Højer 2021; Wagner-Pacifici 2000).[1] One would need comparative studies of interactions with police (see Voigt et al. 2017) as well as of militaristic rhetoric and interventions to fully critique the disparities of power produced in and through the different colonizing contexts of racial capitalism (Melamed 2015) informing multiple circulating discourses about escalation.

To police officers, escalation may mean measurable and incremental changes in speech, gesture, and movement that signal the unfolding of a conflictual encounter between themselves and civilians, or it might be taken as a sign itself of an emotionally charged interaction. In many cases, police officers, as well as

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1. Wagner-Pacifici's (2000) theorization of the standoff, which she defines as "situations of mutual and symmetrical threat, wherein the central parties face each other . . . across some key divide" (7), offers a somewhat different perspective from the popular use of "escalation," which we argue characterizes interactions of asymmetrical threat.

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media commentators, liken signs of escalation to flight or attempts to flee. These different metapragmatic frameworks nonetheless index a single institutionally buttressed language ideology. Through the semiotic mechanism of "rhematization" (Gal and Irvine 2019), the indexical link between civilians interpreted as escalating actors and those presumed to communicate a perceived intent to reject police authority is rendered an iconic one; that is, both groups are seen as one and the same. Although the racial biases in this ideology are not readily apparent when examining single interactions, they can be exposed by analyzing interdiscursive processes across communicative events (Agha 2007; Wortham and Reyes 2015) that highlight the circulation of stereotypes of racialized personae in the mainstream liberal elite media (Chun and Lo 2016; Dick and Wirtz 2011; Rosa and Díaz 2020). The social personae available to Black, Indigenous, and Brown civilians in their encounters with authoritative state representatives—which include police officers and media commentators who evoke the framework of escalation to suspend free speech rights—are limited to that of a criminal and potential fugitive who is always ready to escalate and that of a docile or reformed subject who concertedly de-escalates instead. White Americans, by default, are presumed to be nonescalating actors. When taking into account the prior and subsequent interactions, ideologies, and authoritative institutions that shape what counts as the permissible forms of agency allowed among non-White persons in policing and other White supremacist contexts, we see that interpretations of escalating behavior necessarily constrain future choices and outcomes available to Black, Indigenous, and Brown civilians, regardless of their actions in the moment. Hence, the language ideology of escalation authorizes those in power to view and interpret the communicative practices of Black, Indigenous, and Brown civilians as threats that need to be curtailed, often with excessive force, before conflict inevitably scales up to violence.

This article offers a theoretical framework for analyzing how the language ideology informing popular views of escalation regiments communicative practices across White supremacist contexts. We rely on linguistic, ethnographic, and media evidence collected through collaborative research conducted in Columbia, South Carolina, since 2017 in the aftermath of Walter Scott's killing by police officers in Charleston. We draw from a corpus of 70 hours of bodycam and dashcam footage of police-civilian encounters recorded during officer-initiated stops between 2014 and 2020. We examine 18 interviews with former criminal defendants and ethnographic research conducted in courts, police departments, and police academies to identify the communicative practices and sociolegal frameworks informing how police-civilian encounters are labeled or acted on as escalation. We situate these interactions in the context of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement (Camp and Heatherton 2016), which started in 2013 after the acquittal of George Zimmerman for killing Trayvon Martin and continued past spring and summer 2020 when a multiracial coalition joined in nationwide protests of police killings of Black civilians. BLM ruptures the hegemony of the ideology of escalation by proclaiming that Black

civilians are not only denied their constitutional rights to individually critique and collectively protest the government but also coerced into giving up their rights to save themselves from being perceived as escalating agents. The violence is thus twofold: Black civilians must police their own persons and submit to police force to stay alive; however, with every passing minute of every interaction with the police, they further endanger their lives.[2]

Black, Indigenous, and Brown civilians bear the brunt of the blame for violence when the framework of escalation is enacted, even when video surveillance through bodycams and dashcams is intended to protect their constitutional rights and ensure fair treatment. We rely on the concept of racial optics to underscore how legacies of slavery and genocide inform the military-police-entertainment industrial complex that transforms video surveillance into potentially harmful technologies. These optics reaffirm the assumption that visual and aural communicative signs captured on video are perceptible and legally consequential evidence of escalation, even if such tokens cannot be measured. An ideology rooted in the racial optics of escalation also erases (Gal and Irvine 2019) how video footage taken from law enforcement contexts produces enduring cultural images of criminality and danger associated with the figure of the Black fugitive, a historical reference to a fleeing subject that draws on both liberatory and repressive narratives describing Black mobility and mobilization. BLM protests have shown that, whether from facial recognition technology, bodycam footage, or reality television shows, videos of Black fugitives have saturated viewing publics (Fiske 1998) and desensitized White-aligned Americans to the racial injustices enacted daily on minority communities. We argue that video footage of police-civilian encounters downplays the liberatory sense of Black fugitivity, characterized as a refusal of capitalist structures, in favor of a White supremacist view that promotes the racial optics of escalation and condones excessive force against Black civilians.

Additionally, Black-aligned voices engaging in communicative acts of protected speech and Black-aligned movements expressing the right to free assembly resemble one another because of the racial logics governing their discretionary outcomes. Both types of constitutionally protected acts trigger in state authorities, especially police officers, the propensity to characterize the inevitability and intensity by which racialized persons are seen as escalating conflict into violence. In the United States, police discretion legally superposes First Amendment rights, and the lack of laws clarifying the property rights of surveillance video complicates the monitoring of images depicting the culpability and criminality of Black, Indigenous, and Brown persons. Political rhetoric that justifies the use of military intervention on domestic soil further naturalizes discriminatory outcomes. During the Trump administration, a recursive entailment (Gal and Irvine 2019) of the racializing language

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2. Similarly, Ralph and Singhal (2019) draw on Orlando Patterson's concept of "social death" to "understand how mortality . . . shapes social aspirations" (859) through the intersectional experiences of domination.

ideology that represses First Amendment rights was to label activists resisting state power as "terrorists" and criminalize their interactions with police.

In this article, we first examine the racial legacies of slavery and genocide that inform what the figure of the fugitive is and explain why this is historically linked to police notions of escalation. Next, we examine the discretionary application of statutory laws by law enforcement officials and correlate these with known outcomes of police bias, comparing the experiences of Black and White civilians in the United States. Particularly, we analyze a traffic stop captured on bodycam and dashcam, where White police officers stop an elderly White man and two young Black men with similar criminal records, treating the Black men as potentially escalating fugitives and mostly ignoring the White man, who confessed to the crime. Finally, we explore the consequences of journalistic analyses of videos of traffic stops and political protests, united by their attention to the hidden logics of escalation. We argue that media critiques, even though they seek to denounce police violence, may inadvertently reinscribe the racial optics of escalation. This violence can be exacerbated by public demands to release police-controlled bodycam and dashcam footage. We conclude by emphasizing how video discourse analysis is best equipped to sustain a critique of the racial optics of escalation and does so by identifying voicings of fugitivity across communicative events and analyzing the material affordances of bodycam and dashcam video footage for protecting or challenging participants' First Amendment rights.

The White Supremacist View of Black Fugitivity

The White supremacist view of Black fugitivity privileges an optics for viewing Black mobility and mobilization as dangerous while concealing other logics accounting for civilians exercising their First Amendment rights. In choosing the term "optics" and not other analytics such as "gaze" or "vision," we seek to highlight the technologies involved in producing, circulating, and interpreting race as an embodied sociocultural category that differentially distributes rights and obligations.[3] Similar to Charles Goodwin's (1994) concept of "professional vision," which suggests that "socially organized perceptual frameworks shared within the police profession" (616) informed the interpretation of actions memorialized by video of Rodney King's beating by Los Angeles police officers in 1992, we recognize that "any camera position constitutes a theory about what is relevant in the scene" (609). However, whereas Goodwin was interested in how practices of coding, highlighting, and graphic representations guide the interpretations of events discussed during courtroom trials, our discussion of racial optics instead focuses on the varied circulations and uses of

video in an interdiscursive chain not limited to the courtroom, drawing attention to the circulation of images extending from enslavement to the present, to show how these have impacted the criminalization of Black persons and language.

Rather than examining the role of personal and institutional moralities (e.g., good or bad cops, good or bad victims, good or bad policies), we thus turn our attention to how technologies of video surveillance can delimit the personae construed as criminal, as opposed to docile, and facilitate violence against Black civilians while paradoxically purporting to liberate them from racial bias and police brutality (Benjamin 2019; Browne 2015; Hinton and Cook 2020). In addition to authenticating and naturalizing the perspectives of the police officers who control most of these technologies, racializing optics also privilege particular historical viewpoints as opposed to others. They conceal how postcolonial reverberations of violence against Black, Indigenous, and Brown persons manifest and live on in present-day police killings and in the White supremacist perspectives that characterize these encounters as always escalating in nature.

Critiques of the colonial roots of American racial regimes highlight the foundational role of White supremacy and White settler colonialism in producing racial categories, such as the "fugitive" or "maroon" (Dunnavant 2020; Hernandez 2010), through the entwined projects of Indigenous genocide and African enslavement. They also show how these dehumanizing colonial projects legitimize Whiteness as good, well intentioned, and normative (Pierre 2020) and render problematic Black mobility in its various forms. Stefano Harney and Fred Moten (2013:7), drawing on the tradition of "Black fugitive thought" in writings by Aimé Cesaire, W. E. B. Du Bois, and David Walker, argue that the historical criminalization of Black fugitives was based on a pervasive fear and knowledge of Black mobilization (Sojoyner 2017:532). Anthropologist Damien Sojoyner retools the concept of Black fugitivity to emphasize both a disavowal of and disengagement from state-governed liberal projects of freedom and democracy involved in the construction of racial difference and segregation. Black fugitivity is thus humanizing from the perspective of those who refuse and disengage from "the racially charged tenets of capitalism, across historical moments, [which] are incapable of reform and are only capable of reproducing violent conditions for Black life" (Sojoyner 2017:528).

However, in the context of policing, the White supremacist view of Black fugitivity disregards the liberatory logics of the fugitive's refusal and disengagement in favor of the institutions and social structures that seek to manage and curtail the mobility and mobilization of Black civilians. Since policing projects at the regional, state, and federal levels in the United States are premised on a White supremacist orientation toward Blackness, these institutions and criminal codes necessarily frame the liberatory logic of Black fugitivity as a threat to be suppressed. Therefore, whereas Black fugitivity refuses the legitimacy of the institutions that produce the violent conditions of daily life in the United States, the White supremacist view of Black fugitivity

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3. See Stanley (2017) for an alternative approach to "optics," described as the image "that which both includes and exceeds narrative" (615) and "surveils as it conceals" (613).

is designed to uphold the legitimacy of those very institutions and to coerce acquiescence instead. Ideologies of escalation are therefore indebted to racializing optics describing White responses to the actions of police officers as nonthreatening, compared with the presumed charged-up and noncooperative responses of racial minorities.

As the foundational ideology underwriting US legal codes and institutions, White supremacy normalizes Whiteness by producing and pushing to circulate a limited set of racialized behavioral templates to homogenize and interpret Black, Indigenous, and Brown civilian behaviors whenever the "escalating" framework is interactionally evoked. Videos taken and shown by law enforcement fossilize this framework, recontextualizing the liberatory logics of Black fugitivity into a White supremacist view, where Black movements and verbal practices are depicted as behavioral derelictions requiring corrective censure and punishment. In a midsize police headquarters in Columbia, digital images of convicts at large, along with their gang affiliations, shown on a video loop and viewed by officers before leaving for patrol reinforce this perspective. The material affordances of surveillance and bystander videos viewed by police officers, prosecutors, defense attorneys, and judges also lend an aura of transparency to defendants' speech, gesture, and movement and reinforce assumptions about so-called escalating signs (see Wirtz 2014). For example, video footage of interactions between civilians, police officers, and military personnel position Black civilians as potential "fugitives" or "flight risks" through the camera's hypervigilance to movements such as back and forth pacing. Videos can also show police officers interpreting and responding to verbal acts of questioning, refuting, or denying guilt as a failure to comply with state processes and a direct provocation against officers rather than as the expression of free speech. These biases and acts of discretion culminate in the taking of police action greater in force than the civilian's presumably instigating actions and contributing to the perception of officer disrespect (Voigt et al. 2017).

Depending on the type of recording device, who controls the output and editing of the video footage, and the property rights assigned to the footage, a White supremacist view of Black fugitivity can assume different forms. Police-civilian interactions are surveilled through two digital video recording technologies (White and Malm 2020). The bodycam, attached to the middle torso of the police officer's uniform, was first implemented in the United Kingdom in the 2000s and in the United States in the 2010s, after a series of high-profile police killings of Black and Brown civilians (Coudert et al. 2015; White and Malm 2020). In use since the 1990s in the United States, dashcams instead produce footage that reveals visual elements about the physical setting, including the position and movement of officers and civilians, which are also relevant in a criminal case. Mounted on a parked police car, the dashcam shoots through a long shot and a fixed angle that matches the viewers' eye level (C in fig. 1). The recorded bodies and their actions coconstitute the interactive frame (A↔B in fig. 1) to create an on-state scene of the events.
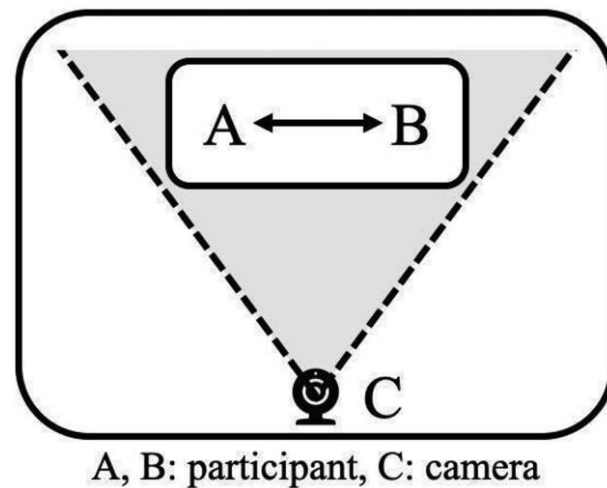

A, B: participant, C: camera

Figure 1. Dashcam and the interactive frame.

Differences in the technological and material affordances of dashcams and bodycams impact how people perceive certain sensuous effects, such as "jarring" or "hypervigilant," as present, real, and even natural.[4] For instance, since the bodycam is attached to the torso of a police officer, even the slightest movement of the officer impacts the camera angle. This dynamic angle reflecting the officer's every motion makes bodycam recordings appear more jolting and violent than those of the dashcam and, when seen through the racial optics of escalation, can be taken as evidence to promote and reproduce the White supremacist view of Black fugitivity. Also, when a police officer moves around a lot, the interaction appears more emotionally charged than what the dashcam footage reveals. Since the bodycam produces a limited first-person shot below the officer's eye level (fig. 2; see Stoughton 2018), in up close footage this low-angled view follows the civilians' facial expressions yet can obscure eye gaze or other bodily movements. In comparison, the dashcam's angle comes across as more stable. Cross-examining bodycam and dashcam footage could rectify these discrepancies in perspective, yet few attorneys can afford this time investment, and in our study, criminal defendants rarely had the opportunity to view the footage themselves.

Racializing optics also amplify temporal aspects. When police officers wearing bodycams move in reaction to civilians whom they suspect to be fleeing or acting aggressively, the jarring motion of the camera makes the pacing appear frenetic and intensifies the perspective that events are escalating. The fast pacing memorialized in bodycam footage supports the use of defensive tactics by framing the officer's forceful actions

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4. This perspective, based on research on qualia (Chumley and Harkness 2013), suggests that the technological and material affordances of digital video recording (e.g., angle, movement/motion, perspective) serve a key role in generating different "experiences of sensuous qualities" (239), which are selectively taken up as evidence to justify or amplify the racial optics of escalation.
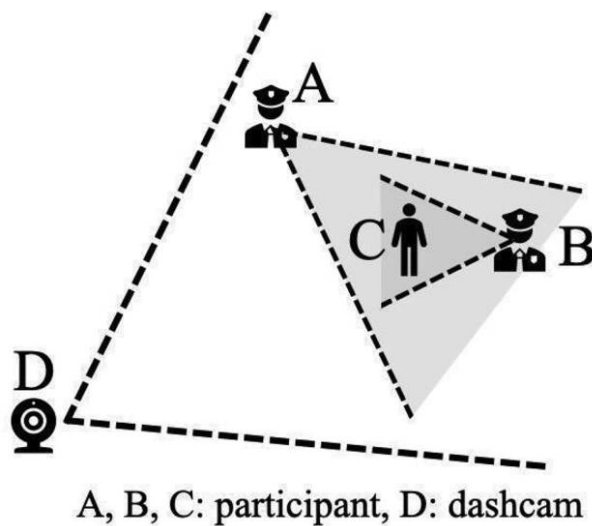
A, B, C: participant, D: dashcam

Figure 2. Different angles by dashcam and bodycam.

following a civilian's movement as justified responses to civilian-initiated escalation, even when the original "trigger" might have occurred earlier or externally to that moment, might not have been recorded, or might not have existed at all. Viewers of body-cam footage are thus inclined to ignore how misalignments between police officers and civilians often have hazardous consequences for asymmetrically positioned participants.

Our interviews between 2018 and 2019 with former criminal defendants of traffic stops in Columbia, South Carolina, reveal that Black and Brown people are keenly sensitive to racializing optics. When asked how they would teach a younger version of themselves to speak with police officers, one interviewee, an elderly Black man, shares the following advice he gives to his five-year-old granddaughter, who asked him about police violence in the aftermath of the nonlethal arrest of Dylan Roof, a White supremacist who killed nine Black churchgoers and injured another at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston in June 2015:[5]

> My grandbaby, she's five years old . . . she asked me why do the cops kill a lot of Black people that don't have guns but they was able to arrest Dylan Roof who they know had a gun and killed nine people but they didn't even bother to try to kill him . . . she asked questions like that . . . and that's why I tell

her you have to approach the police a little differently . . . so she's aware already at five, well we try to make her aware of that, and I think that's what's gone keep her alive . . . and my I tell my grown kids if you get stopped, just comply.

Another interviewee, a young Black man, explains his similar approach with the police:

> Don't be an aggressor . . . keep your composure at all time, because they will try and do things to, just say stuff like **boy** and stuff like that just try and get you like off your toes, to like get a negative reaction, whether it's a facial expression, whatever it is like they wanna . . . to be caught slipping. So please just be on your p's and q's at all times like continue to give off positive energy, just try and do that at all times.

These interviews express the metapragmatic awareness that questioning the legal knowledge of police officers, who occupy positions of authority over stopped civilians, evokes images of aggressive behavior falling outside of White supremacist norms. Similarly, children are socialized to identify acts of police provocation, along with their colonial histories and racist loadings, and keep their facial expressions and movements neutral to avoid accusations of escalation. In this example, calling a Black man "boy" betrays a White supremacist and paternalistic view of the state toward treating Black men as wards; it is both legally and popularly recognized, especially in the South, as a racist appellation.[6] Children also learn that, despite their best efforts, prosecutors can cite facial expressions and other gestures captured on camera and interpreted through a White supremacist perspective as signs of true threats, disregarding how these communicative signs instead index fear of a repressive law enforcement.

There is no systematic proof that bodycams and dashcams reduce violence in police-civilian encounters.[7] Also, depending on department policies and state laws, police officers can edit a video ex post facto or claim that a file is corrupted, describe their equipment as malfunctioning, or turn off their cameras at (in)opportune moments during the encounter (Balko 2016). Criminal defendants and attorneys sometimes have other footage available to them for cross-examination, including soundless surveillance videos, reality television shows, and citizen bystander videos (White and Malm 2020), which fill in the gaps where bodycam and dashcam footage leave off. These videos, while providing greater coverage, can also perpetuate racializing optics through their circulation. For example, one entertainment cop show, *LivePD*, which was canceled in June 2020 in response to nationwide BLM protests, caricatures the fraught

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5. Regarding transcription conventions, we acknowledge that transcription is an act of interpretation and representation intertwined with relations of power and motivated by analytic concerns and sociopolitical contexts (Bucholtz 2000). To avoid reinforcing unequal authority between police and civilians and reproducing raciolinguistic stereotypes (cf. Delfino 2020), we transcribe the speech of police officers and civilians, who use phonological features of Southern American English and African American Language, using standard English orthography. An ellipsis indicates significant pause. Brackets indicate overlapping speech. Words in bold italics indicate emphasis. Hyphens indicate cut off speech. Colons indicate lengthening. Parentheses indicate visual and auditory information. An ellipsis in brackets indicates omitted words.

6. On December 16, 2011, the 11th Circuit Court of Appeals found in favor of the plaintiffs' case in *Ash v. Tyson Foods* that two African American men were discriminated against by being called "boy."

7. Ariel et al. (2015) in Rialto, CA, find that video is linked to a 50% decrease in use-of-force incidents and a 90% decrease in complaints against police officers. Yet newer studies by police departments show that bodycams and dashcams have little impact in changing police behavior, and juries are not significantly swayed by video evidence.

nature of police-civilian encounters by suggesting that criminal suspects usually instigate conflict in interaction. One interviewee, Kareem, a young Black man, explains how *LivePD* has impeded social life in his neighborhood:

> I'm-I'm *from* Newark so I'm moving back. Actually, just, I'm not coming back to stay. Just every week is a *LivePD*. It's like you gotta *always watch out* for *LivePD* and like you-you ain't gotta be doing nothing it's like you just *watch out*.

Even his mother stays at home on Fridays when *LivePD* films their live show:

> They probably won't be moving around today because of *LivePD*. People really don't be wanting to go around because of *LivePD*. They stay in the house. My mother's the same way [. . .] Yeah she just, every time, "*LivePD* out. I ain't going nowhere." She just don't wanna go nowhere. (*laughing*)

Kareem believes that *LivePD*, present during his stop, relied on camera footage to exaggerate his offense for television ratings:

> Yeah he was just like because I had like my money on the seats and stuff and he was just trying to make it seem like I was a big drug dealer like and I'm-as-as-I didn't know what he was doing until I got home, seen the actual footage like [. . .] *It was only $57 and a lot of ones*. And he was trying to make it seem like I just made a *drug* deal or something like I was like they-they just made this look *real* bad. Yeah like y'all just made this look real *good* for y'all cameras.

Media industries that produce and capitalize on images of Black fugitives and presume criminality in acts or projections of refusal or fleeing ingrain into national consciousness racist stereotypes of violent Black communities, targeted for surveillance and entertainment value (Smiley and Fakunle 2016).

White supremacist views of Black fugitivity thus rely on distortions, propaganda, and lies to benefit Whiteness and degrade Blackness, making it hard to sustain the legitimacy of the law. With military personnel not required to wear cameras to monitor their behavior against "enemies" and surveillance drone footage protected as national security, the murky distribution of property and privacy rights assigned to video in different policing and military contexts raises questions about the legal status of documentary images in the public domain (Feliciano-Santos and Das 2019). Moreover, the nationwide prevalence of algorithm-driven policing through corporately managed systems like predictive policing and gunshot detection obscures the ideological divide between the state and private industry (Das 2019). These legal issues and institutional partnerships hinder efforts to trace the statistical and other opaque models that authorize biased decision-making based on racial segregation. In June 2020 the American Civil Liberties Union filed a complaint against the Detroit Police Department for wrongful arrest due to their inappropriate use of facial recognition technology in making a false positive criminal identification (Fung and Metz 2020). Since people of color, especially women, are linked to high rates of false positives (White and

Malm 2020), when technology companies profit from the sale of artificial intelligence software to police forces without correcting for racial and gender biases, the White supremacist view of Black fugitivity, as opposed to the liberatory one, becomes further entrenched in American society.

A Police-Civilian Encounter in South Carolina

High-profile incidents involving police-civilian encounters since the onset of BLM have given rise to a coherent ideological framework informing local expectations about escalating outcomes. In South Carolina these incidents include the highway patrol shooting of Levar Jones in September 2014, the police killing of Walter Scott in April 2015, the mass shooting at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in June 2015, and the removal of the Confederate flag from the State House in July 2015. Among these events, stops are popularly imagined as leading to most cases of police misconduct. Since procedural regularities and institutional obligations related to traffic violations impact police action, it is important to note how statutes on the criminalization of drug use and driving under the influence (DUI) in South Carolina specify the obligations of officers to arrest under these circumstances. Police officers have the discretion to stop vehicles as they see fit, as long as the officer provides "reasonable" suspicion of an offense. One public defender explains reasonable suspicion in the following terms:

> Not signaling, brake lights being out, wrong color LED lights. If the officer witnesses something that could conceivably be a traffic infraction, they get to seize you. If they want to stop you, they just follow you around until you commit one, which everyone does. They only need to provide a reason for the stop, and it can be anything except explicitly stating someone's race or anything that is baldly prejudiced.

Once stopped, law enforcement officers have further discretion to search a car if they have probable cause to find illegal substances, such as smelling marijuana or seeing plantlike material. In the case of a suspected DUI, civilians can challenge the assertion, after which the officers will ask questions and take them to a field sobriety test site. If the officers are certain that the civilians understand that they have failed the test, federal and state statutes mandate their arrest. Officers read civilians their Miranda rights (which affords them the right to remain silent), cuff them, take them to a Breathalyzer test site where officers inform them that they will be video recorded, and formally charge them. If civilians legally refuse the Breathalyzer test or if the test reads at a blood alcohol level over 0.08, officers send them to jail. Cases involving drug possession can also involve a narcotics specialist who assists in making decisions about the illegal substance and offense; nonetheless, the arresting officer is still the one in charge.

Law enforcement officers act as if they are vested with the legal authority and discretion to identify and quell perceived and potential threats of escalation, including decisions over whether a citizen's expression lies within the bounds of First

Amendment protections or is a true threat against the officer. When police act outside the bounds of the law, there is little recourse to restrain their actions because of hurdles such as qualified immunity and extant procedures for investigating police misconduct (Feldman 2017). Through police reports, choices about evidence disclosure, and public relations efforts, law enforcement departments are bureaucratically empowered to sway the narratives and images about criminality endorsed by media and entertainment industries (White and Malm 2020). Even though bystander video footage can offer alternative perspectives and has been crucial in developing cases against police misconduct, US courts have historically exonerated police officers by justifying their split-second decisions made in response to escalating encounters (Kirkpatrick 2021). The following example demonstrates how the racial optics of escalation inform police discretion, as officers recorded on video respond to speech, gesture, and movement with a White supremacist view of Black fugitivity.

During a routine traffic stop in South Carolina in 2018, the arresting officer, Mike, pulls over a moving vehicle with missing tag lights and initiates the recording function on his dashcam while turning on the bodycam affixed to his uniform (fig. 3). Expressing suspicion about an elderly White man, Adam, driving in a car with two young Black men, Jamal and Kendrick, Officer Mike learns that the car belongs to Kendrick's girlfriend. After Steve, the other officer on the scene, finds two rocks of crack cocaine wedged on the passenger side windowsill, Officer Mike calls in a plainclothed narcotics officer, Sam, and two additional officers on patrol to assist. All five officers are White. After chatting briefly, Officer Steve accuses Jamal, seated in the

passenger seat, of trying to inconspicuously flick the drugs off the sill. Even though this alleged action is not captured on video and Adam insists he is the addict and has asked Jamal to get rid of the crack for him, the officer pins the crack, based on its proximity, to Jamal. Responding with anger and frustration at the accusation, Jamal paces back and forth between the car and the officers. When he questions Officer Mike's legal knowledge, the officer responds to the accusation as a sign of escalation, despite Jamal expressing his constitutional right to question the officer. After consulting with three other officers, Officer Mike arrests Adam and Jamal for drug possession and frees Kendrick, who, riding in the back seat, is viewed as compliant.

The traffic stop, which quickly turned into a drug bust, raises the question of why the White police officers treated the two young Black men differently, despite their having similar criminal records and both being implicated in a drug crime for which there was no incriminating video or forensic evidence, deciding one to be culpable and the other innocent. Stated otherwise, why did the interaction get glossed as escalation for Jamal and as compliance for Kendrick, when both verbally asserted their innocence to the White police officers? We analyze key moments in the traffic stop, reconstructed from five bodycam videos and one dashcam video, to suggest that policing actions associated with Jamal and Kendrick are differently linked to interdiscursive entailments of racialized voicing contrasts (Agha 2007; Wirtz 2014), with Jamal enacting the figure of the fugitive, despite his actions to prove himself the contrary. Kendrick, also described in terms of flight risk, nonetheless manages his self-presentation through signs interpreted as nonthreatening, using honorific address terms such as "sir" and using poetic repetition

Figure 3. Dashcam view of the stop.

to align himself with the syntax of the police officers. He successfully performs the social persona of a young reformed convict recently released from jail and committed to staying out of trouble, with no desire to aggravate the officers. Kendrick's efforts at self-presentation match the police officers' responses to his speech, gestures, and movement, depicted on the arresting officer's camera footage as steady, calm, and nonerratic. In contrast, Jamal cannot manage his self-presentation in a way that will not be perceived as escalating or noncompliant, even when his comments and movements seem aimed at clarifying his rights and noncriminal status. From his facial grimaces and eye rolling to his use of negative repetition, the absence of honorific address terms, and the annoyance and frustration evident in his speech, Jamal's demeanor, from the perspective of the White police officers on the scene, is undoubtedly criminal, and his actions merit punishment.

In their first exchange, Officer Steve accuses Jamal, who had been seated in the front passenger seat of the car, of staring at the crack wedged onto the windowsill, suggesting that a person's gaze signals criminal intent. Jamal's rigorous self-defense and assertion of innocence intensify the affective charge of his subsequent interactions with the officers, especially when he starts pacing rapidly and steps away from the car. Officer Mike, who was watching from behind the car, intervenes aggressively by treating him as a flight risk, after which Officer Steve frames Jamal's speech as untruthful, insisting, "Alright man here's the time to be honest y'all."

> *Officer Steve:*   Man I saw you staring at these rocks the whole time right here.
>
> *Jamal:*   You ain't seen me staring at no rocks.
>
> *Officer Steve:*   You rolled the window down and tried to flick them out.
>
> *Jamal:*   No I **didn't**. Say I'm trying to flick them out. I ain't flick no rocks (N-word). (*Jamal steps to the side.*)
>
> *Officer Mike:*   Hold up step. [Step back on over here.]
>
> *Jamal:*   [I ain't going nowhere.]
>
> *Officer Mike:*   Nuhuh. (*firm voice*) Step back over here.
>
> *Officer Steve:*   Hey man.
>
> *Jamal:*   I'm not **going nowhere man**.
>
> *Officer Mike:*   No you gonna stay right back here. Come on. (*Jamal moves back to car, leans over*

trunk for a moment, then tries to walk again. Mike reaches out and grabs him by the sleeve.) Uh uh. Come on over here. Stay right back over here. By the bowtie.

> *Jamal:*   He told me he seen me throw something. I ain't throw nothing man.
>
> *Officer Mike:*   What did he tell you?
>
> *Jamal:*   He said I threw something.
>
> *Officer Mike:*   I don't know. (*Officer Steve searches around car.*)
>
> *Officer Steve:*   Alright man here's the time to be honest y'all. You got anything else on you?
>
> *Jamal:*   I don't have nothing.
>
> *Officer Steve:*   Best time to be honest.
>
> *Jamal:*   We-none of us don't have nothing.

Jamal continues to enact an oppositional footing with the two police officers. Part of this stance exhibits his agency through the repetition of the negation syntactic structure—subject pronoun + negative particle + transitive verb phrase + object—used in phrases such as "You ain't seen me staring at no rocks," "I ain't flick no rocks," and "I ain't going nowhere." The building up of intensity by using the double negation in these counters (Goodwin 1990:105) mimics the repetition of his increasingly vehement refusal. His opposition is registered through the officers' reliance on police protocol to limit Jamal's bodily movement and warn him of their lack of faith in his sincerity and intentions. Jamal's stepping away from the police car is understood as being "too far away," prompting Officer Mike to grab and forcibly move him back. This "misstep" introduces a new interpretive framework that evokes discourses about Black fugitives refusing state power and moving dangerously through public space and drives the bundling of Jamal's previous, ongoing, and forthcoming actions as communicative signs cautiously treated by the police officers as "triggers" of escalation. Despite the warning, Jamal's challenge of Officer Mike's decision to search his car without offering probable cause is treated as further escalation.

> *Jamal:*   That what you saying. That what you said-. No you said-no now you said-um. You said no license lights.
>
> *Officer Mike:*   Yeah. There are no lights-excuse me no license [lights].
>
> *Jamal:*   [So] That's a reason to stop somebody?

Officer Mike: Yeah it is. [You have to have one.]

Jamal: [That's probable cause?]

Officer Mike: It's-it's a reason to stop-

Jamal: That's probable cause [. . .] (*Officer Steve comes to back of the car.*) This is **bullshit** man. Y'all pulled us for no reason.

Officer Steve: Everything good?

Officer Mike: As of right now. I ain't checked the car out yet.

Officer Steve, who was inspecting the passenger seat, walks over to them and asks, "Everything good?" putting an end to the contentious interaction between Officer Mike and Jamal.

Soon afterward, Officer Mike confers with two of the police officers on the scene, mentioning his suspicion for initiating the stop over an elderly White man driving around in a car with two Black men, stating to Officer Sam, "I wanna know what that dude's doing driving them around." Other than this statement, the officers spend little time discussing Adam, who remains silent during most of the stop and is only briefly questioned at the beginning by Officer Mike. During the private conversation between the officers, Officers Sam and Steve refer to Kendrick, who is standing to the right of the other two suspects, as "that one keeps wandering" and "the young one."

Officer Sam: Cause that one keeps wandering. The one on the right. (NAME)

Officer Steve: The young one.

Officer Sam: Yeah.

Officer Mike: I need to go talk to him for- I wanna know what the dude's doing driving them around. What the deal is.

Officer Sam: (*Incomprehensible.*)

Officer Mike: Yeah.

Also deemed a flight risk, Kendrick now becomes the subject of attention. Yet, as we shall see next, Officer Mike adopts a paternalistic attitude toward Kendrick after learning that the car with the infant seat in it is his girlfriend's, who needs it to take their baby to day care in the morning.

Thus, in the fourth scene, when Officer Mike conducts a thorough search of Kendrick's person, he jokes with him about a Jolly Rancher candy that he finds in the suspect's pocket. Although a joke about candy may seem inconsequential, this occurs in the recent context in which George Zimmerman brutally murdered 17-year-old Trayvon Martin, who had Skittles in his pocket. Zimmerman was acquitted because he could invoke the stand your ground law in Florida and, in court, rely on the White supremacist perspective that privileged his sense of threat over Trayvon Martin's right to freely walk outside, going from the store to his father's fiancé's home. The joke about the Jolly Rancher in this context suggests that Officer Mike is convinced that Kendrick is compliant and his actions are not criminal. Kendrick's hysterical response to the joke—which we gloss as high-pitched laughter—accentuates an emotional release as he realizes that he will not be arrested. Officer Mike asks, "You ain't got nothing on you?" and Kendrick reassures him vehemently that he is not carrying a concealed weapon. His compliance is further reinforced through the repetition or parallelism of the syntactic constructions, "I ain't trying to get in no more trouble" and "I ain't got nothing on me I promise." After the pat down, Officer Mike and Kendrick talk calmly about the events, and Kendrick again denies knowledge of the crack and explains that he only came along on the ride to retrieve $30. Officer Mike, satisfied with Kendrick's response, does not persist with this line of questioning, affirming, "You good." As the one put in charge of the case, Officer Mike successfully affirms a paternalistic view toward Kendrick that supersedes Officer Sam's labeling of him as a flight risk, and the interaction reaches a noncontentious resolution.

Officer Steve: Let's search him.

Officer Mike: Yeah [. . .]

Kendrick: I ain't got nothing on me I promise you man.

Officer Mike: Alright well-

Kendrick: I tell you I just went to pick up my money that's it. I just went to get my (*incomprehensible*). A known fact.

Officer Mike: (*Puts candy back in Kendrick's pocket.*) You keep your Jolly Rancher too.

Kendrick: (*Hysterical laughter.*) (*Incomprehensible.*) you a Jolly Rancher. You clown (*incomprehensible*).

Officer Mike: (*Officer Mike checks inside Kendrick's shoes.*) You ain't got nothing **on you on you**?

Kendrick: Nah go ahead. (*Kendrick takes a step away.*)

Officer Mike: Alright. (*Officer Mike continues to search.*) Alright. [Grab that.]

Kendrick: [(*Incomprehensible.*)] I ain't trying to get in no more trouble [. . .]

Officer Mike: Alright real talk. What's the-what's the deal- What's the deal going on here?

Kendrick: I-I'm gonna-I'm gonna keep it real. I'm gonna tell you why I come out the house tonight. Look here. My people just moved down here.

Officer Mike: Uhhuh.

Kendrick: They staying at the (*incomprehensible*). I tell them straight up. I lent him $30 so we can go in his room. I tell them. Bruh. I'm about to pull up for my money. I need it I'm not playing. You got the $30. But you sit here playing with me. Bruh I need my money. I just lend you $30. To get-on your room-to help you get a room. It's done been a week now.

Officer Mike: Whose-whose crack is that?

Kendrick: Crack? Huh?

Officer Mike: You don't know nothing about no crack?

Kendrick: No, I'm asking you. I was in the back.

Officer Mike: Who's it-alright [. . .] (*Officer Mike and Kendrick rejoin the group.*)

Kendrick: I ain't getting in no more trouble. I can't. I (*incomprehensible*).

Jamal: I swear I can't either.

Although Adam early on admits his guilt and claims the crack cocaine as his own, the police officers focus most of their attention on Jamal and discuss with one another what his charge should be, unsure whether to even charge Adam with possession (ultimately, they decide to do so). This bias becomes evident when Officer Sam, the narcotics officer, declares when speaking about Jamal, "He just-he needs to go." Although all three cuffed suspects are quietly smoking a cigarette provided by a fourth officer (fig. 4), from the perspective of Officers Sam and Mike, Jamal's identity has sedimented into that of a criminal and potential fugitive, without obvious evidence of his guilt, whereas Adam is presumed innocent, despite admitting his guilt.

Officer Mike: We ain't Mirandized them yet.

Officer Sam: You can still take . . . the passenger. You can take them both.

Officer Mike: Yeah.

Officer Sam: He admitted possession. He had possession. Be done with it. Cause didn't the-what-the:-passenger on probation.

Officer Mike: Mhm.

Officer Sam: He just-he needs to go.

Officer Mike: Yup.

As for Kendrick, Officer Mike continues to treat him as a young ward of the state. Even though it is customary for police officers to tow a vehicle when drugs are found in it, Officer Mike lets the girlfriend pick up her car, since Kendrick does not have a valid driver's license and cannot drive it home himself, promising him, "I'm gonna try not to tow it for you." When reading the charges to Adam and Jamal, although Adam repeats laconically at distant intervals, "It's mine," Officer Mike's attention is centered primarily on Jamal, who again refuses the legitimacy of the charge by emphatically stating, "It ain't mine." This negation, inversely linked through the formal features of poetic parallelism with Adam's periodic affirmations of his guilt, challenges Officer Mike to explain the basis of what the charges are against Jamal. Instead, the officers abruptly silence themselves by allowing a ringing cell phone call to divert their attention. Even though this disengagement can be interpreted as a de-escalating tactic by the police officer, one could argue that preemptively ending the conversation about the drug charge itself instigates conflict. By ceasing to engage, the officers give Jamal little opportunity to contest his charge: he must either accept the unfair accusation or continue arguing against it, when arguing runs the risk of being labeled as noncompliant, which would be framed as an escalatory action that justifies police retaliation. Jamal, realizing that the encounter is effectively over and further resistance would be futile (or deadly), pronounces, "Man that's bullshit," before he and Adam are taken into custody.

Officer Mike: (*Officer Mike walks over to where Jamal and Adam are standing.*) Both of y'all are gonna ride for that crack man.

Jamal: That's crazy man. How y'all gonna-that's crazy. Y'all gonna lock me up for that for real man?

Adam: It's mine.

Officer Mike: What's that?

Adam: It's mine.

Officer Mike: But he still had possession of it. Cause it was right there.

Figure 4. Bodycam view from the fourth police officer.

Adam: Well because I asked him to get rid of it.

Officer Mike: But that's still putting him in possession of the crack. And you admitting to it.

Jamal: I never touched that crack man. (*Officer Mike turns to Officer Steve.*) I never touched that crack. I didn't-

Officer Sam: I-I'll tell you now. It would either go-Either he doesn't go. Or both y'all go. Or just you go. You see what I'm saying?

Jamal: It ain't **mine**. Why-

Officer Sam: Because you had possession of it-

Jamal: How did I have possession of it? How? You still ain't say how I got possession of it. It's not in my- How's it in my possession?

Officer David: Don't answer.

Jamal: Huh?

Officer David: His phone is ringing.

Jamal: I'm saying how's it in my possession? It's not in my possession man. That's **bullshit** man. That's crazy man.

Since structural inequality favors police officers during traffic stops, officers' knowledge or understanding of the law, even when inaccurate or impacted by biases, prejudices, and racist assumptions, empowers them to make split-second or more drawn-out decisions about the fate of civilians in custody. Attributions of criminality, therefore, hinge not only on acts of committing crimes but also on the interactionally enacted, ideologically regimented, and institutionally constrained frameworks of racialized personae imposed on criminal suspects by the actions of police officers. "The young one," Kendrick, is a Black man who, although he has a criminal record and is initially described as "wandering," is not yet identified as a hardened criminal by the arresting officer. The presumption that he can be reformed is indexed by Officer Mike's paternalistic tone in treating Kendrick as his ward, his making jokes and other signs of friendly reassurance, and his granting him preferential treatment upon learning of his relationship with the mother of a baby. Jamal, on the other hand, is positioned as a potential fugitive early on in the encounter, and this depiction is unalterable throughout his subsequent interactions with the police officers. Therefore, although Jamal and Kendrick both sought to manage the signs of their self-presentation to avoid being seen as escalating in their interactions with police, the divergent outcomes point to structural limitations, as well as different agentive possibilities, for Black mobilization. These politics of refusal (Simpson 2007), contingent on interactions linking colonial histories of Black fugitivity with present-day policing contexts, mean that the communicative practices of two Black men, one cast as a potential fugitive early on and during the remainder of the interaction and the other whose actions are

recontextualized into those of a young ward and not a flight risk, both nonetheless face greater censure during a traffic stop than what an older White man, who confesses to possession of crack cocaine, actually says or does.

Video Analysis in the Public Domain

In many low-profile trials of traffic stops, court participants do not get to view bodycam or dashcam footage, since criminal defendants are often advised by their lawyers to plead guilty in exchange for a lesser charge or time served. In high-profile cases, however, public calls for the release of videos of police violence and killings of civilians have become the norm. This footage, along with bystander and surveillance videos, is critical to making the argument that police are unjustified in using excessive force. In the year following George Floyd's murder, *The New York Times* relied on journalistic analyses of publicly available video montages and partial transcripts of police-civilian encounters to argue for misjudgments, in chronological order, in the killing of Rayshard Brooks in Atlanta, the deployment of riot police in a BLM protest in Seattle, and the killing of Andrew Brown Jr. in Elizabeth City, North Carolina. In these analyses, we see the advancing of the claim that Black-aligned voices can do little to avoid being treated as escalating threats. As the cases scale up from police stops to larger assemblies, one also sees the racialized persona of the fugitive recursively reconfigured to account for the multiracial identities of participants, treated as domestic terrorists to justify the repression of civilians' free assembly rights (Ralph 2020*b*). Yet journalistic reports, in their efforts to critique police violence, may or may not identify the racializing optics of escalation and, by focusing only on single events, might end up reinscribing White supremacist perspectives on Black fugitivity. These critical appraisals, partial solutions at best, make clear that the public viewing of bodycam and dashcam video does not always benefit the victim in the situation, especially when there is a lack of critical attention paid to ideological regimentation through folk ideas about escalation.

In the case of the use of deadly force by police against Rayshard Brooks, the journalists raise the question of how police officers can arguably see a fleeing man as escalating to the point of justifying his killing. On June 14, 2020, Brooks, a 27-year-old married father of four, fell asleep in the drive-through of a Wendy's restaurant, when the employees called the police to get him out of the way of traffic. Bodycam, dashcam, bystander cell phone, and surveillance video footage, reproduced in a series of subtitled montages and time-stamped commentaries (Brown et al. 2020), captured the events that transpired and led to his tragic death. Atlanta police officer Devin Brosnan first approached Brooks at 10:42 p.m. and asked him to relocate his car to the parking lot and step outside. The journalists describe the initial interaction between the two men at 11:04 p.m. as "friendly and compliant," while Officer Brosnan searched his person and Brooks responded to his questions. Black civilians are often coerced into complying and

acquiescing to police discretion in ways that put them at risk of paying more fees, facing incarceration, and accruing a criminal record that impacts jobs, debt, and so on without ensuring a peaceful outcome. Brooks thus agreed to take a Breathalyzer test, declaring, "I don't want to refuse anything." The situation shifted once the police officer determined that Brooks had failed his field sobriety test and started to handcuff him. Under criminal law in Georgia, where a DUI is a chargeable offense, an officer is legally obligated to arrest a person failing the field sobriety test to prevent further harm in the form of vehicular accidents. However, since Brooks was already on foot, he could have been allowed to walk to his sister's house as he had requested, or Officer Brosnan could have let him run away, since he already had the necessary information to put together a warrant and arrest him later without using lethal force. Instead, Officer Brosnan used his discretion and relied on the criminal code to limit Brooks's mobility by tackling him to the ground after he sought to escape. When the officers attempted to use a Taser on him, Brooks wrestled free and grabbed the Taser as he was running away. Although he turned and dropped the Taser after shooting it in the air once, he was shot three times in the back and killed by Officer Brosnan, who had put away his Taser and pulled out his pistol instead.

The New York Times analysis used editing features to circle on the video where Brooks held nothing in his hands when he was running and the officer shot at him. This image suggests that his flight should not be seen as a threat to the police officer, and it did not mandate the escalation of force from Taser to firearm. In addition to putting pressure on the police department to fire Officer Brosnan the next day, the video analysis explicitly mentioned Brooks's compliant demeanor before he was handcuffed. *The New York Times* thus suggests that it was the officer who instigated a series of actions that condemned a docile man to death. When Brooks was interviewed months before his killing regarding his past experiences in the criminal justice system, he talked impassionedly about his struggles to have his humanity recognized during his life after incarceration: "I just feel like some of the system could, you know, look at us as individuals. We do have lives, you know, was just a mistake we made, you know, and, you know, not, not just do us, as if we are animals. You know lock us away" (Kaye 2020). Since the possibility of arrest in a police-initiated stop puts the civilian at a multitude of risks, regardless of the merits of the case, Brooks's desire to flee is a human response to this trauma. *The New York Times* does not claim this explicitly, but the editing of the footage into a video montage does raise the question of whether compliance can prevent the escalation of force.

More than publicly condemning the atrocities of police killings, BLM protests have broadly critiqued the rhetoric of escalation in White political speech. Providing a counterpoint to White nationalism especially prominent during the Trump regime, BLM attempted to shift the national conversation away from minimal police reform to calling for the total abolishment or defunding of police forces. BLM has forcefully argued

that legislative actions and grassroots movements advocating for new training in de-escalation tactics, restrictions on choke holds, stringent accountability measures, and reduced patrol units are bound to be insufficient in tackling police brutality against Black Americans. Non-Black Americans have awakened to the harsh reality of racism in policing and the enduring structures of racialized violence embedded in the criminal justice system, especially in prisons and also through the militarization of police and policing of public spaces, where partnerships between federal, state, and local law enforcement agencies facilitate the sharing of knowledge about defensive tactics, including the purchasing of large equipment from the military to the police. For example, in South Carolina, military bases sell decommissioned military equipment to police forces, and there is a unit for the FBI to teach urban warfare in the compound of the South Carolina Justice Academy, where police officers from all over the state undergo residential training. Trump's act of referring to BLM protests as "Treason, Sedition, Insurrection!" (Itkowitz 2020) further blurs the boundaries between domestic "insiders" and foreign "outsiders," creating domestic "others" marked as objects of surveillance to justify violent forms of escalation crackdowns (Hinton 2016; Seigel 2018; Wang 2018). In contrast, Trump referred to mostly White protesters wielding military-style firearms in front of government buildings objecting to mask ordinances and the closings of businesses to counter the spread of COVID-19 in late spring 2020 as lawful civilians and patriots (Ecarma 2020).

On June 26, 2020, former police chief and *The New York Times* commentator Brandon Del Pozo published a video analysis of a BLM protest in Seattle to explicitly challenge the police's perspective on escalation. He narrates how a loud yet peaceful march in the Capitol Hill neighborhood of Seattle on June 1, 2020, became violent after riot police deployed pepper spray, batons, and tear gas to disperse a crowd of protesters (Del Pozo 2020). Before this, police officers equipped with riot gear stood behind the bike police facing the protesters, standing before a metal barricade placed in front of the police headquarters building. Del Pozo argues that, contrary to official reports, the act of riot and bike police switching places is what instigated the ensuing violence. He writes, "Once the riot officers were in place on the line, they moved against the protesters in less than a minute, showing how quickly a simple altercation between a demonstrator and an officer can *escalate* unnecessarily" (our emphasis). The opening of an umbrella by a protester may have interfered with the line of vision of a riot officer and prompted him to push the umbrella away and shoot pepper spray into the face of a protester, committing the rest of "the police to this logic of escalation." Yet Del Pozo differentiates between the pretense for using military tactics in response to an obtrusive umbrella and the instigating action, which happened before when the riot police targeted the crowd as a threat. He notes that police discretion allowed officers to manipulate the temporal gap between these two events to deny the constitutional right of free assembly, writing, "The judicious use of this dis-

cretion is critical to managing the crowd and protecting the First Amendment rights of protesters." Thus, according to his analysis, the argument of escalation is a smokescreen shielding a police force primed to provoke a crowd into provoking them. Although Del Pozo does not connect this with traffic stops, the Black men we interviewed, as discussed previously, attest to similar provocation.

State laws and courts are increasingly weighing in on the proprietary status of bodycam and dashcam footage (NCSL 2021), allowing the public to investigate cases of militarized policing (Bornstein 2018). After weeks of wrangling over the public's access to bodycam and dashcam video, a one-minute clip of footage from Andrew Brown Jr.'s killing was released. On April 21, 2021, a police officer lethally shot Brown in the back of the head when he was fleeing in his car from a tactical team conducting a drug search and arrest. Journalists for *The New York Times* analyzed the sequence of events, resorting to slow-motion clips to authenticate their conclusions. They argued that lethal force was unjustified because of the lack of imminent danger to the police officers caused by the moving car. However, they characterized Brown's decision to flee rather than comply as a sign of escalation, writing, "Mr. Brown does not comply with officers' orders. The situation escalates" (Koettl and Kim 2021). Although the bodycam footage showed that the police fired most shots at Brown's backside after his car had bypassed the officers, the frenetic pacing of the footage reinforces an optics that justifies the split-second decision taken by officers to minimize greater harm to the public from a fleeing vehicle by shooting at it. The journalists' interpretation of flight as escalation thus reinscribes a White supremacist view of Black fugitivity that legitimates excessive force as a tactical response.

The three video analyses by *The New York Times* are allied in their rejection of the criminalization of Black mobility and mobilization. Although they vary in their critique of the racial optics of escalation, the video clips provide the raw material for identifying voicings of Black fugitivity through "cross-event configurations" (Wortham and Reyes 2015:38). No US law condones lethal force when a subject is fleeing, yet these reports demonstrate that excessive force is used when so-called escalating criminals' actions are interdiscursively aligned with the personae of fugitives and domestic terrorists. When compelled to speak with an interlocutor in a position of state power, therefore, Black, Indigenous, and Brown civilians find themselves in grave danger for not controlling the means by which their communicative practices are evaluated when their speech, gesture, and movement are seen as not docile enough. Unfortunately, media analyses of single events do not identify the language ideology that equates communicative practices of state resistance with escalation and the effects of the sensuous qualities on video footage that exacerbate racist depictions of fleeing Black, Brown, and Indigenous civilians. Only by examining how fugitivity is voiced across these mediatized events (Agha 2007) does one see how law enforcement denies constitutional rights by evoking arguments about escalation.

Conclusion

This article draws on the theoretical framework of discourse analysis to investigate communicative practices linked together through the racial optics of escalation. In our analysis, we have argued that escalation is reducible neither to a "heated" exchange nor to the communicative maneuvers that start, sustain, or increase conflict. We suggest instead that the enactment of the framework of escalation in folk ideological terms is indexically linked to the voicing and interdiscursive entailments of racialized social personae, particularly that of the fugitive. Because of the institutionally entrenched structures of White supremacy in US law enforcement and cultural stereotypes about the presumed criminality of Black fugitives, policing practices transform the liberatory logics of Black fugitivity into a White supremacist view, and this is partly achieved through video surveillance technologies. Policing also normalizes aggressive and violent outcomes to interactions with Black, Brown, and Indigenous civilians through tactics used to instigate conflict and memorialize it, through video, as escalation instead. Investigating police officers' metapragmatic commentaries demonstrates that officers depict Black civilians and Black-aligned protesters as criminals or, otherwise, as docile and compliant, and their actions are cast in terms of escalation or de-escalation, respectively. Once police officers evoke a framework of escalation, whether implicitly or explicitly, they can use their discretionary powers to shield themselves from critique and limit the expression of free speech.

Discourse analysis offers a means to analyze the different temporal scales through which interactions, ideological frames, and institutional structures produce or mitigate conflict in police-civilian encounters. Our primary case examines the poetic structures and interactional cues that entail contrastive figures of criminality and docility to expose the interdiscursive history in which the racial optics of escalation operate. Although *The New York Times* does not examine the poetic structures of cross-event configurations, it does provide the raw material to investigate whether ideological claims of escalation actually match up with the course of events and the use of force. What this critique demonstrates is that Black-aligned voices face heightened scrutiny in police-civilian encounters because they are presumed to be escalatory agents and are limited in their ability to respond in an acceptable manner to police action. The interpretative achievement of escalation thus erases the voices and rights of civilians in light of the enduring structures of police authority, seen in the scaling up of responses from police stops to BLM protests. The problem with viewing single videos, however, is that this analysis may obscure the link between the racial optics of escalation and a White supremacist view of Black fugitivity. Whereas, in fact, these are mutually constituted through the experiences of sensuous qualities of video footage and a postcolonial history of racism dating back to enslavement, both of which generate institutionally entrenched stereotypes about the dangerous speech, gesture, and movement of Black, Brown, and Indigenous civilians. Situating these videos interdiscursively thus works to systematically expose the normalizing effects of these stereotypes and challenge the assumption that racial minorities will inevitably escalate during police-civilian encounters.

As the national conversation continues to evolve on the benefits of video surveillance, one must be careful not to presume that the memorialization of interactions between police and civilians will automatically expose racial injustices. Given the complications encapsulated by the racial optics of escalation, we argue that the public viewing of bodycam and other video footage of police-civilian encounters must pay attention to the figuration of Black fugitives driving claims about escalation rather than to simply problematize the alleged cause of escalation or critique the justification for the use of force. As long as the ideology of escalation gets deployed uncritically to scaled-up contexts of conflict, violence, and warfare, the potential for civil rights injustices to ensue and proliferate through militaristic rhetoric and interventions also abounds.

Acknowledgments

Comments

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What Liberals and Progressives Do Not See on the News

In "Racial Optics of Escalation," Das and Lee argue that escalation, commonly understood in the context of police-civilian interactions as an increase in the threat of criminal violence or escape, is not determined by a series of events that occur in these interactions. They argue that escalation is rather a language ideology shaping racialized communicative events between police officers and Black people who are perceived vis-à-vis the institutionalized subject position of fugitivity, to be engaged in acts of escalation. By attending to the pragmatics of scale (citing Carr and Lempert 2016:9), Das and Lee argue that the language ideology of escalation privileges institutionalized white supremacist perceptions of fugitivity, a subject positioning in which racialized minorities are perceived either/only

as threats or docile subjects. This hegemonic perspective is often magnified by what they term the "racial optics" of surveillance technologies, specifically police body cameras and dashboard cameras. As they explain, these technologies render Black civilians, their speech, and their actions threatening and justify the use of state force.

As someone who has recently authored an article on how liberal discourses of white allyship as antiracism recenters whiteness and reproduces white supremacy using semiotic discourse analysis (Delfino 2021), I am most interested in how Das and Lee's article theoretically advances study on how white supremacy persists in liberal and progressive digital discursive spaces. First, there is one of the two title concepts, "racial optics." As Das and Lee explain, the concept of racial optics seeks to highlight technologies that help produce and circulate race as an embodied sociocultural category with differential effects for rights and obligations. They describe how bodycam and dashcam footage, the technologies under question, can be produced and altered to privilege white supremacist perspectives of Black bodies as always already engaging in fugitivity. However, this is a fairly obvious finding, and it is unclear how the concept of racial optics versus escalation and fugitivity can be further operationalized to do the important work of illustrating how commonly shared anti-Black ideologies are (re)produced, circulated, and rendered normal in liberal media that intends to do otherwise.

However, the other two central concepts in this article, escalation and fugitivity, help render visible the workings of everyday white supremacy extremely effectively. To summarize again, they argue that escalation is a language ideology steeped in the legacies of genocide and slavery and that escalation indexes racialized models of criminality and docility such that Black people's speech and actions cannot register outside of these models. If this is the case, then it is possible to shift conversations about police-civilian encounters away from what racialized individuals were or were not doing to how they are perceived via white supremacy. Thus, with escalation and fugitivity, Das and Lee advance what is referred to by language and race scholars as a "raciolinguistic perspective" (Alim and Smitherman 2012; Delfino 2020; Flores and Rosa 2015; Rosa 2019) in the face of a pressing issue: the everyday, tacit legitimation of state violence against Black bodies in liberal media. Such a study has implications for exposing the normative functioning of liberal democracy, which is not antiracist but which depends on white supremacy and racial violence to function (Marable 2000; Mills 1999; Rosa and Bonilla 2017).

Finally, the authors' semiotic discourse analysis is sophisticated, with much of it focused on one specific bodycam-recorded traffic stop. The analysis of this singular communicative event details how the contrastive figures of criminality and docility emerge with respect to two Black civilian men, while the white civilian man involved is hardly addressed, even though he claims to be in possession of the drugs that are found. The interactional cues and poetic structures they identify and analyze in this event are then interdiscursively compared with data from news, media, and court cases. The authors argue that this discourse analytic method, interdiscursivity, highlights the wider circulation of escalation as language ideology and fugitivity as racialized typification, successfully illustrating, they argue, a systemic operating of racial optics in a way that single-event reporting in mainstream media cannot successfully highlight.

Ultimately, this article is extremely impactful in terms of illustrating the pervasiveness and ubiquity of white supremacy in everyday discourses, following other scholars who have done so (Bucholtz 2011, 2016; Delfino 2021; Hill 2008; Smalls, Spears, and Rosa 2021). However, Das and Lee's impact on a broader anthropological audience is perhaps lessened by the overburdening of their analysis with extremely specialized linguistic anthropological concepts that are cited but not explained in relation to the overarching framework of racial optics, escalation, and fugitivity—for example, rhematization (Gal and Irvine 2019). If these concepts are indeed essential to showing how linguistic anthropology can theoretically intervene in the liberal democratic normalization of white supremacy in a broader way, then they also need to be operationalized in relation to the overall analytical scheme.

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The excellent article by Sonia Das and Hyemin Lee provides a compelling example of the ways that language mediates processes of racialization. One of the challenges in studying racialization is to figure out how and where we see it. Is the evidence in systematic distributional patterns of measures like educational achievement, incarceration, life span, and health outcomes? Or should we instead look for patterning of differentiation at a lower scale, for example, in the ways that teachers talk to and position one set of students versus another? If the experience of racialization means that I apprehend the world in starkly different ways, should we be attending to how subjects themselves navigate this sensual encounter? How do we come up with analyses that span all of these different scales?

The piece brilliantly demonstrates how to perform an analysis that moves across sites and scales. As I understand it, one of the key contributions of this work is the authors' attention to what we used to call "context." In dialogue with work that has examined how invocations of context are politically situated framings (Rosa and Flores 2017; Wortham 2012), Das and Lee argue that we need to attend both to the details of interaction—tone of voice, eye gaze, movement, and stillness—and to the formulation of frameworks that circulate at wider scales, such as "escalation." There are many possible scales of space-time here that could be invoked to situate the interaction that is at the center of this piece—local politics, histories of policing in the United States, categories of unequal personhood that

undergird capitalism, to name just a few that they bring to bear—and this piece skillfully illustrates how the figurations at play are linked to perceptual regimes and subject positions that stretch across all of these. The figure of the Black fugitive is not merely racialized, as they note, but also typified along several axes of differentiation, including age, physicality, and moral propensities, thus illustrating how the term "Black" is deeply saturated with indexical overlays for American consumers who align with sensationalizing mediatized portrayals.

This work thus deftly rejects two of the more common pitfalls in work on language and race: (1) looking only at the interactional scale through compelling single events and (2) taking a strictly referentialist approach. The referentialist approach takes the stance that if a certain term or turn of phrase is understood by members of a particular community as "racist," then all we have to do is to look at sites in which the offending item is used to discover racialization. What Das and Lee convincingly show is that to understand what a term like "escalation" comes to mean, you have to look at how it is applied in actual events of interaction. By looking at how various kinds of participants—journalists from liberal outlets, police officers, BLM activists—understand and use the term "escalation," they illustrate how this temporal framework, which foretells a stepwise path to uncontrolled violence, is applied to particular interactional events. What I appreciated particularly about this aspect of their analysis was their unpacking of the uneven application of this framework, in the ways that any kind of action from Jamal seemed to be taken up as escalating, while the same was not true of Adam.

In this sense, their work builds on research by linguistic anthropologists like Goodwin (1990) by illustrating how seemingly straightforward analytic categories like opposition are framed in relation to other co-occurring signs. What counts as aggravated correction, heightened disagreement, or poetic parallelism is a feature not of texts or words themselves but of the metapragmatic frameworks that various interlocutors bring to bear. This piece thus articulates with scholarship that draws attention to the ways that perceiving subjects do not simply take up already existing signs but project and attribute signs to supposed sign producers (Inoue 2006; Lo 2021; Marsilli-Vargas 2022). In this regard, it seems that the issue is not so much video technology or recordings per se but the ways that the circulation of video is regimented as some sort of new and transparent universally interpretable medium, a media ideology in short (Gershon 2017; Kohl and Gershon 2020). If the police are indeed consumers of what Das and Lee call the "military-police-entertainment industrial complex" and trained in these perceptual regimes through their work, then we can see how ways of seeing can become institutionalized and deployed as routine modes of interaction.

Last, framing the relationship between perceptual regimes, circulation, standpoints of perception, and attached figurations as a "language ideology" for the readership of *Current Anthropology* is a bold move that reorients us away from the ways that this term tends to be used in linguistic anthropology journals,

where it is tightly linked to particular kinds of semiotic process related to iconicity and indexicality. I would be curious about how the authors understand the implications of this expanded use of the term. If rhematization is, in the restricted sense, used to discuss a situation in which a particular linguistic feature that is indexical is understood instead as iconic, such that a linguistic feature displays the social group's inherent nature (Irvine and Gal 2000:37; e.g., the "lazy" pronunciation of word-initial /n/ as /l/ is understood by many Cantonese speakers as characteristic of people who do not care or try), then what do we gain by the more elastic use of the term "linguistic ideology" in this piece? My sense is that Das and Lee want to draw our gaze to broader processes of figuration, downshifting, and upshifting that are not necessarily about how we think of meanings as inherent to particular linguistic forms. Or perhaps that is not the point either. Maybe the goal here is to join with authors who have made concerted efforts to make the technical apparatus of semiotic anthropology available to various kinds of readers through clear and accessible prose (e.g., Babel 2018; Ingebretson 2017), an endeavor that we should all cheer.

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In this exemplar of an emerging linguistic anthropology of images (Nakassis 2023*a*), Das and Lee investigate the "racial optics of escalation," where "escalation" is an ethnometapragmatic typification (of a genred diagram of entextualization that regiments indexes of racialized semiosis as manifesting a chronotope/narrative of black threat and justified police retaliation) and where "optics" analytically captures the mediation of seeing-as that is implicated in "escalation." Melding the sense of "optics" in politico-corporate talk to denote how some mediatized event/message is perceived by some public with the science of seeable radiation, the authors stress the role of technologies involved in the entextualization and circulation of visual image-texts of racialized police encounters. This move highlights the ironies of technologies such as dashcams and bodycams that were put into use, presumably, to make police accountable to and auditable by their publics (who can thus see what "really" happened via the presumably objective, machinic "optics" of cameras) yet that often produce the very opposite, reinscribing stereotypes of "Black fugitivity" that themselves lead to the violence such technologies are meant to mitigate.

Central to such "optics," thus, are what Fanon (1952) called the "legends, stories, history" (90) of antiblackness that mediate the phenomenology of vision or what linguistic anthropologists would call the "enregisterment of racial stereotypy" (Rosa 2019; Wirtz 2014). Such "ways of seeing" (Berger 1972) and ways of speaking incorporate optical technologies into what we can call, extending Branigan (2006), a "discursive camera" (Nakassis 2023*c*), of which dashcams and bodycams are but one piece

alongside any number of other semiotic forms. This is why, as the authors argue, to focus on individual events is to miss how across events, metapragmatic frames like "escalation"—built up out of many different media across many different interactions— already inflect and preentextualize the unfolding of specific events and their subsequent interpretations and how, for example, certain sensuous qualities like the shake of the image—indexical of the shake of a bodycam, itself indexical of the officer's bodily movement—can be reanalyzed as an icon (and index) of "perpetrator" movement (indeed, constituting that movement as that of a "perpetrator") and thus further count as an indexical icon of "escalation," itself the minor premise that produces the felt sense that police retribution (the "conclusion") is justified. Here, however, it is the major premise of this implicit racializing syllogism—that black persons are always already criminal, fugitive, threatening, which is to say escalating—that virtually hovers over all such encounters, actualized by the evenemential contingencies within which racialized minorities are rendered vulnerable by the cameras, "technological" and discursive, of police encounter.

To emphasize that "optics" are always part of a discursive camera is to emphasize that seeing-as is encompassed by semiotic processes that are not necessarily visual or strictly technological; this is demonstrated by the fact that a racialized discursive camera would be at play within interactions like that between Kendrick, Jamal, and so on even if there were no dashcams and bodycams involved. Just as sound and speaking are enregistered as indexically sensible/forceful/meaningful through the interdiscursive links that emerge from and are forged between multimodally entextualized events (Agha 2007) so too are visibility and looking (and mutatis mutandis, all perceptibility/perception; Nakassis 2023*c*). Percepts presume, and shade into because they are shaped by, perceptual judgments, and vice versa; such judgments are themselves always shaped by, on the one hand, the emergently diagrammatic texts/events within which they manifest and, on the other hand, the compelling but nondeterminative habits/dispositions of semiosis (individual and sociocentric: the stereotypes, legends, and historicity but also genres, registers, ways of seeing, etc.) within which we see/appear, speak/hear, and so on. In short, "optics," or discursive cameras, are not properly technological or visual per se; they are non-modality- and non-medium-specific. They are the perspectival "camera" lodged in/enabled by the indexicality of sign activity under conditions of entextualization/contextualization.

Yet if optics are semiotic, and thus seeing an interpretive, cultural, historical activity, this raises epistemological and political questions. To the first, for the kind of study that Das and Lee—and all anthropologists using audiovisual texts as "data"—are engaged in, what kind of a datum is dashcam and bodycam footage? At what moments do we treat such footage as windows into the interactional dynamics that interest us (e.g., police-citizen encounters), and what set of assumptions does this implication vis-à-vis what kind of a thing an image is? And at what moments do we treat such footage as the datum itself, where we analyze the image as such, not for what it reveals beyond itself but as itself something to countenance in our analysis? Vacillating between the two, or ignoring the latter, is an unresolved tension in much linguistic anthropology.

To the second, and relatedly, the authors' analysis shows that "optics" are not only the basis of the political, but critically, its misrecognition. For optics in the narrow sense—technologies of seeing that visibilize processes of racialization—tend to efface optics in the broader sense, winnowing focus to localizable and explicit visual signs of race in individual events while obscuring the more implicit and distributed grounds of racialization (cf. referentialist/personalist tendencies of language ideologies; Hill 2008; Silverstein 1981), a tendency abetted by (equally referentialist) ontologies of the photographic image that read bodycams and dashcams as unproblematical windows on reality (Nakassis 2023*b*). It is as if, to return to our syllogism, ideological consciousness focuses on the manifest, explicit minor premise (did individual X do Y or Z in that particular event?) to evaluate the warrant of the conclusion (police retaliation) without recognizing or questioning the implicit, unstated, and historically distributed major premise ("Black fugitivity," "fantasy of predatory Blackness"; Ralph 2019), leaving it untouched and continually iterated, whether or not, in specific instances, justice is served, rights unviolated, policing proper, and so on. The work of politics is in the intertextual movement between such gaps, in eliding or expanding them (Briggs and Bauman 1992), rendering the particular general and the invisible visible (or vice versa), not simply in the register of rights or justice but in (in)sensibility (and its distribution; Rancière 2009) and semiosis.

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Sonia Das and Hyemin Lee expose the insidious semiotic work of racialization in real-time police-civilian interactions and their afterlife in video recordings. The authors demonstrate how ideologies of interactional escalation concatenate with ideologies of racial optics, arguing that the racial optics of escalation emanates from an institutionalized white supremacist perspective to justify the often violent denial of civil rights to Black and brown US citizens. From this thoroughly institutionalized white supremacist perspective, what Saidiya Hartman (1997) calls the long afterlife of slavery takes the form of an afterimage of Black resistance and fugitivity as threatening, criminal, and a flight risk. Meanwhile, processes of ideological erasure (cf. Gal and Irvine 2019) allow plausible deniability and severe historical myopia to render the semiotic work of racial optics invisible to the very institutions of law enforcement, the legal system, and the news and entertainment industry that enact them.

At the same time, BIPOC citizens and communities demonstrate an acute awareness of the "ideological coercion" to relinquish their civil rights to mitigate the risk of harm and increase their chances of surviving law enforcement encounters such as routine traffic stops. The two young Black men caught up in the traffic stop analyzed in the article demonstrate two contrasting strategies in response to the emergent and differential constraints of the unfolding interaction: while Kendrick's mobilization of a politics of respectability successfully results in his release, albeit in a subordinate position Das and Lee describe as "ward" to one of the white police officers, Jamal cannot escape the cloud of suspicion despite his protestations of innocence and ends up offering a heartfelt critique: "That's **bullshit** man. That's crazy man." And lest we forget the older white man, Adam, who repeatedly admits to criminal drug possession, the police officers seem inclined to overlook him, and when they do arrest him, it is almost an afterthought. The racial optics of whiteness seem to negate any need for escalation or preventing flight.

The article indicates two especially significant directions of analysis: first, the centrality of the linked concepts of perspective and framing and, second, the importance of working across interactions, institutional and interactional domains, and time depths to trace the emergence and stabilization of durable figurations, in this case of race, through interdiscursive webs that ultimately reach across the historical *longue durée*, connecting times of slavery to the present. In the present, both perspective taking and interdiscursivity are central to understanding the uptake of video footage from police-civilian interactions into narratives. As Laurence Ralph (2020*a*) argues, in concert with Toni Morrison (1993) and Elizabeth Alexander (1994), storytelling from critical perspectives of racially marginalized people can make ideological frames of racialization more widely visible, challenge them, and reassert the humanity, collective memory, and civil rights claims of victims. To be clear about my own positionality, not only as a scholar studying the semiotics of racialization but as a (white) parent to two African American young adults, I feel dismay and anger but not surprise in this article's findings.

Perspective and framing, as optical metaphors, are prominent in the discussion of video footage. As Das and Lee show, recording practices as diverse as law enforcement dashcams and bodycams, civilian cell phone cameras, and reality TV production crews afford particular viewing angles and framings of the action. Long-standing ideologies of photographic and filmic realism (cf. Ball 2017; Benjamin 2015; Nakassis and Dean 2007) can readily frame what the camera produces as a transparent rendering of reality so that material affordances of camera angle, position, and stabilization (handheld vs. mounted), not to mention recording and editing choices, are erased. At the same time, their effects can contribute to the racial optics of escalation, as the footage produced is taken up into differing narrative trajectories that offer distinct socially situated perspectives. Jarring handheld or bodycam footage, for example, can "intensi[fy] the perspective that events are escalating" or

can be contextualized as a result of camera movement. Even more significant to recognize is who controls whether recordings are even made and if so the conditions of their circulation—power-laden social aspects of technology in use that are never in the camera's field of view.

This interdiscursive potential for the material and technological affordances of police dashcam and bodycam recordings to reinforce some narrative and viewing perspectives at the expense of others has a provocative resonance with another sense of "optics" deployed in the paper, which is as an ideological perspective. The figuration of Black fugitivity is a key example. From a (normative) white supremacist perspective, fugitivity figures Black citizens' constitutionally protected and human rights as dangerous to the social order, whereas fugitivity as marronage (encompassing both flight and active forms of resistance) is an assertion of Black agency and a challenge to white supremacy. That is to say, "optics" always implies a viewing perspective, promoting particular vantage points on and framings of social actions and actors, including in the narratives through which ideologies gain traction or are challenged. So I conclude by connecting the contemporary racial optics of policing civilians driving or protesting while Black to the historically fraught capturing and possession of photographic images of Black people.

As Davis and Smalls (2021) argue, summarizing a plethora of scholarship, logics of dis/possession (of land, bodies, labor, representation) undergird racialization processes. Scholars from diverse disciplines (e.g., Hartman 1997; Mirzoeff 2006; Thompson 2011; Young 2010) contrast the coercive images taken of the enslaved, lynched, and racially marginalized (e.g., from "fugitive" announcements to photographic series advancing white supremacist race science or promoting plantation-nostalgia tourism) to acts of self-representation, perhaps most famously encapsulated by Sojourner Truth's photographic cartes de visite, bearing the motto, "I sell the shadow to support the substance" (see Grimaldo Grigsby 2011). The conditions of visibility for those Hartman (2019:21) describes as "bound to appear" have long been, and remain, fraught with danger for those so captured. Amid a proliferation of increasingly interconnected video technologies (adding CCTV and even doorbell cameras to the list), it is crucial to challenge claims that ever more video surveillance improves law enforcement "accountability."

Reply

We are deeply grateful to our colleagues for their incisive comments, which have pushed us to reaffirm the connection between optics, escalation, and racialization. Our introduction of the concept of optics in this article is aimed at dismantling a series of presumptions about the objectivity that technologies (writ large) produce through acts of "perceiving" (i.e., seeing and

hearing) evidence of danger and criminality in racialized bodies as indisputable signs of escalation. From the camera angle to the act of watching video footage (sound and soundless) to in-the-moment uptakes, the transparent perceiving of all signs as conventionalized symbols by police officers, lawyers, civilians, journalists, and academics is problematized for its tendency to overly simplify and distort the causes, mechanisms, and outcomes of racial bias and violence in police-civilian encounters. As Nakassis points out, technologies such as bodycams and dashcams are in use under the presumption that the police (and their acts) can be "accountable" and "auditable" by their publics (i.e., the viewers). The act of perception, carried out by the public, assumes a group of people who can grasp what actually happened through "presumably objective, machinic optics of cameras." At its core, and as Wirtz strongly points out, this article argues for the opposite conclusion.

First, outcomes of racialization in the United States are often outcomes of technological mediatization (Agha 2011). Delfino exemplifies this tenet when she writes, "White supremacy persists in liberal and progressive digital discursive spaces." By focusing on specific platforms of digital media (e.g., online newspapers, reality TV) and recording technologies (e.g., body-cams, dashcams), we explore how "moving images" or videos can be transformed into legally acknowledged or socially construed evidence of signs of escalation, gesturing toward the "power-laden social aspects of technology in use that are never in the camera's field of view" (Wirtz). Whether the intent is to justify or critique police actions by determining what are their "true" or "original" instigating factors, such popular construals problematically assume that "escalation" is pertinent to this appraisal because it is a transparent, standardizable, and thus value-neutral metric. We forcefully reject this "optical illusion" as a semiotic and digital (and increasingly AI) conundrum.

"Optics" seeks to bring both theoretical frameworks together, privileging neither one nor the other, to denounce the White supremacist views that legitimate acts and outcomes of seeing and hearing signs of danger in Black American "movements" and "mobilizations" and scaling up from these interpretations to make legally binding judgments or predictions about future criminal acts. One aim in writing this article, as Delfino affirms, is to "shift conversations about police-civilian encounters away from what racialized individuals were or were not doing to how they are perceived via white supremacy." At the same time, we agree with Wirtz's argument that assertions of Black agency such as fugitivity as marronage, "encompassing both flight and active forms of resistance" are challenges to White supremacy, and this vantage point is part of a politics of reckoning with practices of photographic/filmic and police "capture" undergirded by logics of "dis/possession" (Davis and Smalls 2021). We have shown how the material affordances of digital technologies generate different experiences of sensuous qualities, which can be selectively taken up as "evidence" (Lee, forthcoming) to naturalize the racial optics of escalation. Analyzing these racial optics can also expose the longer-term effects of policing techniques that racialize minoritized people as always-escalating subjects. Standards of evidence and norms of court procedure that translate into sociolegal ecologies of distrust, where oftentimes poor and racialized actors' perspectives are dismissed before formal legal hearings occur (López-Espino 2023), are such examples.

Nakassis distinguishes between optics in the narrow (technological) and broad (sensuous-semiotic) senses and asserts that the former reinforces minor premises at the expense of more liberatory major ones. We argue that the concept of "optics" encompasses forms of perspective and stance taking that characterize technologies of face-to-face interaction as well (Das, forthcoming), including the cognitive mechanics of vision (Balcetis and Dunning 2006) and hearing. Hence, even if no camera is present, "perceptual regimes" (Lo 2021) remain so, as Nakassis suggests. He also asks how one tracks between video footage as a "window" and "datum," suggesting that "vacillating between the two" or "ignoring the latter" produces unresolved tensions in our field. By elucidating the relationship between different scales of digital mediatization through the interdiscursive analysis of linked (and by ourselves linking together) communicative events, we dissolve the ready-made distinction between "primary" sources, such as interviews and face-to-face interactions recorded by anthropologists, and "secondary" sources, such as video productions made by police and commentaries authored by news and entertainment media, to stress their potential coevalness. We take Nakassis's comment a step further by noting, along the vein of Wirtz's comments, that people have long resisted the "thingification" (Engelke 2007) of photographic or "moving images" of racialized persons, even in the service of research or social justice, to avoid violences of the sort that have produced White supremacist figurations of the Black fugitive-maroon.

In the United States, we argue that the genealogy of White supremacist figurations of the Black fugitive is entangled with histories of racial capitalism, Indigenous genocide, and settler colonialism. This claim is valid even if it appears in the recorded data that the figure of the Black fugitive is enacted or authorized by the police-military-entertainment industrial complex. Wirtz points out that the industrial complex itself participates in its own erasure through arguments of "plausible deniability" and "severe historical myopia." She reminds us that narratives, "(re)tellings" (Smalls 2018), and "storytelling from critical perspectives of racially marginalized people can make ideological frames of racialization more widely visible." Lo also notes, "The figure of the Black fugitive is not merely racialized . . . but also typified along several axes of differentiation, including age, physicality, and moral propensities," entailing diverse real-life outcomes. From 70 hours of video footage of police-civilian encounters that we have transcribed and coded, we chose one encounter to write about because it depicts some of these differentiations vividly while exemplifying the limited options available for two Black Americans to speak and move about "freely" as they circumnavigate enforced and stereotypical roles in authoritarian contexts, allowing us to make an argument about constitutional rights.

Current Anthropology   Volume 65, Number 3, June 2024

Escalation is a language ideology, not just a discourse, be-cause its exclusionary logic that delimits constitutional rights for racialized populations has been naturalized through insti-tutional processes extending beyond a single domain to further drive (and legitimate) acts of racialization in police-civilian encounters in the United States. First, there is an act of con-flation (i.e., rhematization) between communicative signs taken to index the intent to reject police authority (often glossed as "willful disrespect") and signs taken to index impending increases in aggressivity (presumably measured in terms of by-degree and hence perceptible shifts in pitch, speed, facial expression, bodily movement, etc.). A consequence of this lan-guage ideology is that even a clarifying question can be taken as evidence of escalation, justifying the use of greater force by police officers to quell the supposed insurrection. Jamal's ob-jections to Officer Mike's "probable cause" argument are a case in point. Second, escalation is a language ideology because it produces fractal recursions, a sign of the generativity of power (Gal and Irvine 2019). Such recursions are the labels of "esca-lation" imposed on "domestic 'terrorists'" (who did not employ violence) during the Trump regime and who were persecuted (and prosecuted) on the basis of their alignment with Black Lives Matter. Third, escalation is a language ideology because it promotes erasures. As we have stated, this ideology erases how "video footage taken from law enforcement contexts produces enduring cultural images of criminality and danger associated with the figure of the Black fugitive, a historical reference to a fleeing subject that draws on both liberatory and repressive narratives describing Black mobility and mobilization." Over-all, the industrial complex regiments presumptions of objec-tivity by attributing likeness and causality to an assemblage of already racialized signs (Smalls 2020): "motion" is first seen as the same as "flight" or "escape," reflexively attributing "esca-lation" to the actor and thus prompting (and justifying) "vio-lence," all in one chain of linked communicative events, even though there is nothing self-evident about these "politically situated framings," as Lo explains.

Taken broadly, "escalation" is also used as a tool to justify "the excessive use of force as a tactical defensive response" and even "arguments in justification of warfare." Rather than situating "escalation" in either a military or policing context, pointing to its ideological nature and wider use serves to de-naturalize how "acts of interpersonal conflict" are distortedly imagined as inevitably "scaling up" to engender violence and the mass destruction of life and property. (The opposite can be said about how violence and the mass destruction of life and property are reductively imagined as inevitably scaling down to engender acts of interpersonal conflict.) In either direction, the unpredictability of social life through semiosis, more gen-erally, and technological mediatization, more specifically (Agha 2011), is flattened. Thus, police officers, soldiers, and govern-ment officials, convinced that they know how the "enemy" will act, feel empowered to act on this interpretation because of feelings of fear stoked by racism. We share Delfino's hope that the act of identifying the racial optics of escalation "has im-

plications for exposing the normative functioning of liberal democracy, which is not antiracist but which depends on white supremacy and racial violence to function."

Racism, as a by-product of race category thinking, consti-tutes and is constituted by processes of racialization shaped over the *longue durée* as well as unfolding moment by com-municative moment. Acknowledging these different temporal scales hints at the limits of linguistic data and the necessity of operationalizing an "optics" for recuperating data pointing to racialization alongside (often democratically sanctioned) efforts to erase evidence of the signs of racism (through various tech-nological means). Given that "free speech," or the legal right to verbally and nonverbally critique the government, was formally denied to enslaved and formerly enslaved populations in the United States until 1964 and pragmatically denied to Black Americans (and others) in police-civilian encounters today (based on arguments of "police discretion"; Das, forthcoming), speech and writing cannot be the only data from which to excavate often buried signs of racial bias and violence.

"Optics" thus has important implications for anthropolog-ical methods in the study of race, racism, and racialization, especially in the digital era. Not only does attention to the mechanical effects of video recording, in the sense of being unnecessarily jarring or frenetic as was discussed in this ar-ticle, or the doctoring of digital content that we see and hear circulating online every day render consumers justifiably sus-picious of the facticity of images, sounds, and texts, but we also intuitively recognize that academic and nonacademic analysts cannot capture the entire historical arc of racialization because it is fragmented by structures of power (i.e., the police-military-entertainment industrial complex) that were never meant to be perceivable in the same frame or lens together. Concurrently, these structures of power produce racializing discourses that are so pervasive and ideologies so dense that their logics were never meant to be translated into one message by technological means. Optics capture the dual sense of this limit.

We also impose this limit on ourselves by rejecting the generalizing thrust of patriarchal theory and canon making (Reno and Halvorson 2023) and propose that collaborative and mixed-methods research across disciplines can best approxi-mate the causes, mechanisms, and outcomes of race, racism, and racialization in the United States. At the same time, we share the abiding sense that the search for evidence of racism is itself a product of White supremacy, since no data will ever be enough for some people or meet the threshold for breaking US law. The irony, of course, is that the search for evidence of escalation is quite thin. The "racial optics of escalation" is thus a call, and a theory, about the illogicalities of free speech activism in light of enduring racial inequalities.

—Sonia N. Das and Hyemin Lee

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