2016 has been a year of protest. From Charlotte to my own Baton Rouge and New Orleans, the news has been rife with images of ordinary people taking to the streets to express their discontent with the current state of affairs. There have been clashes with the police. There has been bloodshed. And there have been bodies laid on the pavement. American society is in state of conflict and the site of these conflicts are the public spaces.

The public space is the communal areas of the city used for commerce, travel, and recreation whereas the ghetto or slum is the space for the marginalized. Why control the public space? Because the public space is the source of all political, social, and economic power. The sheer act of existing in the public space is a political act from which other demands for power emanate; this is why African American, Hispanic, Native American, HIV, Feminist and LGBT movements have all held political and social demonstrations. America forces the victims of its most garish sins into the margins of society where the public will not see them. Claiming the public space counters that. But it is also a threat to the traditional structures of society. This is especially true in regard to race. David Goldberg writes “Power in the polis, and this is particularly true of racialized power, reflects and refines the spatial relations of its inhabitants. Urban power, in turn, is a microcosm of the strengths and weaknesses of the states.”

In the popular discourse, we do not conceptualize “the city” as a social construct but in reality it is a social construct in which we use space to represent power dynamics. As people of color, LGBT, women, Muslims, and all intersections have increased their presence in the public space, they have increased their power over “the city”.

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and the state. The state of terror reinforced by police shootings of Black people which occur in the public space, such as Alton Sterling and Deborah Danner, send a clear message to the Black community: we rule, you are ruled. The intention is to terrorize Black people to such a degree that they will withdraw from the public space thereby diminishing their own political power and increasing the power of those invested in Black marginalization. What cannot be accomplished through legal means is being pursued through collective violence—in order to preserve some measure of White privilege, a blind eye is being turned to the extra-judicial killings of Black people and the mass terror it inspires in the Black community as they move through the public space. This is the same operative theory that drives street harassment of women with often the same lethal results.

Burleigh Wilkins writes “the significance of the relationship between force and violence begins to emerge more fully when we consider the claim that violence may be physical, psychological, and even institutional. Here it becomes clear that a large part of what is going on in attempts to differentiate force from violence turns upon whether there is some moral difference between the two.” The extrajudicial killings of Black men, women, and children are narrow instances of physical violence that cause psychological violence to millions of people. The Black community has a longstanding practice of having to instruct children how to act in public as a means of protecting them from being subject to extrajudicial violence and killing. From lynchings to killings captured on smart phones, this Black terror curriculum that Black people are forced to teach their children, which socializes them to live with a base level of fear, has continued unabated since the end of slavery. The purpose of this curriculum of survival is so that children, as they transition to adulthood, will be able to negotiate the public space unharmed. This curriculum is not a guarantee of survival; it is merely a chance at survival.

The most predictable responses to any extrajudicial killing of a Black man, woman, or child is: 1) Black on Black violence rates provide context into why this extrajudicial killing was necessary; and 2) the victims are culpable in their own deaths because of their previous record or because they did not listen to police orders. It is incumbent to ask why these responses are offered as a matter of course when these events occur. The grand sum of all of the coded discourse surrounding these video recordings of the victim’s final moments and their viral appeal on the internet is that it creates a state of terror for Black people in America and a curriculum of survival. Black terror matters, too. Native American terror matters, too. Latinx terror matters, too. LGBT terror matters, too. Women terror matters, too. In this time where the United States repeatedly declares to the world that “we will not live in terror,” it is infuriating to know that “living in terror” does not include the terror Black people or any other marginalized group endures when we enter the public space.

ENDNOTES