"[T]his officer believed he was pursuing an armed felon"
Racism, Police Violence, and Transversive Affective Systems

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Abstract

This paper explores the critical role of affect and emotion in racialized police violence in the United States using the case of the death of Ramarley Graham at the hands of a NYPD officer in 2012 as a way of expanding several models of affect theory. This is done through the demonstration of a theoretical link between the representations of bodies, the creation of virtual threat, and the transference of emotion between bodies based upon that threat. In doing so, the paper draws from the theorizations of affect through both Brian Massumi's Affective Systems, and Sarah Ahmed's Affective Economies. The paper levels the critique at both Massumi and Ahmed that their theorizations of affect are not individually satisfactory when examining racialized police violence, and presents a theoretical synthesis of the positions of the two that allows for the tracing of affect, emotion, and responses between bodies that allows for an explanation of disproportionate police responses to racialized bodies.

Keywords: Police Violence, Racism, Emotion, Affect, Media, Representation of Bodies

1. Introduction

This paper explores racism as an affective system based upon Brian Massumi's theorization of affect in *Fear (The Spectrum Said)* (2005). This exploration will be performed through an inspection of the experiences of violence and racism against black bodies at the hands of police. This violence is the result of the operation of a racist affective system upon the population as a whole, and police specifically. Through an inspection of the shooting death of Ramarley Graham in 2012, I will demonstrate that an examination of this racist system requires an expansion of Massumi's affective systems, as the presentation of these systems in his paper renders them inadequate when the complexities of affective racist interactions are inspected and interrogated. It is the intent of this paper to demonstrate that by addressing this inadequacy in Massumi's structural description of affective systems via the incorporation of the treatment of affective emotions by Sarah Ahmed (2004), one can develop a more expansive and robust model for affective systems, allowing for a more extensive application of this theoretical framework.

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2. Theoretical Discussion
Massumi: Affect, Emotion & Action

Massumi (2005) presents affect as the intensities and forces that reside within and influence the body as that body sits in relation to the subjective world within which it resides. These affective influences exist before the body's subjective and conscious responses are mediated by cognitive or emotional processes; "we have already begun to experience [affective influence] non-consciously, wrapped in action, before it unfurls from it and is felt as itself, in its distinction from the action with which it arose" (p. 36). Massumi refers to this as the body's irritability (p. 40). This means that affect is enacted before any process that makes up decision-making processes; affect influences the foundational state of the body upon which decision-making processes are laid. Affect stimulates the "nervous systems and somatic expressions of the [body]" (p. 34). Through this stimulation, affect can reliably induce a response through a conditioned trigger, "without proof, without persuasion" (p. 34). The response of the body is pre-subjective; it responds to a trigger with an affective response that has been built around a virtual construct.

Massumi outlines the utilization of what he refers to as affective systems by various entities. The purpose of these is to influence or modulate the affective mood of various targeted populations for various (often) biopolitical ends (p. 47). These systems operate by conditioning the body to react to a sign or signifier with the aim of producing an affect-driven response or action. It does this by conditioning bodies to react to a virtual construct which has been intrinsically linked to a physical or embodied construct or state. By altering the virtual sign or signifier, the affective system is able to alter the moods of those affected by that system. If the sign moves towards a more positive state, the subjective mood of the populations will so trend, and vice-versa.

Massumi's description of affective systems suggests that many of these systems exist, and which target and influence bodies and populations within modern society. These systems do not each target every individual, nor do individual bodies experience these systems in the same manner. These systems may exist on a number of levels, from the tone of voice used by a person in a position of authority, to police crime reports or safety bulletins, to the presentation of certain groups within the media. It is through these systems that we can observe the implementation of affective systems in the modulation of the affective tone of various bodies and populations, as well as the induction or mobilization of those bodies into action.

This, however, presents a limitation: the structure that Massumi describes is specifically unidirectional, and the sign utilized by the affective system to influence the affected population is contained within that system. This means that this approach does not account for indirect interactions in a satisfactory way, nor does it provide space for intrapersonal interactions between bodies, as it outlines only the interaction between the system (affect source) and the affected body (affect destination).

Ahmed: Sticking and Sliding

In her paper, *Affective Economies* (2004), Sarah Ahmed suggests that affect operates through the circulation of emotions between bodies and objects. These emotions do not reside or originate within the body, rather they 'surface' on bodies (p. 126), either 'sliding' across or 'sticking' to them. This

means that emotions are communal, and not internally developed; rather, they travel between carriers, gaining intensity or significance as they travel. Ahmed uses this model to outline the creation of collective identities based upon the sharing of positive emotions within groups, as well as the creation of boundaries between those groups and the 'other' through the assignation/sharing of negative emotions with those groups/individuals/objects. Like Massumi, it is through the intensity of an affect that action is produced.

3. Discussion
The Shooting Death of Ramarley Graham; Police Violence and Black Bodies

On February 2nd, 2012, 18-year-old Ramarley Graham was spotted by police leaving a house in New York. The officers claimed they observed Graham adjusting his waistband, and believed he was carrying a pistol. The officers then allegedly chased Graham into his apartment building, where they kicked down the door to his apartment, pursued Graham into his bathroom and, believing he was reaching for the pistol, Officer Richard Haste shot him in the chest, killing him (Kemp, 2012). Following the incident, no evidence was found demonstrating that Graham had indeed been armed, and video evidence later showed that Graham had likely been unaware of the officers following him (Savali, 2016). Officer Haste stated during his trial that he had believed at the moment of the shooting that he was about to die and had feared for his life (Lysiak, Beekman, McShane, 2012).

Graham's shooting death is just one example of many in which police, fearing for their safety, have shot and often killed unarmed black men and women in the U.S (Juzwiak, Chan, 2014). Studies have shown significant biases in police responses to racialized groups, particularly black individuals, who are 3.49 times more likely to be met with deadly force than white individuals in similar situations or interactions (Ross, 2015). In many of the cases, the police officers cited the motivations for their responses as being grounded in a fear for their own life. Implicit bias tests have demonstrated that not only do white individuals consistently demonstrate implicit and unconscious racist stereotyping wherein they are more likely to assign negative connotations to non-white bodies (Kahn, Goff, Lee, Motamed, 2016, Frantz, Cuddy, Burnett, Ray, Hart, 2004), but police officers, who are motivated to appear non-racist are more vulnerable to this form of stereotyping behaviour (Frantz, et al, 2004, Tyler, Wakslak, 2004). Police officers, particularly white police officers, fear black bodies (Gomez, Goerling, 2016, Frantz, et al, 2004).

Media Representation, Racial Fear & Virtual Threat (The Affective System)

From where does this fear stem? While the full extent of racism as an affective system is rooted within a multitude of other systems (suggesting that racism is also hegemonic in nature), this paper will focus on media representations of black people, and the influences of these representations upon the population.

Roughly one-third of televised news is made up of crime reporting, with the majority of this reporting being focused on violent or abnormal crimes. Within this reporting racialized bodies are presented in ways that appear to be more threatening, as well as being offenders of violent crimes. This both greatly over-represents them when compared to racial crime data (Chiricos, Eschholz, 2002), and over-represents the victimization of whites by blacks (Dixon, Linz, 2000). This leads to the conflation of an exaggerated image of both the criminality of black populations and the prevalence black-on-white crime. Racial crime misrepresentation occurs in fictional media as well; crime dramas elevate the perceived level of incidence and severity of crime in the racialized communities it portrays (Callanan, 2012).

Popular culture provides a description of blackness that is threatening as well; the majority of prominent or well-known black figures within popular culture embody violence in some way (hooks, 2004), such as with athletes (Carrington, 2002) or gangster/rappers (Hurt, 2008).

In reality, the threat of black violence is largely virtual; the majority of whites have not reported experiencing violence, or, have not experienced violence at the hands of a racialized body (U.S. DoJ, 2011, FBI, 2013), and black-on-white crime is minimal compared to white-on-white/ black-on-black crime. But the continuing existence of phenomena such as white flight, suburban segregation, and white supremacy indicates a continuing white fear of black bodies (Zhang, 2011, Huber, 2016). Many whites have little to no personal experience with crime, and so will substitute the media presentations of threat and criminality for their own experiences, leading to a fear of black bodies that is not based on non-virtual experiences (Callanan, 2012). This is compounded further when one considers that many white people are more likely to experience black bodies through media than in real life (Myers, Jackson, 2001); their conception of blackness has been entirely mediated through third parties (Punyanunt-Carter, 2008). The presentations of black bodies within media conditions viewers to identify those representations as true, and the signs and signifiers represented by those virtual bodies are then transposed upon real-life bodies when encountered.

This carries into policing; racial inequalities in policing practices are not dependent on local crime rates, and are shown to exist to a significant degree regardless of the racial composition of local populations (MPV, 2015, FBI, 2014), and further, police are more likely to experience violence at the hands of a white offender than a black one (FBI, 2014). This suggests that the greater level of perceived threat outlined earlier, as well as the greater level of enacted violence in police responses to racialized bodies is not necessarily experiential, but could be, in fact, the result of the same affective conditioning that produces unconscious racial bias in the greater population.

Triggered & Triggering Bodies; Racism as Affect

The demonstration of racism by police, particularly when considered in conjunction with the impacts of the media representations of black bodies, indicate that the initial operational level at which police violence directed towards black people begins is a form of unconscious racism which begins with the body, specifically during interactions with racialized bodies (Fanon, 1967, Kahn, et al, 2016). In an interaction in which a police officer is reacting with excessive force against a black suspect, the racialized body is being reduced to a negative affective object (Hemmings, 562, Fanon, 1967). To explain this, two distinctions must be made; first, it is the non-racialized (police) body which is reacting to the affective sign that is represented by the black body, but the black body that bears the brunt of the interaction; it does not act, it passively exists. Therefore, it is not the source of affect, but a trigger for a preconditioned affective response. Second, it is the imposition of this racist framework by the police officer upon the black body that frames the affective groundwork of this interaction. It is the racist body that is acting upon the racialized one.

Therefore, racism must be understood as an outcome of affective influences upon bodies; "this means… hatred, and other emotions about (non-white) 'others' are at once embodied, affective, and socially produced" (Zembylas, 2015). When Officer Haste shot Graham, his decision was justified/driven by the fear he experienced. While it is not possible to fully inspect the decision-making processes of Officer Haste, this shooting seems to fall in line with many others, where in the use of force is influenced by a fear of black bodies. This fear can be related to the intensity of those moments in which decisions like Officer Haste's are made. The action taken by Haste was driven by his fear at that

specific moment, which was grounded in and built upon the intensity that arose from the irritability caused by Haste's exposure to an affective signifier; Graham's blackness.

The signifier in this interaction, the racialized body, and the interaction between the affected body and the triggering racialized body introduces a level of complexity that is not addressed by Massumi. Affective interactions are multidirectional, but actions, or at least the initial action, is not; the interaction is not racist until a racist makes it so. Massumi's (2005) affect is unidirectional; it travels from the affective system to the body it influences. But in the case of racism, one must observe a more omnidirectional series of interactions; the original unidirectional communication between the affective system and the targeted body is still present, but that body has been conditioned by that system to interact with a specific trigger. In addition to this, Massumi has described the affective system as containing the sign or signifier which initiates or triggers an affective response. This is, in the case of affective racism within policing, not the case.

This indicates that through the media, the presentation of the threat of black bodies targets the irritability of the body in such a way that an affective response can be induced when that body is stimulated by the correct trigger. This is done through the imposition of anxieties via virtual structures (black bodies within the media), and the attachment of those anxieties upon the targeted affected body. And while this system does not easily allow for the modulation of the affective moods of the populations exposed to it, it doesn't need to. It simply holds steady a normative state.

Addressing the Network Flaw: Massumi & Ahmed

So, to an extent, Massumi's theorization holds true in that through conditioning via the presentation of black bodies within the media, the racist affective system operates to enact biopolitical power upon populations through racialized practices enacted by the police and justice system (Foucault, 2003, Corva, 2009). But the structure proposed by Massumi is not adequate, in that it fails to account for the relationship between the affected body and the racialized triggering body. The complication that arises here is this; it is possible for the racialized body to exist in a way that is entirely separate to the affective system that has conditioned the affected body, a situation that is not accounted for by Massumi. It's triggering property is not an embodied property; it is one that is assigned by the affected body. To compensate for this, one can adopt an aspect of the theoretical model of affect presented by Ahmed (2004); that of the sticking of emotions.

In *Affective Economies* (2004), Ahmed describes emotions as not being internally contained, but instead as being circulated between subjects and objects, picking up intensity or 'economic value' as they are passed about. She describes emotions not as internal, but as external constructs that 'stick' or 'slide' to/between bodies. Ahmed also specifically discusses fear, as her presentation of emotions existing within a shared economy is somewhat disrupted by the characteristic of fear wherein it is often about an object, and is, therefore, more internalized than shared. To address this, Ahmed suggests that fear is linked instead to the 'passing by' of an object. It is here that the sticking of emotions onto bodies becomes relevant. The affective system of racism conditions it's targets to be affectively triggered by black bodies through the virtual presentation of those bodies. But in the absence of the non-virtual black bodies, the fear conditioned through that affective system is stuck to all black bodies. The affect (fear) is stuck to black bodies; it exists externally, not experienced by those bodies themselves. Instead, when the affected body comes into contact with a black body, this affective force is simultaneously detached from the black body and conjoins the affected and black bodies. The detaching of that affective emotion elicits an affective response from the affected body, which introduces the black body to the system

responsible for this response and linking them to the affected body (they are now a part of the interaction triggered by the affective response.), "[a]s affect exists as a mode by which a body or bodies are able to both affect other bodies as well as be affected by them" (Zembylas, 2015, p.215).

Expanding the Affective System

In the case of the affective fear within policing as a result of the affective network of racism, it is now possible to account for two populations upon which biopower is exerted by this system; the officers and the racialized bodies they react to/against. The influence upon the officers is clear; the affective system directly interacts with the body, and conditions it to elicit an affective bodily response when faced with the indicated sign. The biopolitical intent (or result) of this interaction is to code into police officers an unconscious level of fear or bias when interacting with black bodies. But black bodies are also implicated as being within this affective system, despite the possibility that they may have never interacted with any facets of that system directly (ie. They may have never interacted with police or watched crime reporting before). The fact that these disconnected bodies are by virtue of the affective emotions attached to them made to be the signs or signifiers to which the affected (police) bodies react indicates that while they are not intrinsically involved within this system, they become by necessity involved the moment their presence provokes an affective reaction.

The integration of this conceptualization of affect as being transversive and externally affixed to unknowing bodies into Massumi's systems allows for the explanation of the actuation of response through the triggering of affect by an previously uninvolved other, upon which a virtual sign has been transposed. Therefore, through the hybridization of Massumi's affective systems and the unidirectional and sticking properties of affective emotions or forces described by Ahmed, not only is the network flaw in Massumi's system addressed, but his affective systems can also be extended in both scope and complexity. This expansion occurs in two substantial ways: it allows for a more precise and consistent prediction of response/action as a result of affect (such as with racialized police shootings), and it allows for the application of affective systems and Massumi's theory upon both more subjective/intrapersonal and more complex affective structures.

But the Massumian approach is also inadequate in that it fails to account for and allow the exploration of the relationships between the affected body and the triggering body. This is where Ahmed's transitive emotions become useful. By taking Ahmed's approach to affect wherein emotions are objects which are attached to the signs that are communicated to, or between bodies, we can complicate the Massumian trigger by acknowledging that the trigger is not the black body itself, but the sign or property of threat/fear that is affixed to the surface of the black body and allowing for an inspection of that sign and its relationship to the body to which it is attached. By doing this, we can create a new site and space wherein a much deeper inspection of the forces of affect at play within these interactions. This allows us to more easily acknowledge the triggering body within our explorations of affect. With Massumi, affect is driven simply through exposure to a trigger. By integrating into this model the circulatory approach of Ahmed, we can reimagine that trigger as two or more separate constructs; the signs and emotions affixed to the surface of that individual, and the individual themselves. I think this alone is important; the resolution of the trigger into a body in and of itself. We can now more effectively see this trigger as a body, and indeed a population in its own right, and, looking past the white body targeted by a system of racialized affect, we can now suggest that the conditioned and curated body may not actually be the true target of these affective systems, but is a means through which the biopolitical control of black bodies is practiced.

4. Conclusion

Ramarley Graham, who had previously been unaware of the both the presence of Officer Haste, his partner, and the affective responses they were experiencing, became a part of the affective system that was (in part) responsible for his death the moment he first entered into the awareness of those officers. The affective forces that had been unknowingly affixed to his body by the affective system of racism detached and connected with the bodies of Haste and his partner. It is (presumably) this affective reaction and fear that compelled Haste to pursue Graham and, for fear of his life, shoot Graham to death. The fact that until seconds before his own death Graham was likely unaware of his sudden involvement in this system and the interactions it had triggered is tragic but inconsequential; he had been indelibly bound to Haste the moment Haste's actions became foundationally laid upon an affective response. It was Officer Haste that was the target of the affective system; Graham was pulled into it through Haste's affective response.

While there are aspects of Ahmed's theorization of affect that work better here, the systemic nature of Massumi's theory is better suited when inspecting racism in relation to the biopolitical issue of racialized police violence. By drawing from the Ahmedian concept of the 'sticking' of emotions to bodies, and the incorporation of this concept into the theorization of an affective system, it is possible for Massumi's theoretical approach to be deployed in a greater range of systemic inspections, where the original framework may have been rendered situationally problematic. So in the case of police shootings, not only are we able to trace the pathways through which racist affective systems and triggers are introduced to and curated within the body through institutions such as 'the media', but we have also complicated the unidirectional nature of the Massumian analysis, which is focused on the influence of systems on targeted bodies, so that the interactions between these bodies and the bodies that represent their affective triggers can also be recognized and explored more deeply. We are also able to decenter the police officer and their affective response, and make space wherein the person who has been shot can become realized as more than a cause of this affective fear response, and also be allowed to take up space within analyses.

Finally, it is also worth noting that in this model, bodies are largely presented as being at least partially passive subjects. While within the theoretical model, this makes sense, but I also want to briefly note that whether or not someone is being immersed in these systems, or is even aware of them, the fact that they are living in a society that systematically works to marginalize them places them in a position of resistance, an inherently non-passive location.

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