

DEATH IS VIOLENT: NOT-VIOLENT SIT-INS AND EMBODIMENTS OF VICTIMHOOD IN ANTI-POLICE PROTEST RHETORICS

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Following the mass protests of 2020, awareness of the systemic nature of police violence in the United States has increased dramatically. However, much of this work remains to be finished, as is seen in the current Stop Cop City protests to prevent the construction of a militarized police training complex in Atlanta. In this article, I examine social media representations of a Stop Cop City sit-in following the police killing of an activist named Tortuguita to gain a deeper understanding of the rhetorical functions of embodied portrayals of victims of police brutality. Current research finds that protesters perform nonviolence to emphasize police violence in contrast to victims' innocence (O'Rourke; Meckfessel; Goldberg). To extend this conversation, I utilize qualitative coding and employ feminist rhetorical criticism alongside theories of body rhetoric to bring to light how these protests disrupt the hegemony of militarized policing. In particular, Sonja Foss's method of feminist criticism and Judith Butler's theories of nonviolence as a rhetorical practice inform this work. By juxtaposing incongruities between peaceful protesters and violent police, rearticulating victimhood and symbolic death, and enacting their right to protest the police, Stop Cop City protesters reframe the narrative surrounding Tortuguita's death and militarized policing at large. I argue that embodiments of victims of police brutality utilize performances of victimhood and the interplay between violence and nonviolence to disrupt the normalization of police brutality. These findings suggest how embodiments of (non)violence can work as a rhetorical strategy to disrupt established hegemonies.

INTRODUCTION

Stop Cop City is a movement based in Atlanta to protest the city's proposed police training complex. Activists criticize the "Cop City" project for the ways it will further militarize the police and harm the environment, which will, in turn, exacerbate existing injustices against marginalized peoples in Atlanta. Stop Cop City

gained national attention in January 2023 after police shot and killed Manuel Esteban Paez Terán, a nonbinary and Indigenous environmental activist known as Tortuguita (Pratt). This event marked the first time in U.S. history that police killed an environmental activist while they were protesting (Love and Donoghoe). The killing of Tortuguita sparked

massive protests against Cop City and police brutality, as protesters claimed Tortuguita was a nonviolent protester who was murdered by the police, which autopsy results corroborated (Rico).

Using feminist rhetorical criticism alongside body rhetoric, I analyze social media representations of a Stop Cop City sit-in called “Demand Justice for Tortuguita,” wherein protesters embodied the results of Tortuguita’s autopsy to protest police violence and Cop City. Through their silent bodily presence, protestors embodied Tortuguita’s peacefulness and innocence in the face of police brutality. Through my analysis, I aim to answer the question: how do embodiments of victims of police brutality function as a rhetorical strategy? This question and the subsequent analysis are grounded in a Butlerian perspective that views both embodied performances and nonviolence as acts or as ongoing practices. Informed by these theories and the methods of feminist rhetorical criticism, I argue that embodied protests against police challenge police brutality and militarization by juxtaposing violence with nonviolence; by embodying death, victimhood, and innocence; and by reframing the narratives of policing to uncover the systemic nature of police violence and the suppression of protest in the U.S. My findings demonstrate how embodiments of victims function as disruptive rhetorical strategies, ultimately blurring the lines between violent and nonviolent protest by calling up images of violence while still portraying protesters and the dead as peaceful. The tensions between rhetorical violence and nonviolence raised by this study point towards

a need for a deeper understanding of embodiments of violence within the field of rhetorical studies. That is, body rhetoric that utilizes the juxtaposition between violence and nonviolence shows us as rhetoricians that our analyses of violence must be situated *within* the tension of non/violence rather than trying to resolve it.

PHYSICALIZED PROTEST: THE CASE OF EMBODIED VICTIMHOOD IN STOP COPY CITY

The Stop Cop City movement, also known as “Defend the Atlanta Forest,” protests both police violence and the environmental degradation the project would cause. The \$90 million Atlanta Public Safety Training Center, dubbed “Cop City” by its opponents, would train officers in combat tactics using a mock village and a shooting range (Rico). Stop Cop City protesters criticize the project for the ways it will increase surveillance, further militarize the police, and exacerbate the over-policing of nearby Black neighborhoods (Goodman). Prior to Cop City, Atlanta already had a troubled history with its police department, including mass protests in 2020 after Atlanta police shot and killed Rayshard Brooks just weeks after the murder of George Floyd (Ortiz). Furthermore, Stop Cop City’s environmental concerns are no less intertwined with systemic racism; because the construction of Cop City necessitates the deforestation of the Weelaunee or South Woods Forest, Stop Cop City also protests the project’s environmental impact on nearby Black and low-income communities. Protesters point to the forest’s crucial role in defending

Atlanta from flooding, decreasing air pollution, and mitigating high temperatures, all of which are even more important in the face of the climate emergency (Love and Donoghoe). Environmental activists, therefore, make up a large part of the movement through a branch of eco-anarchists known as the Forest Defenders.

During the Forest Defenders' months-long occupation of the Weelaunee People's Park to protest Cop City, their encampment was raided by police on January 18, 2023, when Georgia State Police shot and killed Tortuguita. Their death led to national coverage of Stop Cop City in the media and debates about who was to blame for Tortuguita's death. While the Atlanta Police Department alleges that Tortuguita shot at them first, Stop Cop City activists maintain that Tortuguita was committed to nonviolence (Goodman), and later autopsy results showed that Tortuguita had no gunpowder residue on their hands (Marcus). Stop Cop City has largely been criticized in the mainstream media for violent, destructive protests following Tortuguita's death. However, as more details surrounding Tortuguita's killing have emerged, media coverage has become more favorable to the movement. It is also important to note that as I undertake this study, the movement to Stop Cop City is still ongoing.

In this study, I examine a self-described non-violent sit-in and rally called "Demand Justice for Tortuguita, Jailed Forest Defenders, and All Victims of Police Violence" that took place on March 25, 2023, outside of Georgia's capitol building in Atlanta. My analysis of this rally employs Sonja Foss's method of feminist

rhetorical criticism, though my work also relies on the study of body rhetoric and the theorizations of Judith Butler. For my coding and subsequent analysis, I rely on pictures of the sit-in shared on social media by the many accounts associated with the movement to Stop Cop City; @photokinetic_photography posted multiple images of the event on Instagram, which were then shared by the @stopcopcity account. I also draw from posters and announcements of the event, such as those from @stopcopcity on Instagram and @atlantajusticealliance on Twitter, as they fill in the context surrounding the sit-in and also do some rhetorical work to set up and amplify the protest's message. It is important to acknowledge that with the use of social media posts as data, this analysis is based upon Stop Cop City's online portrayals to craft the narrative surrounding Tortuguita's death. While all forms of media are tools of framing (Scheufele), many scholars have noted that social media is unique in that it constitutes a public sphere, a living web of discourses (Habermas; Fraser; Carney). We can, therefore, understand social media posts as curated rhetorical representations meant to reach a large, online audience. These social media posts also provide insight into the activists' goals for representing their movement.

The "Demand Justice for Tortuguita" event was planned in response to an independent autopsy that indicated that Tortuguita was likely sitting cross-legged with their hands up, palms facing inward when they were shot 14 times (the official autopsy later upped this number to 57), including in the head and both hands (Marcus). Accordingly, protesters at the rally

were instructed to get their hands marked with red “Xs” and to then “sit like Tort” (see fig. 1, fig. 2). This sit-in is well-suited to rhetorical criticism because of its deliberate nature, with posters telling attendees that getting their hands marked was “crucial for the image the rally is creating” (see fig. 1). More importantly, as a case study, this sit-in speaks to both the rhetorics of embodied nonviolent protest and those of death, victimhood, and police brutality. In doing so, it places violence and nonviolence together and inscribes them simultaneously on each of the protester’s bodies.



Fig. 1. Atlanta Justice Alliance [@atlantajusticealliance]. “Justice For Tortuguita.” Instagram, 21 March 2023, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CqEQFEuu77H/?igsh=MThqNTVvcXUzY3Fhcg==>



Fig. 2. Atlanta Justice Alliance [@atlantajusticealliance]. “Justice For Tortuguita.” Instagram, 21 March 2023, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CqEQFEuu77H/?igsh=MThqNTVvcXUzY3Fhcg==>

Similar to a die-in, wherein protestors lie down and pretend to be dead, the “Demand Justice for Tortuguita” sit-in provides a means of examining performances of death, victimhood, and embodied protest against state-sanctioned violence. It fits into a long lineage of sit-ins as forms of civil disobedience against systemic racial injustices (Ritchie; O’Rourke and Pace; DeLuca) while also giving voice—or body—to anti-police arguments and ideologies. Thus, this sit-in provides an inroad to a deeper understanding of how these rhetorical strategies function to disrupt and dismantle

hegemonic ideologies about policing, violence, and the suppression of protests. These ideologies are based in “law and order” mentalities that normalize the use of violence to maintain “order” or to maintain the status quo. I draw from Angela Davis’ teachings on policing, violence, and protest to identify how these ideologies criminalize dissent by characterizing protests—and, therefore, protesters—as unruly and dangerous. The ingrained assumption that demonstrations, particularly those related to racial injustice and police brutality, are themselves violent is exactly the assumption that anti-police protesters aim to disrupt.

A FEMINIST VIEWPOINT OF EMBODIED PROTEST AS DISRUPTIVE

I analyze the “Demand Justice for Tortuguita” sit-in using feminist criticism. As Sonja K. Foss outlines, feminist criticism is a process where-in critics “identify and explicate strategies that disrupt established hegemonies, and, in turn, create new ways of thinking, acting, and being” (Foss 147). Although these strategies do not have to come from the rhetoric of women or other marginalized groups, the margins are typically where this type of counterhegemonic rhetorical work is found, since those that the existing social order oppresses are the most likely to turn to alternative rhetorics and subversive strategies to dismantle it. Foss’s feminist criticism is based on how marginalized groups attack systems and the norms that support them. A protest movement based in countering environmental racism and militarized pol-

icing is inherently feminist in essence because it counters such dominant ideologies and ways of being and knowing.

Feminist criticism is rooted in Stuart Hall’s theories of ideological analysis, which examine how articulations between different elements in an artifact point to the social realities or worldview that underlie a group’s rhetoric. While feminist ideological criticism likewise draws out the ideologies behind different rhetorical strategies, this methodology focuses more narrowly on marginalized and counterhegemonic ideologies and strategies, as true disruption can only occur against the grain of dominant ways of knowing and being. Some of these strategies for subverting hegemonies that Foss identifies are: “generating multiple perspectives, cultivating ambiguity, reframing, enacting, and juxtaposing incongruities,” though this list is not exhaustive or meant to be limiting (147). Further, these different strategies frequently overlap and work together in complex ways.

This feminist methodology illuminates how Stop Cop City, like many social movements, employs numerous strategies to break down conventional perspectives. The first step in creating change is to unsettle foundations and break down the structures that hold dominant ideologies in place. Thus, although sit-ins can sometimes appear relatively non-disruptive or passive, that is entirely untrue—civil disobedience is, in essence, a direct challenge to the status quo. Indeed, as Judith Butler asserts, nonviolence is not just a tactic but a rhetorical and political “practice.” Just as nonviolence is a practice in embodiment, so too is the rhetoric of victimhood. Victimhood, too, is “culturally

practiced,” meaning that constituting victimhood is an *active* process, not a passive state (Hoondert et al. 3). It is important to note that my focus on embodiments of victimhood and the rhetorics of nonviolent protest does not aim to place nonviolence on a pedestal above other important forms of protest, including rioting and the destruction of property, both of which are key tactics of the Stop Cop City movement. Rather, I’m interested in how performances of exaggerated nonviolence through the embodiment of victimhood function as mechanisms to make visible state-sanctioned violence.

Key to this examination of embodiments of victimhood and nonviolence is the theory that bodies are political and rhetorical. When people, particularly those who are marginalized, use their bodies to protest, that action is inherently disruptive. Kevin Michael DeLuca tells us that in embodied protests, protesters’ bodies “become not merely flags to attract attention to the argument, but the site and substance of the argument itself” (10). Embodiment, then, is not just a piece of evidence but the very place from which the argument is made. Moreover, body rhetoric can present a physical challenge to hegemonies through the ways these rhetorical acts “demonstrate a rejection of the expected performance of an individual’s body in each moment” (Lennox 476-77). In other words, going against the status quo by performing stillness or unexpected movements can be powerful rhetorical tools that counter dominant ideologies. Because the sit-in for Tortuguita utilizes bodies to make an argument, my study necessitates a methodological

approach that focuses on these embodied acts as disruptions.

To analyze the sit-in, I coded the sit-in’s Instagram posts for different disruption strategies. I developed codes for different aspects of the social media posts (mourning, defiance, stillness, violence, BLM/anti-racist signifiers, etc.). I then consolidated these codes, aligning them with Foss’s strategies of disruption most relevant to this research: juxtaposition, reframing, and enaction. However, I did not want my findings to be limited to just those specific maneuvers, so although not all of my findings fit neatly into the strategies Foss names, they do still work to push back against dominant perspectives. This is seen most clearly with my difficulties properly categorizing the codes “violence” and “nonviolence.” The categorization-resistant elements ultimately led to the most fruitful analysis of the sit-in for Tortuguita.

In my analysis, I find that by embodying Tortuguita’s innocence, Stop Cop City juxtaposes the incongruities between the conflicting narratives surrounding Tortuguita’s death. I then examine how said incongruities communicate a larger tension between the peacefulness of the protesters and the violence of the police, ultimately reframing hegemonic perspectives on policing. Next, I analyze the sit-in’s performance of stillness and death and argue that by physicalizing oppression and disempowerment, protesters are turned symbolically into victims of police brutality, which further troubles dominant ideologies of policing by re-seeing police brutality and state suppression of protests as systemic problems.

Then, I examine the ways in which protesting in the face of police suppression of protests is in itself a disruptive form of enactment. I conclude by synthesizing these strategies to examine how they overlap and work together. Following this analysis, I discuss how my findings add to the current scholarship on embodiments of victims of police brutality by using a feminist critical lens that shows how this type of rhetoric is inherently disruptive through its positioning of violence and nonviolence. Finally, I explain the implications of my findings on the critical importance of embodied protests against police brutality.

“SIT LIKE TORT”: EMBODIMENTS OF VICTIMHOOD IN PRACTICE

The “Demand Justice for Tortuguita” rally utilizes the embodiment of Tortuguita sitting down in the position they were in when they were killed by police, making this sit-in akin to a die-in. This image of nonviolence in the face of violence intervenes in the hegemony of police militarization in the United States, particularly against BIPOC. The law and order ideology behind militarized policing is characterized by a suppression of protests, making protest rhetoric all the more counterhegemonic. The “Demand Justice for Tortuguita” sit-in works to dismantle this ideology by (1) juxtaposing incongruities between the conflicting narratives surrounding Tortuguita’s death; (2) using this juxtaposition to intervene in and reframe the assumed criminality of protesters and other victims of police brutality; (3) performing mass victimhood and symbolic death to reframe police brutality and sup-

pression of protests as systemic; and (4) enacting the right to protest and perform civil disobedience. Altogether, these rhetorical strategies allow the Stop Cop City activists to transcend the individual event of Tortuguita’s killing to frame all police brutality and state suppression of protests as symptoms of social control and militarization.

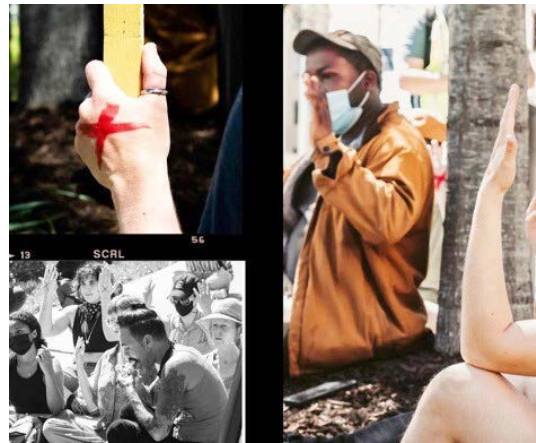


Fig. 3. Photokinetic Photography [@photokinetic_photography]. “Manuel Esteban Paez Terán, AKA Tortuguita.” *Instagram*, 28 March 2023, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CqVRu1ogtvE/?igsh=eDFxNnMzZXVkam93>

By embodying Tortuguita’s innocence, the protesters construct Tortuguita as a victim of police brutality, thereby juxtaposing their peacefulness with the violence of their death. As protesters at the rally “sit like Tort” with their legs crossed and their hands up, they say with their very bodies that Tortuguita was innocent. Further, attendees at the sit-in had the back of their hands marked with blood-red “Xs” (see fig. 3, fig. 4). These red “Xs” symbolize the bullet wounds found on Tortuguita’s

hands in the autopsy, so that when protesters put their hands up, they embody the evidence that Tortuguita had their hands up when they were shot 57 times by police. The hands-up position emerged as a pattern within the coding, signifying antiracist protest against the police. This image of the hands up in the face of police violence works to place Tortuguita's peacefulness in contrast to police violence, calling up images of BLM rallies, taking a knee, and "hands up, don't shoot." By showing with their bodies that Tortuguita was killed with their hands up in a gesture of surrender and with no weapons, Stop Cop City rewrites the narrative of Tortuguita's death. By drawing out the incongruities between the two stories, the protesters ultimately overrule the police's account that Tortuguita fired at police and that the police acted in self-defense. This functions as a refusal to let the state dictate the "truth" of the events and construct an unchallenged narrative that protects their own interests. Furthermore, by claiming the narrative for themselves and Tortuguita both through embodied protest and a large online presence, the Stop Cop City protesters effectively situate their own version of events as the truthful and dominant one. As many scholars have noted, the politics of victimhood are contested (Hoondert et al. 168). This means that by claiming the status of victim for Tortuguita, activists prevent the police from claiming victimhood themselves by framing the incident as an act of self-defense.



Fig. 4. Photokinetic Photography [@photokinetic_photography]. "Manuel Esteban Paez Terán, AKA Tortuguita." *Instagram*, 28 March 2023, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CqVRu1ogtvE/?igsh=eDFxNnMzZXVkam93>

With this same juxtaposition, Stop Cop City also reframes *all* victims of police violence as innocent, disrupting the assumption of their criminality. In the protest's embodiment of Tortuguita, it is significant that it was not just one protester sitting like Tortuguita but many of them. Although some of the images posted to social media show close-ups of single protesters, the majority of photos zoom out to show multiple rows of protesters all sitting on the sidewalk together with their legs crossed and hands up almost identically, so that repetition became a recurring code (see fig. 5). The

repetition of so many bodies in the same position serves to not only rearticulate Tortuguita's innocence, but also widens the frame to see the victims of police brutality as not one, but many. As is seen in the name of the rally, "Demand Justice for Tortuguita, Jailed Forest Defenders, and All Victims of Police Violence," the Stop Cop City sit-in, though it focuses on Tortuguita, extends this identity of innocent victimhood to all those hurt by police violence (see fig. 1). By deliberately constructing Tortuguita, and therefore all victims of police brutality, as innocent, the sit-in organizers trouble the assumption that those killed by police, especially people of color, must have "done something wrong" in order to provoke such a violent reaction from cops. This dominant worldview, spread by the media and the state, overlooks the fact that BIPOC bodies are automatically seen as a threat so that victims of police brutality are often criminalized even after death. As problematic as it is to require "innocence" on the part of victims to see police brutality as unjust, this reframing of all victims as undeserving of violence is fundamental to challenging police militarization. In this way, the sit-in counters the assumptions of victim wrongdoing by using Tortuguita's killing to represent all victims' innocence, all while rearticulating the embodiment of hands up to demonstrate the repetitive and, therefore, systemic issue of police brutality.

Beyond representing other victims of police brutality, in embodying Tortuguita, the protesters are turned symbolically into (potential) victims themselves, reframing police violence as a systemic condition of state control

that criminalizes protests and protesters. This emerged in the coding through images that had elements of "violence," "nonviolence," "vulnerability," and "victimhood" all at once, placing protesters in a position of strength and



Fig. 5. Photokinetic Photography [@photokinetic_photography]. "Manuel Esteban Paez Terán, AKA Tortuguita." *Instagram*, 28 March 2023, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CqVRu1ogtvE/?igsh=eDFxNnMzZXVkam93>

vulnerability at once. Similar to a die-in, the protesters sitting like Tortuguita pose silently and stay still. Though not limp or fully corpse-like, they nevertheless perform death by sitting in the exact pose Tortuguita was in when they were killed. In this position of mourning, the bodies of protesters are turned symbolically into victims of police brutality themselves—they are all Tortuguita. Rather than an empowering form of protest, this position of play-death is disempowering and vulnerable. Prone on the ground, protesters are easy targets for

police kettling tactics, arrest, and violence. In putting themselves at risk, the protesters sitting like Tortuguita communicate that they, too, are quite literally at risk of death at the hands of the police. Their performance of potential victimhood makes visible what Judith Butler terms the “precariousness of life,” especially in a state of never-ending cycles of violence. In this way, their performance of vulnerability and death serves as a disruption to the hegemonic assumption that anti-police protesters are threatening. By further reframing protesters as peacefully demanding justice in the face of violent police responses, this action flips the framework and ultimately articulates the police as the dangerous ones. This reframing makes it so that the action of sitting like Tortuguita provokes a re-seeing of police suppression of protesters, challenging the supremacy of ideologies that view social control and surveillance as normal.

In that same vein, the very act of protesting in the face of protester suppression is in itself a disruption. Just sitting quietly in an era of militarized policing and the suppression of social movements can be counterhegemonic. Because the ideologies behind the increasing militarization of the police are about control, particularly control over people of color who are deemed as threats to the existing social order of white supremacist capitalism (Davis; Gilmore), to engage in civil disobedience against that system is to say no to that control, if only momentarily. In the “Demand Justice for Tortuguita” sit-in, the presence of so many bodies from different policed groups claiming space publicly in front of the capitol building is disruptive

to the status quo. By engaging in this protest, then, attendees claim their right to protest the government and the police despite police violence at past Stop Cop City events. The very act of protesting at all becomes an enactment, as protesters are willing into being their right to peacefully protest the government without violence. This enactment reflects the ultimate goal of the Stop Cop City movement: to claim the right to stop the state from building a militarized police training complex in their city. Because their response to Tortuguita’s death while protesting is to continue to protest, this enactment refuses to let the “way things are” persist and instead enacts a world where protesters can fight injustice without facing brutality.

Because all these strategies occur simultaneously in each of the bodies sitting like Tortuguita, they work together in complex ways, going beyond the individual event of Tortuguita’s killing to ultimately reconfigure the larger structures at play behind police brutality, like militarization, state control, and the suppression of protests. The fourfold disruption makes it so that the “Demand Justice for Tortuguita” sit-in reframes Tortuguita’s death as murder. In doing so, it constructs all people, whether they be past victims, potential ones, or protesters, as innocent and undeserving of police brutality, refuting the normative acceptance of police violence as the status quo. In this way, embodying one victim of police brutality is not a singularity but inevitably extends toward all victims and the systems at large. Correcting the story behind Tortuguita’s death is in itself a refusal to accept state suppression of protests and the militarization of law enforcement;

protesting the murder of a nonviolent protester through more nonviolent protest, the Stop Cop City protesters enact their right to engage in protest without police violence. To “sit like Tort,” then, inscribes upon the bodies of protesters multiple simultaneous disruptions to hegemony that transcend the individual event of Tortuguita’s killing.

DEATH IS VIOLENT, PROTESTERS ARE NOT

In the case of embodied protests against police brutality, the source and location of the protest is the body—the very site of police violence. As seen through the “Demand Justice for Tortuguita” sit-in, when protesters use their bodies as argument and evidence in protest, they make visible the violence of police militarization. When rhetors like those behind this protest use civil disobedience to disrupt the normalization of police brutality with their bodies, they perform nonviolence to juxtapose their peacefulness with police brutality. However, when embodied protests against police go beyond being solely a sit-in or taking a knee and instead also embody a victim, this juxtaposition becomes increasingly disruptive—to the point that despite being nonviolent, it nevertheless draws its argumentative strength from symbols of violence.

Judith Butler tells us that “non-violence is not a peaceful state, but a social and political struggle to make rage articulate and effective” (182). Taking this further, Shon Meckfessel posits that the dichotomy between “violent” and “nonviolent” protest is misleading and functions as a limiting binary. He views

nonviolence as a “rhetorical move of disavowal whose meaning relies on calling violence into the audience’s mind, just as speakers are disavowing it” (57). He further notes that nonviolence, as a rhetorical strategy, “exploits ambiguities in shifting definition of violence, particularly by equating very similar phenomenon together as ‘violence’” (57). In this light, we can examine the rhetoric of civil disobedience not as a binary of violent *or* nonviolent but through a lens of nuance that embraces these tensions. Meckfessel’s terms “not violent” and “not/violent” are particularly apt for the “Demand Justice for Tortuguita” sit-in. By embodying Tortuguita, protesters juxtaposed incongruities, reframed the narrative and larger perspectives on policing, and enacted their right to civil disobedience—all of which are, if technically “nonviolent,” still confrontational, disturbing, and demanding disruptions that aim to make viewers uncomfortable. Though they did not destroy anything or harm anyone, the protesters embodied victimhood, marked their hands with symbolic bullet wounds, and forcefully made police brutality present. My findings, therefore, show that the paradigm of violent vs. nonviolent is challenged not only through speaking and writing but also through acts of performing protest with bodies. Further, these embodied strategies of disruption are really *strategies of violence* against hegemonic structures, as they attack white supremacy and capitalism, as well as the state-sanctioned violence and militarization of police. As Torsten Menge finds in his bridge-building work between the theories of Foucault and Arendt, “power is essentially nonviolent since violence

by its very nature is incapable of creating power” (764). We can thus understand power, violence, and nonviolence as an interplay of tensions and struggles, each communicative signifiers in their own way. That is, violence acts as a performance of power, even as it is not generative of it. *Strategies of violence*, therefore, attack dominant power structures by making visible structural violence even as they disavow it through a display of violent nonviolence. To perform violence and nonviolence simultaneously is, therefore, also to perform both power and powerlessness at once.

A central component of this tension between violence and nonviolence is the way in which these performances compel viewers to mourn unjust death. In a study of the queer-led grassroots group AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP) die-ins to protest and draw attention to the AIDS crisis, Susan Leigh Foster points to the power of performing death, finding that activists “pushed death . . . squarely in front of those who witnessed the event” (404). Similarly, Jesse A. Goldberg finds that BLM die-ins functioned as “an interruption of not only business as usual but life itself” (133). Performing death, then, troubles normal assumptions of nonviolence as “passive.” Thus, it is a misinterpretation to view performing death as truly “nonviolent” because death *is* violent—and that is the point. Die-ins and performances like the “Justice for Tortuguita” sit-in make visible violent and unjust deaths in order to force viewers to contend with their existence. Performances of victimhood tie victim innocence and police violence together in each and every protester’s body to show their

oppositonality. This space, the protester’s body, becomes the site of not/violent protest that highlights the tensions between violence and nonviolence, police and protester, life and death. Embodiments of victimhood perform this multilayered juxtaposition in order to prevent people from peacefully ignoring state-sanctioned murder.

Beyond forcing viewers to confront death, embodiments of victims also use the victim’s identity, personhood, and innocence to further their argument. In their study of BLM anti-police rhetoric, Langa and Creswell find that activists “reconstruct the deceased’s personhood by identifying them with a larger victimized collective” and that this allows the “dead to not only become full persons again but also post-mortem political actors” (200). Thus, activist portrayals of victims reconstitute the dead as not just faceless, nameless victims but as *people* who were killed by police or other forms of state violence. This maneuver of giving victims their personhood back is essential because it intervenes in “the norms that differentiate between those lives that count as livable and grievable and those that do not” (Butler 180). Because the invisibility of police brutality rests on the dehumanization of victims, grieving those who are socially and politically “already dead” is radical. In this way, there is a tension between the living, who are embodying death, and the dead, who are symbolically resurrected through the performance. Both parties hover between life and death, drawing attention to the fragility of life in the face of never-ending cycles of state violence.

This inevitable tension between violence and nonviolence is also central to the work of disrupting hegemony itself. As Meckfessel states, “violence *is* semiosis,” meaning that violence is this rhetorical “power to rearrange subjectivities” (130). Destroying dominant beliefs by making new, alternative meanings is, in a sense, violent. My findings demonstrate the ways in which embodiments of victimhood function as disruptive and, therefore, violent performances. As rhetorical strategies, they juxtapose violence and nonviolence, reconstruct victims as innocent people, and force viewers to look at police brutality in a new context—one that fully recognizes the violence of police militarization. As such, these types of protest trouble the line of what constitutes “nonviolent” protest, calling upon realities of death that are disruptive through their ability to force us to reckon with brutality.

CONCLUSION

By sitting like Tortuguita, Stop Cop City protesters were able to not only reconstitute Tortuguita as an innocent protester and victim of police brutality but to forcefully make visible the ways in which protesters, and all marginalized people, are at risk of unwarranted violent responses from police. As I found in this study, the rhetorical strategy of embodying victims of police brutality functions to uncover the structural violence that most people would, if they did not overlook completely, dismiss as the way things are. Additionally, it is essential that in embodied protests against police brutality, the very evidence against further militarization is the past victims and their innocence, which are made symbolically present through embodiment. Therefore, physical pro-

tests that go so far as to perform death are critical for the necessary work of forcing viewers to confront the reality of police killings and the deaths of protesters and people of color.

As police militarization only continues to increase in the wake of the 2020 protests, a thorough understanding of the efficacy of both embodied and online protests against police brutality is essential. Unlike kneeling, embodiments of victims of police brutality are resistant to being co-opted by police. A dual lens of feminist criticism and the theories of body rhetoric, then, enable a deeper understanding of the critical work of embodiments of victims and the ways in which they bring the tensions between violence and nonviolence to the surface to challenge the accepted normalcy of police killings. Especially because of the ways in which the body is the central site of police brutality, rhetorical strategies that make this violence prominent through and on the body are crucial in the struggles against police militarization.

NOTES

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