

The Phone as a Tool in Modern Black Self-Defense

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Abstract: As Black Americans continue to be targets of police brutality and racial discrimination, the phone has evolved into an effective tool for Black self-defense. This paper examines the ways in which ideas of black self-protection have persisted and evolved over the past two decades. While many historical notions of Black self-defense have persevered, the emergence of social media and technology in activism has led to a new form of Black protection. Utilizing a variety of primary and secondary sources, this paper examines the history of Black Self-Defense, nonviolence versus militancy, and using social media in activism, particularly in Black liberation movements. In recognizing the phone as an effective weapon in combating racial discrimination, Black Americans can utilize this tool to protect themselves, get justice for others, and prevent future recurrence.

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Introduction

On May 26, 2020, organized protests around the world erupted following the widespread circulation of a bystander video that captured the murder of George Floyd. The 10-minute video, recorded by 17-year-old witness Darnella Frazier, was posted to Facebook and Instagram shortly after the murder took place. A statement released by Frazier's lawyer stated, "I opened my phone and I started recording because I knew if I didn't, no one would believe me."¹ Frazier's video served as an important catalyst in the emergence of the George Floyd protests and acted as crucial

evidence in the trial of the perpetrator, Derek Chauvin. Although the video documenting the incident did not change Floyd's fate, it did ensure that his story did not go unnoticed. The civil unrest immediately following George Floyd's murder was unprecedented, resulting in extensive conversations about systemic racism globally and calls for significant criminal justice reform.

In documenting and circulating instances of racial discrimination, the phone acts as a tool for Black individuals to protect themselves, get justice for others, and prevent future occurrences from taking place. This paper examines the ways in which ideas of Black self-

defense have persisted and evolved over time, with a particular focus on the 21st century, distinguishing between which ideas and practices are strictly for safety and which are used as a form of rebellion against racial discrimination. Specifically, this paper argues that while many historical ideas of Black self-defense have endured, the emergence of social media and technology has resulted in a major shift in the ways in which it is practiced.

Historiographical Section

One of the most contentious characteristics within the civil rights movement, as well as subsequent movements, was the practice of armed self-defense. Civil rights scholar Charles E. Cobb argues that while Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. is well-known for his nonviolent tactics, guns played a major role in the fight for racial equality during the Civil Rights Movement.² In *We Will Shoot Back*, Akinyele Omowale Umoja asserts that Black Southerners used armed resistance to challenge White supremacy intimidation tactics and successfully preserve Black southern communities.³ In an attempt to reconcile nonviolence and militancy, scholar Simon Wendt presents two distinct ideologies present in the Civil Rights Movement and subsequent Black Power Movement: protection versus revolution.⁴ Wendt argues that the idea of nonviolence was utilized as a tactic for protection, and the addition of weapons grew out of necessity rather than as a sign of rebellion.⁵ On the other hand, Wendt argues that militant groups used armed self-defense tactics in a more symbolic manner which ultimately proved less effective than nonviolence; for instance, Wendt argues that Black Panther Party members used armed resistance as a gendered symbol to affirm Black masculinity.⁶ While most scholars acknowledge the importance of Black self-defense in 20th-century Black liberation movements, a consensus on

the relationship between nonviolence and armed protection proves to be elusive.

In broader literature, photography has long been used as a tool of resistance in documenting and circulating images of political and social struggle. Documentary photography has played an important role in raising awareness and preserving the legacy, both favorable and unfavorable, of significant figures and movements in history. Referred to as the first television war, the Vietnam War was a turning point for many Americans regarding public sentiment on violent conflict largely due to the visual testimonies which illustrated civilian suffering. One enduring image from the Vietnam War era, dubbed “Accidental Napalm,” depicts a naked girl screaming in pain from napalm burns covering her body. While the image itself was horrifying, it transcended an individual experience, instead symbolizing the immoralities of war. Similarly, images of Nazi Germany continue to shape our memories and memorialization of the Holocaust. However, in *Through Amateur Eyes: Film and Photography in Nazi Germany*, author Frances Guerin challenges the iconic imagery of the Holocaust, arguing much of it comes from Nazi perpetrators and sympathizers. Rather, Guerin focuses on the amateur photography of the era taken by soldiers, resistance workers, and civilians, ultimately asserting these images are more impactful as they show impromptu, everyday depictions of life in the face of trauma and loss. These famous examples of documentary photography display the power and influence that images can have on society, acting as a tool that can garner attention and sway public opinion on civil conflict.

While the concept of social media being a modern tool for Black self-defense has not fully been explored, many scholars have discussed the efficacy of social media as a tool for activism. In *Making All Black Lives Matter*, historian Barbara Ransby notes that the Black Lives

Matter movement, the most prominent Black liberation movement of the 21st century, started with a hashtag on a Facebook post regarding the acquittal of George Zimmerman, the perpetrator in the shooting of Trayvon Martin.¹⁰ Providing multiple examples of social media use in the movement, Ransby ultimately argues that the use of social media as a tool for activism is a viable path toward an equitable society.¹¹ In *The Prophetic Lens*, Phil Allen provides the most comprehensive connection between historical ideas of Black self-defense and modern technology.¹² Allen claims that the camera has been a powerful tool in both past and modern black liberation movements, maintaining that the camera even played a major role in the Civil Rights Movement as leaders such as Dr. King wished for everything to be filmed and photographed.¹³

Early Ideas of Black Self-Defense

Given the nonviolent tactics of the Civil Rights Movement, this period reveals many early thoughts and manifestations of Black self-defense. In his book of oral history, *My Soul is Rested*, Howell Raines provides first-hand accounts from a variety of prominent activists in the Civil Rights Movement from 1974 to 1976.¹⁴ One interviewee was Hartman Turnbow, a grassroots civil rights activist who was one of the first African-Americans to attempt to register to vote in Mississippi. In his account, Turnbow recalls an incident in May 1963 in which he was targeted by two white assailants who set his house on fire and shot at him, to which he responded by firing his own weapon.¹⁵ Upon meeting Dr. King, Turnbow challenged his stance on violence, stating, “This nonviolent stuff ain’t no good. It’ll get ya killed...If [the white man] pose with a smile, meet him with a smile, and if he pose with a gun, meet him with a gun.”¹⁶ He further explained that the bravery that he felt

came from his love for his family and his desire to protect them at all costs. Turnbow justifies his actions, despite pushback from Dr. King, as he believes that he has a right to respond to violence with violence.

While civil rights leaders attempted to reconcile nonviolent tactics with armed protection, the Black Panther Party (BPP) embraced dangerous confrontation. Between early 1967 and late 1968, the BPP established patrols of police in an effort to capture police misconduct incidents. In *Black Against Empire*, Joshua Bloom and Waldo E. Martin describe one of these patrols in early 1967 Oakland involving BPP founders Huey Newton and Bobby Seale as well as Lil’ Bobby Hutton, the first party recruit.¹⁷ While they were monitoring a police car, the three men caught the attention of an officer as their firearms were clearly visible. After the officer pulled them over and attempted to take the weapons, Newton refused, exclaiming, “Ain’t you ever heard of the Fourteenth Amendment of the Constitution of the United States? Don’t you know you don’t remove nobody’s property without due process of law?”¹⁸ Educated on firearm laws and constitutional rights, Newton and Seale used this initial tactic to draw attention to police misconduct, thereby attracting additional party members through street discussions. BPP members also took advantage of the press as authorities pushed back on their practices. On May 2, 1967, 30 armed BPP members arrived at the capitol building in Sacramento, challenging police who attempted to take their weapons before reading a statement in front of reporters regarding the Mulford Act, which sought to limit their armed demonstrations.¹⁹ Though unsuccessful in obstructing the passage of the legislation, the BPP demonstrated that weapons were not the only effective tool in combating racism.

In addition to patrolling the police, the BPP consistently advocated

for Black people to arm themselves for protection against likely attacks. In the May 4, 1968 edition of *The Black Panther Party* newspaper, a column titled “Arm Ourselves or Harm Ourselves” describes that “White citizens are arming themselves all over the country and organizing their communities not for self-defense, but for the outright slaughter of innocent Black civilians.”²⁰ Citing multiple specific examples, such as the city of Newark purchasing shotguns and rifles for its police department, this column implies that the BPP is advocating for its followers to arm themselves as they believe White citizens are preparing to harm the Black community.²¹ In contrast to Hartman Turnbow, the BPP advised its readers to be proactive in preparing to defend themselves, while Turnbow and other civil rights activists waited until they were targeted or attacked to fight back. However, while the nonviolent Civil Rights Movement has a seemingly different viewpoint than the militant BPP, this column also bears many similarities to Turnbow’s justification of his act of self-defense. This volume further expands on early ideas of Black self-defense, building off of civil rights ideologies and advising followers to be prepared.

Modern Examples of Black Self-Defense

Contemporary examples of police brutality can reveal the power of phone recordings as a tool for Black self-defense. On April 4, 2015, a 50-year-old Black man, Walter Scott, was fatally shot by a police officer, Michael Slager, after being stopped for a non-functioning brake light.²² Initially, Slager claimed that Scott had taken his taser and that he felt threatened, which led him to shoot Scott.²³ However, a video recorded by bystander Feidin Santana contradicted Slager’s story, as the video depicted an object falling to the ground and Scott

running away before being shot in the back eight times.²⁴ Santana states he was hesitant to come forward with the video and feared retaliation, but upon reading the police report, he knew that Officer Slager’s story was misrepresentative of the situation.²⁵ Santana notes, “...the police officer just shot him in the back. I knew right away, I had something on my hands.”²⁶ This quote illustrates the use of the bystander recording as a tool to get justice for Walter Scott as Slager likely would have gone without punishment had the video not been recorded. Santana’s explanation demonstrates how a phone recording is not just used as evidence, but rather as a tool for protection and justice.

Although phone recordings have often been utilized in instances of police brutality, the phone can also be used in self-defense in everyday occurrences of racial discrimination. Anthony Gibson, a Black man who frequently posts about his fishing experiences on his TikTok, began videotaping instances where he was confronted by his white neighbors for fishing at the private community’s lake.²⁷ In a TikTok video posted on July 11th, a White woman, Tanya Petty, can be seen approaching Gibson who is accompanied by two Black female friends.²⁸ Petty proceeds to question whether Gibson and his friends are residents of the neighborhood, stating the lake is reserved for residents only.²⁹ Despite being a resident in the neighborhood and having a permit to fish, Gibson notes, “Literally every single time I went fishing, someone bothered me. That’s the only reason why I turned the camera on.”³⁰ As the neighbors who confront him often end up calling the police, Gibson adds that “If you call the police on a Black man, there’s already some suspicion,”³¹ suggesting that he viewed these encounters as having the potential to escalate into a dangerous situation. Ultimately, Gibson’s posts provide an example of the way the phone can be used as a tool for self-defense in everyday instances of racism.

While some may argue that recording police or other discriminatory confrontations is purely to have evidence, video recordings represent an act of expression and resistance. Jocelyn Simonson, Professor of Law at Brooklyn Law School, discusses the recent pushback on filming the police, framing it as an act protected by the First Amendment. Simonson describes the history of organized copwatching groups where residents observe and document police activity to watch for potential misconduct.³² She argues that “you cannot hold up a camera in front of a police officer without it being a political act or an act of dissent.”³³ This quote supports the argument that the use of the phone in Black self-defense goes beyond providing evidence for legal cases but is also a way to resist discriminatory experiences. With this reasoning, filming the police would be unquestionably protected by the First Amendment, which is especially relevant as recent court cases have argued that documenting the police is not a constitutional right. This is compounded by the fact that police body camera footage is often difficult for the public to obtain access to. These arguments could suggest serious consequences for modern Black self-defense, as the use of the phone as a tool for protection and resistance may be under attack by legislators. Though these potential restrictions could pose a risk for Black Americans seeking justice, the parallels to past legislative control of the BPP’s armed demonstrations strengthen the argument that the phone is a modern means of confronting systemic racism.

Conclusion

As Black Americans continue to be targets of police brutality and racial discrimination, the phone has evolved into an effective tool for Black self-defense in allowing Black individuals to protect themselves, get justice for

others, and prevent future recurrence. Early movements, such as the Civil Rights Movement and Black Power Movement, differed in their stances on nonviolence and revolution, though most activists saw the value of armed protection. In recent times, scholars have acknowledged the value of digital activism as social media has provided an outlet for advocates to document and disseminate recordings of racially unjust incidents. Though existing literature seldom integrates the potential of modern technology into analysis of historical Black self-defense tactics, this paper hopes to address this deficiency by connecting enduring ideas of Black liberation, famous documentary photography, and contemporary innovation.

Further consideration of the phone as a tool in modern Black self-defense is especially critical in today’s social climate as anti-DEI legislation is on the rise, reversing many programs and initiatives that were in place to protect the Black community and other marginalized groups. Future research could also examine various populations, such as women resisting sexual harassment or immigrants navigating increased ICE threats. As advancements in technology have made the world more connected, recognizing the phone as a tool to combat racial discrimination, and other forms of discrimination, is an essential step in progressing toward a more equitable society.

Notes

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