



The Work after Our Rage

Kenneth Bailey and Lori Lobenstine

Here we are again. A white knee on a black neck for a murderous and callous nine minutes. Nine minutes that echo across lifetimes. Nine minutes that are unbelievable and totally believable and beyond excruciating to watch. Nine minutes that yield waves of protest across the country. Nine minutes that may or may not yield any kind of justice for the murdered.

We wrote about this almost six years ago in a paper called *A Case for Social Emergency Procedures*. Since then our country has been on a downhill spiral that doesn't seem to have a bottom. This particular juncture on the spiral is back to the one that we call a Social Emergency.

We are in rage. We are in pain. We are in the streets. And the work will need to continue after our tears, anger, pain and protest.

Since we wrote the initial paper on the Social Emergency, we have written a book called *Ideas Arrangements Effects*. We believe the framework can be useful as we look at the scale of the work ahead of us:

Ideas are embedded in social arrangements, which in turn produce effects.

Right now, violent ideas about black people are embedded in every arrangement of American society, and the effect is constant black death.

Most Americans—particularly those who are not victims of Afrophobic hatred and violence—relate to the social problem of state and culturally sanctioned violence one episode at a time. These ways of relating to it are all within the range of each effect. In this case the effects are the specific murders of specific black people.

And our response each time is righteous rage. We hit the streets protesting another set of back-to-back black deaths at the hand of the US carceral culture and state. This response is critical. It's what makes the work possible. And it's like a sprint. It increases our blood pressure. It takes adrenaline. It's physically hard. It's dangerous. And it's tremendously urgent.

Another set of responses happen at the range of effects and the set of relational concerns that arise from the specific incident or set of incidents: We look after each other, lift up black life, worry about our children, share information, resources and prayer.

Each episode demands these responses and demands justice, absolutely. But when we dig into each episode as if it were an individual act, when we ask about the qualities and intentions of each victim and/or perpetrator, we go down a rabbit-hole of individuation. This makes a kind of distinct enclosure and separation possible. Separation from the act and separation of the acts from each other. It individuates conceptions of some kind of justice. It

makes us fight each time, in each town and city, for a righting of a particular, individuated wrong. It is like fighting a swarm of locusts one locust at a time.

And as we dig in to fight each racist actor—each “rogue cop” or crazed “Ben” or privileged “Becky”—our focus separates these actors from the state. Our narrowed vision separates them from the social culture out of which they emerge and find the entitlement to act.

These actions *are* the state. These actions *are* American culture.

Our wave of protest and resistance is part of the first phase of confronting the effects of state and culturally sanctioned violence. In our scale and urgency, we point to more than one death. We begin the work of connecting the dots of centuries of injustice. But this protest phase will need to increase its durability to make the kinds of cultural and social transformations needed. It has to grow into a bigger second phase; one that’s focused on the many arrangements of American life that produce black death.

Once we move from this phase we are experiencing now, let’s move to investigating and dismantling the set of state and cultural arrangements that produce black death. This move demands that we shift our focus from individuated black death to focusing on the state and cultural context we are enmeshed with, participate in and seek safety from. To this end, we ask us all to make a conceptual and practical move—especially white people and others who are not victims of violent and lethal Afrophobic hatred. This shift ideally should erase the line between you and the state, between you and the racist cop or crazed, white 911 caller.

If we don’t move from effects to arrangements the cycle will continue. If we want to break the cycle, we have to contend with the arrangements giving life to the cycle. If the work of protest is like a sprint, this work is like a triathlon. It’s grueling, it uses multiple skills and above all, it requires endurance.

Here we lay out a proposition a set of assignments to help us with this shift.

Assignment 1 - Advocate for/ support / listen to /and build up ALL Black, Indigenous, and Immigrant led organizations and efforts in this moment

While we are in the heat of protests, many of you are looking to support your black, indigenous, and brown leaders. They will all be needed for this long haul struggle. You are checking in on them, asking about their emotional wellbeing and the like. This is awesome. Here’s the next step, especially for people with resources and/or philanthropic networks: Ask Black / Indigenous / Immigrant leaders about their organizational capacity.

Our organizations need fully funded budgets. We need the capacity to engage in this fight full force. And that looks like us having the wherewithal to increase our human capacity and to be able to engage for the long haul.

If you have the capacity to support, simply do it. If you know and are looking to black/indigenous/ immigrant leaders to lead at this time, ask yourself what connections do you have to financial resources, donors and philanthropic networks. Put your resources to work for all of the leaders you know. At this moment the work needed is simply too complex and daunting to not have all hands on deck at full capacity. And given the realities of Covid19, organizations that are needed the most to lead in their own way at this moment have likely lost funds, human resources and capacity.

Assignment 2 – We must address the ARRANGEMENTS

If you pay taxes to the state, if you vote, if you are protected by 911 and the police every day, you are part of the arrangements of the state. Come up and really look at the State, the state of your State. Come up and look at your culture, the state of your culture. Sit with and study how culture and state invest in and promote the behaviors found in these individuated effects. These are the social arrangements we speak of: our acceptance of policing our children in public education systems, our all white small towns and cities, the countless ways we prioritize white comfort in public space, the many ways we can hide racist fear behind white-washed regulations and “this is how things work”. These are places ripe for inspection and re-imagining.

Isolate all forms of militarized state police (including ICE)

We need to create ways to keep these kinds of actors away from the people they seek to destroy. As we speak, American culture has accepted concentration camps for immigrants at the border, tanks rolling in to our cities to fight protesters, and armed civilians and police killing Black people in their homes and daily lives. For those of us who don't accept this, we need to step up and physically separate these forces from those they seek to harm.

Let's work with lawyers and international peace keeping experts to find the right way to describe a cease fire and spatial amnesty from all forms of police occupation in our communities.

Let's work with choreographers, geographers, spatial and embodied thinkers and practitioners to imagine and deploy techniques that make this kind of work possible.

Conduct a National People's Investigation - Make the Arrangements Public

Let's map the overlapping arrangements that produce and accept black death. Let's expose national patterns within and between the state and the culture.

For example, one arrangement we could begin by mapping is that of 911, a state arrangement that intersects with cultural ideas. As we map its connections back to ideas of white safety (and the arrangement of police in protecting that safety), we see how 911 is integral to the equation of white safety yielding black death. We see how white fear has been weaponized, but also how communities of color are left without safety when they call for help and the result is violence against them and their loved ones.

As a National People's Investigation, let's explore and expose such overlapping arrangements, using them as the bridge between the tragic effects they produce and the sturdy ideas that are embedded within them. Let's learn from relational practitioners, like acupuncturists, anthropologists, process philosophers, and artists who focus of relation, pattern and form. Let's look to the practitioners, activists and academics constantly working to challenge and change unjust arrangements. Let's be co-led by grassroots organizations, intermediaries, diverse faith institutions, as well as academic ones. Let's deploy multiple kinds of ethnographic techniques and participatory action research. Let's keep our eyes wide open.

This project would not yet be for reconciliation. It is simply a project of truth. We advocate for a deep sitting with, a deep encounter with the truth.

Assignment 3—Let's make the IDEAS public

When you back up one step further to the ideas embedded in these arrangements, it's easy to say the idea in operation is racism or anti-blackness. And yes, all too often, even after lengthy fights to change arrangements—think police cameras, civilian oversight boards, decriminalization of marijuana, etc.—we find racism stealthily finding ways to circumvent these changes. This is, in part, due to the fact that racists hold so much power over the arrangements of this country. But it is also due to the ways in which this broad idea we call racism is too vague. It lets people who don't see themselves as racist off the hook too easily. It individuates the problem again. We need to articulate the specific ideas / beliefs that make up the state and American culture's will to kill.

What form will it take to change a nation's ideas of itself and "the other"? Let's fight for People's Addresses, States of the Union-We-Need, where we can hear from thought-leaders who have spent their lives searching for more specific terms to describe the situation we find ourselves within, thinkers whose conceptual prowess in their fields is brave, counter-intuitive and eye-opening. Let's engage the wisdom of elders who have connected so many dots, and the sharp insight and language of our youth. Let's test new language from our artists, activists and academics. We need new kinds of perspective on the ideas at play within these arrangements, ideas that are sharper, clearer, more precise. And as we expose the tenacity of racialized ideas and the complex ways that we all embody them, we need to listen.

Protest as Birth

We're hoping that this powerful current wave of national protest will give birth to lasting change. To ensure this, we must collectively shift from our tendencies to fall back into the old normal in between murders. We must shift from losing our focus as a particular black murder recedes to increasing our focus on the arrangements that produced it. And we must turn towards the deep work of undoing the ideas that will inevitably produce the next murder.

We hope that people will add to our assignments--our nascent ideas for National Investigations, mapping arrangements, People's Addresses and more. Through our collective commitment to this work, we hope to find new levers for imagining, creating, and enforcing the kinds of change we need. We want nothing less than to change the ideas and arrangements that produce black death.

We see a powerful and diverse mix of interventions. We see collective bodies from the scale of small towns to large states stepping into unprecedented investigations into their carceral cultures and practices. We see the arrangements of national media covering People's Addresses and Declarations in the ways they have covered Presidential ones. We see artists depicting the truths of these investigations in ways that require encounter.

This will not be easy. It will not be quick. Ultimately our goal is the total transformation of America's carceral state and culture. We need a completely new model. This is why we have to increase the actors, gather our strength, and look for a long haul struggle. We are looking to fundamentally change the heart and mind of American culture. This is simply the doorway.