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Global Black Lives Matter, a Visual Essay

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This visual essay is a global journey of the multiple demonstrations of protest and solidarity across the world, reflecting on how Black Lives Matter sparked actions of solidarity and demands for justice against police violence - everywhere connected by widespread inequality and institutional racism. In just one week hundreds of thousands of people mobilised and held protests in all fifty states of the United States and around the world.

Social media, global news, graffiti, murals, and performances have visually accompanied the thousands of people who have marched across cities in every part of the world giving support to the Black Lives Matter movement sparked again in June 2020 by George Floyd's infamous murder.

Local and global struggles have adapted the call for justice to their contexts of injustices whilst denouncing police brutality against Blacks and First People in the US and beyond. From the townships of Johannesburg to the favelas of Rio de Janeiro and the plains of South Dakota, a global movement was visually captured through smartphones, news reporters, viral videos and artwork. Performative parading and artistic actions were symbols of visual resistance alongside celebrity presence and filmmaker’s visual statements.

A collage of images from multiple places in different contexts here aims to reflect on the powerful force of collective action and offer a visual sense of the protest. By selecting news clips, viral social media, photographs and videos, I have created a narrative to convey the power, diversity and global dimension of the Black Lives Matter as it erupted everywhere. The music inspired and framed the editing (here curated by Raffaello Rossini, editor of the visual essay). Testimonies from key speakers, policy makers (Cuomo), intellectuals (Cornel West), celebrities and activists led the analysis and reflections on the moment. I especially valued the effect of viewing these images together again after a year since the protest sparked, as images dissolve in the flows of visual communication. Some key moments that were visually captured were in fact striking, catalytic in fixing the moment, and transformative (see Kaur and Klinkert in this issue).

The visual essay starts with Black Lives Matter protest in the US, then expands to the demonstrations in the world. Archives images of civil rights movements and the voice of Martin Luther King are juxtaposed to today protest, reflecting an ongoing struggle - that as Spike Lee says, ‘this is not new... we have seen this in history again and again
and again... when we don’t get our justice, people are reacting they way they feel they have to, to be heard...’

Images of streets on fire, violence, police confrontation with protesters are overwhelmed by visuals of solidarity, symbolic gestures and creative statements. ‘I can’t breathe’ is reproduced in multiple ways across the world, translated to the local injustices, through passionate activist speech and performative parading of armed ‘Black Power’ - or ‘Black Love’ as one affirms. Through the visuals you get a sense of how communities have embraced this powerful moment of resistance across the world, to express solidarity but also denounce ongoing local injustices. Maori haka dance, indigenous protest in Australia, protesters in Japan all accompany chants of ‘No Justice, No Peace’, as a reportage reminds you that ‘hundreds of indigenous people have died in police custody, but no officer has ever been convicted, and so today the march continues’.

The voice of Dr Martin Luther King reminds us that ‘the greatness of America is the right to protest for our rights’ and a young activist shouts, ‘we must love and protect each other... and nothing to lose but a change’. ‘Power to the people’ is claimed as ‘no matter how much hard you try, you can’t stop us now!’. The sports world also globally embraces the call by symbolically kneeling for justice: all the players take a knee, from American football and NBAs players in the US to cricketers in South Africa. And so are some police forces, in solidarity with the protest, kneeling rather than repressing. As Cuomo says, ‘I agree with them. What happened to Mr. Floyd was a disgrace, it was repugnant to America, it was repugnant to any good policing prospective, strategy, approach.’ Justin Trudeau’s kneeling symbolise the recognition that has arisen in the political realm. However, as an activist powerfully states: ‘Those people in positions of power, they don’t give a damn if they burn down Target [a shopping mall in Minneapolis] ... they should be on the street with us, calling for the justice that our people deserve. Where were they all, when Castile [shot by police in 2016] was put down in his car? Which is what they actually represent, where were they? The young people are responding to that, they are enraged and there is an easy way to stop: arrest the cops, charge the cops, not just some of them, not just here in Minneapolis, charge them all, in every city across America where our people are being murdered, charge them everywhere! Do what you say this country is supposed to be, the land of the free for all. It has not been free for Black people, and we are tired.’

‘Statues have been destroyed across the nation in the aftermath of the protest’, Democracy Now reported from the US. Images of statues toppling - Christopher
Columbus in the US, Edward Colston in Bristol, Robert Milligan in London - are montaged one after the other in a sequence that symbolically reflects this powerful wave of protest for long overdue change and recognition. As Colston statue is rolled into the water, here accompanied by experimental sax playing, activists jump on the empty flint - an action later crystallised by artist Marc Quinn, who replaced the removed statue of Colston with that of activist Jen Reid.

‘Daddy changed the world’ affirms George Floyd’s young daughter in the last scene. Indeed, this momentum has changed attitudes across the world that hopefully creates change. As Patrick Hutchinson says, as he explained the moment he saved an anti-BLM activist from violence: ‘We did what we had to do… we stopped someone from being killed, basically’.