A Pragmatic Account of Demands for Recognition

1. Introduction

Members of communities that are systematically marginalized on the basis of race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, disability, or any other identifier find themselves faced with pervasive societal messages that call their humanity into question. These messages may either be explicit, as in the case of a discriminatory law, or implicit, as in the case of a stereotypical media trope. In response to these messages, they often feel compelled to explicitly affirm their worth as human beings, with the intention of altering societal attitudes and practices. Affirmative statements may also target the self-image of marginalized people. Catch phrases like girl power, girls rule, and the future is female, are frequently used by women’s rights advocates, with the intention of building self-confidence among women and girls. These communicative strategies often amount to what is referred to in some strands of contemporary political theory as demands for recognition, that is, demands to be reconstituted socially in the eyes of the “other.”

The communicative strategies of group empowerment efforts are not universally well-received, and while some of the backlash comes from consciously prejudiced individuals who believe these statements of worth to be false, many critics do not fundamentally disagree with the statements but rather find them to be offensive, ineffective, or contextually inappropriate. In this paper, I integrate pragmatic theories—particularly Neo-Gricean theories of Conversational Logic and Speech Act Theory—and political theories of recognition to explain why and how demands for recognition by marginalized groups may be ignored, misconstrued, or rejected by the dominant groups at which they are addressed. I identify two main factors that impede the successful self-advocacy of marginalized groups. First, differing conceptions of a politics of recognition lead to different judgments of implicated meaning. Second, a lack of recognition means that marginalized people often speak from a position of reduced credibility; their actions, including speech acts, are subject to bias-induced perceptual distortions that compromise their potential as illocutionary agents.

2. The Politics of Recognition

The idea of recognition originated as a philosophical concept typically traced back to Hegel’s (1807) *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Hegel
posits recognition by others as the means through which self-consciousness emerges; to be aware of ourselves is to be aware of others’ awareness of us, and our conception of the self is mediated through the gaze of the other. Thus, identities are always negotiated intersubjectively, through continual confrontation with other beings. Recognition was first adopted as a framework for political theory in Taylor’s (1994) essay, “Multiculturalism and the Politics of Recognition.” Adopting a Hegelian conception of self-knowledge as mediated through others, Taylor argues that being misrecognized—or not to being recognized at all—can constitute oppression, inflicting psychological damage in the form of feelings of alienation and low self-esteem. He characterizes a number of modern political movements, such as feminism, civil rights, multiculturalism, as being rooted in demands for previously denied recognition. He then identifies two conceptions of what a politics recognition should look like: a “politics of universalism,” in which recognition is afforded to on the basis of common humanity, without regard to categorical distinctions; and a “politics of difference,” in which all groups are recognized on the basis of their distinctness.

Under a politics of difference, frequently dubbed “identity politics” in contemporary political discourse, the distribution of rights and entitlements is sensitive to the unique cultural values and historical experiences of various constituencies, and people may base their claims to certain rights on their identity-group affiliations. As Kruks (2001) notes, the rise of identity politics is generally considered a relatively modern development, one that challenges Enlightenment-style universalist humanism traditionally associated with Liberalism:

What makes identity politics a significant departure from earlier, pre-identarian forms of the politics of recognition is its demand for recognition on the basis of the very grounds on which recognition has previously been denied: it is qua women, qua blacks, qua lesbians that groups demand recognition. The demand is not for inclusion within the fold of “universal humankind” on the basis of shared human attributes; nor is it for respect “in spite of” one’s differences. Rather, what is demanded is respect for oneself as different. (Kruks 2001, 85)

Those who adhere to a politics of universalism often oppose a difference-based approach to recognition on the grounds that its licensing of differential treatment is anti-egalitarian and opposed to principles of universal human dignity. Meanwhile proponents of identity politics argue that a difference-blind approach fails to redress existing systematic, self-reinforcing inequalities and forces marginalized groups to define themselves in terms of the dominant culture’s values, which exacerbates feelings of alienation.
3. Political Disagreement in Metalinguistic Disputes

In contemporary political discourse, disagreements over the respective merits of universalist and difference-based models of recognition often manifest themselves as metalinguistic disputes over the use of expressions referring to identity-group affiliation in statements concerning human value and dignity. These disputes may concern the linkage of a quality or activity to specific group (Is it better to say Black Lives Matter or All Lives Matter?), or the mention of an individual's identity-group status when attributing a quality or activity to that person (should we celebrate someone as a female writer or simply a writer?). In the following sections, I examine the role of implicated, or non-literal meaning in disputes concerning both kinds of statements.

3.1. The Pragmatics of Black Lives Matter

During the 2016 Democratic presidential debate, candidates were asked, "Do black lives matter, or do all lives matter?" The question alluded to a highly salient controversy surrounding racial politics in America, specifically the conflict between African American activists who coined the slogan Black Lives Matter in response to racialized police brutality and a substantial, largely white opposition to the BLM movement who use the counter slogan All Lives Matter. Lemon's question presents these two phrases as mutually exclusive, and yet, according to a strictly logical interpretation, they are not. The statement black lives matter does not contradict all lives matter, and all lives matter does entail black lives matter. Despite this, the two phrases have fallen firmly on opposite sides of a political divide.

Consider the counter slogan to Black Lives Matter. It is not simply negation of the original (i.e. "Black Lives Don't Matter")--most members of this opposition do not believe themselves to be racist and wouldn't dream of saying such a thing--but a more generalized statement; All Lives Matter. Other counter slogans includes White Lives Matter and Blue Lives Matter (referring to police officers). People who use these slogans argue that, by specifically identifying black people, the original slogan denigrates other groups. But why is it that two logically compatible sentences have come in conflict politically? Why does a statement about black lives provoke a counter response about all lives when there is nothing internal to the statement that provides a judgement on the value other lives? And why is there so much disagreement over the aptness of this response?

It appears that some political disputes are, at least to some degree, arguments over meaning, meaning being a vague term itself. Utterances have multiple layers of meaning; semantic meaning, which is context-independent, sentence-internal, and fixed; and pragmatic
meaning, which is context dependent and highly variable. The political controversy in question is not semantic in nature; semantic assessments of meaning are primarily concerned with the truth-conditions of a proposition, and opposed parties in this debate do not necessarily overtly disagree over the truth value of the utterances in question. Rather, they disagree over what the real-world usage of these phrases implies based on the context in which they are uttered. This is the realm of pragmatics, which concerns not abstract propositions but contextualized speech acts, specifically the relationship between the structural properties and their intended and perceived meaning.

Grice's (1975) theory of the "cooperative principle" attempts to explain how mutually recognized expectations that govern conversation inform the attribution of meaning to speech acts. The cooperative principle states that speakers assume that their conversational partner will make their "conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange." (Grice, 44) Grice argues that this principle accounts for what are now commonly referred to as "Gricean maxims," a set of guidelines that govern how speakers expect one another to use language. Speakers are expected to avoid saying things they believe to be false (the maxim of quality), to make their statements as informative and only as informative as required for the purpose of the conversation (the maxim of quantity), to provide only information that relevant (the maxim of relation), and to avoid obscure, ambiguous, or poorly ordered phrasing (the maxim of manner). Most "violations" of these maxims are only superficial; if the purely literal interpretation of an utterance appears to violate a maxim, addressees will infer an extra layer of meaning from the utterance that satisfies their expectations. Consider the following utterance:

1  a. I'm still hungry
   b. Are you going to finish that slice of pizza?

Most addressees, when confronted with this question, would assume that the speaker is asking for permission to eat the pizza themselves, and yet the speaker has made no explicit request of the sort. So how does the speaker arrive at such a conclusion? According to Grice, she infers information about the speaker's intended meaning in order to make the utterance adhere the cooperative principle. Based on its strictly literal meaning, 1b is unrelated to the 1a, and thereby constitutes a surface violation of the maxim of relation. But because the addressee assumes the speaker is being relevant, she is compelled to reason about the speaker's intentions to determine how the two sentences are related. This
process of attributing meaning to an utterance based on context is called implicature.

Let us consider how implicature informs interpretations of the identity-specific affirmations of worth that are at the center of various political conflicts. Take the slogan *Black Lives Matter*, whose critics say it implies that other lives do not matter, though such a sentiment is not present in the sentence’s literal meaning. How then have they arrived at this meaning? Consider the maxim of quantity, according to which speakers are expected to provide as much, but no more information than is required for the purpose of the conversation. The consequence of this maxim is that people generally assume their conversational partners will make the most generalized and inclusive statement that they can. We assume that, if a couple says the have two children, they have only two children, because if they had more, they would have said so. Grice (1975) refers to this kind of pragmatic reasoning as *scalar implicature*, which results from the use of lexical items that can be placed in a scale of informativity based on linear entailment relationships. These scales, originated by Horn (1972), include examples such as \langle all, most, some, none\rangle, \langle n, \ldots, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1\rangle, or \langle cold, cool\rangle. Scalar implicatures are generated from the assumption that cooperative speakers will use the strongest item on the scale that they can. Thus, *some* implicates *not all*. Thus, it appears that when BLM opponents employ the counter “All Lives Matter,” they are taking the phrase *black lives matter* to mean *only black lives matter* and thus *other lives don’t matter* on the grounds that, if BLM protesters could make a more informative or inclusive statement, they would, presuming they are adhering to the maxim of quantity.

Between the unequivocal condemnations of the BLM movement, such as Rudy Giuliani’s denouncement of the slogan as “inherently racist,” and the demands that the movements make the implicit *too* more explicit, and the objections that a White Lives Matter movement would be considered racist, members of the *All Lives Matter* crowd’s objections to *Black Lives Matter* channel a theory upheld by a number of Neo-Griceans (Levinson 2000; Cherchia 2004) of scalar implicatures as *generalized* or *conventional* implicatures, arising independently of context by virtue of the Q1 maxim. Others have challenged this view, arguing that the generation of scalar implicatures are context sensitive and are subject to other constraints such as quality or relevance.

Members of the latter camp stress the role of contextual factors in the attribution of either upper-bound meanings (at most *n*) contexts and lower-bound meanings (at least *n*). For example, Welker (1994, 31) observes that (2b) typically generates a scalar implicature, whereas (3b) does not.

2 A: I’m having a dinner party and I need four more chairs
  B: John has two chairs
I'm having a dinner party and I need four more chairs

B: John has four chairs

Welker argues that the parenthetical qualification—"for the current purposes of the exchange"—tacked on to Grice's first Maxim of Quantity should be interpreted as a constraint imposed by a higher-order Maxim of Relevance by which set of alternatives operated on by which that of Quantity is "bounded." Matsumoto (1995) proposes a similar "Conversation constraint" on scalar implicatures that requires use of a semantically weaker term rather than a stronger term not to be attributable to another maxim such as that of quality, or manner. Harnish (1976) suggests interaction between quantity, quality1, and relevance, proposing the multi-dimensional maxim—"Make the strongest relevant claim justifiable by your evidence"— in which relevance holds the most weight (31). Others, most notably Sperber and Wilson (1986) have argued for a sole principle of optimal relevance that involves a tradeoff between cognitive effects and processing costs.

Relevance-mediated models of informativity generally hold in common the idea that judgments on informational sufficiency are sensitive to the goals of a communicative interaction. Fundamental to this view is the idea that communicative interactions are centered around a communal point of inquiry, sometimes called the Discourse Topic (van Kuppevelt 1995) or the Question under Discussion (Roberts 2012). Conversational contributions are thus expected to update or enrich the whatever aspects of hearer's model of the world are relevant to the question at hand. This expectation of informational enrichment (Carston 1998) assumes speakers will take into account what the addressee knows and what they want, need, or ought to know to avoid supplying information that is either uncontroversial or unneeded.

As is evident from the Black Lives Matter/All Lives Matter dispute, expectations of informativity/relevance may differ between conversational partners. Relevant to our understanding of this are dynamic theories of pragmatic context, which maintain that immediate discourse goals serve higher level discourse goals that are themselves determined by interlocutors’ respective models of the world. Thus, conversational contributions are not interpreted with respect to a fixed discourse goal but rather themselves presuppose a particular goal by virtue of the conditions under which they are most relevant (Macagno 2012, 237). Thus, speakers perpetually negotiate discourse goals—and by extension, models of the word—by negotiating standards of relevance, as in the

1 The inclusion of quality in this interaction is motivated by cases in which judgments of speaker knowledge inform the generation of lower-bound versus upper-bound interpretations (see Verstraete [2010]; Bergen and Grodner [2010]; Sauerland [2004]).
following example provided by Sperber and Wilson (1990, 250), in which A is considering the prospect of letting Susan borrow his car.

4  A: Can Susan drive a Buick?
   B: Susan can drive any car

Here, B’s response contains information beyond that which is needed to answer A’s question. To understand how B’s apparently over-informative response might be cooperative, consider that A’s immediate discourse goal of determining whether Susan can drive a Buick serves a higher-level goal of assuring that A’s car would be in good hands with Susan. B recognizes this higher-level goal but finds that determining Susan’s general driving ability will be more helpful in achieving it than the lower-level goal originally introduced by A. Thus, B is not being over-informative but rather proposing a new discourse goal for which B’s utterance is sufficiently informative.

However, as observed in the following example from Wilson (1990, 95), A may reject B’s attempt to update the discourse goal and reassert the originally proposed goal, as in 8.

5  A: Can Susan drive a Buick?
   B: Susan can drive any car
   A: A Buick isn’t just any car.

A’s response to B suggests that A is not concerned with Susan’s general driving abilities but rather her ability to deal with what A considers to be distinct qualities of Buicks—qualities that are apparently unaccounted for in B’s model of the world. Given on A’s model of the world, in which the particularities of a Buick are relevant to a person’s ability to drive one, no immediate discourse goal that is not oriented towards these particularities is useful in achieving the higher-level goal of assuring that A’s Buick is in good hands.

As noted by Klecha (2017), interlocutors’ immediate discourse goals are informed by the distinctions interlocutors perceive as relevant for higher-level goals, and disagreements as to what these distinctions are give rise to the need for the kind of meta-linguistic negation featured in (8). In order to understand how this plays out in political discourse, Taylor’s (1992) conception of contemporary political disputes as characterized by a clash between difference-friendly and difference-blind approaches to recognition becomes crucial. What Taylor presents is a fundamental disagreement over what distinctions are relevant in questions concerning the distribution of rights, as articulated below:
With the politics of equal dignity, what is established is meant to be universally the same, an identical basket of rights and immunities: with the politics of difference, what we are asked to recognize is the unique identity of this individual or group, their distinctness from everyone else. The idea is that it is precisely this distinctness that has been ignored, glossed over, assimilated to a dominant or majority identity. (38)

The Black Lives Matter/All Lives Matter debate illuminates how the respective proponents of difference-friendly and difference-blind approaches operative from different sets of pragmatic presuppositions when engaged in discussions of justice and equality. For example, Democratic presidential candidate Martin O’Malley was booed at the Netroots Nation conference after responding to a question about his commitment to combatting systematic racism—amid chants of “Black lives matter”—by saying “Black lives matter. White lives matter. All lives matter.” Assuming a higher-level discourse goal of establishing O’Malley’s commitment to anti-racism, the candidate’s response suggests he thought this might best be achieved by asserting his undiscriminating respect for all people. Meanwhile, the protesters were concerned with his sensitivity to particularities of the Black American experience generated by current and historical structural inequalities.

In response to O’Malley’s subsequent apology, FOX News host Sean Hannity asked, “What is so controversial about saying ‘all lives matter?’ And what does it say when somebody won’t say that?” Meanwhile, comedian Michael Che has posed a similar question about the response to black lives matter. “We can’t even agree on ‘black lives matter.’ That’s a controversial statement. Black lives...[shrugs]...matter. Not matters more than yours just...[shrugs]...matters. [...] That’s where we’re starting the negotiation. What the fuck is less than ‘matters?’ Black lives exist, can we say that?” (Che 2016)

Both of these remarks reflect a tendency to attribute the point of controversy to the truth of the contested statement, though a pragmatic analysis suggests that is precisely because black lives matter is so seemingly uncontroversial—in a society in which explicit racism is generally frowned upon and in which there is a prevailing presumption of a post-racial or “colorblind” community—that the phrase is so loaded. Under a presupposition of racial equality, saying black lives matter has no apparent contextual effect, as it is taken to be part of the common ground. For the utterance to be coherent, the hearer must then reevaluate whether black lives matter can be said to be common ground in America. The slogan thus performs a meta-discursive function (Macagno 2012) of shifting the central question of justice-oriented political discourse from what values or rights we should attribute to all lives to who is included under the scope of all lives in the first place. Likewise, all lives matter is
not controversial because of what it says, but what it does when invoked to reject the commitments proffered by black lives matter.

3.2. Group Membership and Relevance

In addition to issues of informativity, the invocation of membership categorization devices (hereafter referred to as devices) gives rise to issues of relevance. Sacks (1972) describes terms denoting social identity as belonging to relational sets, or membership category devices such as [black, white, asian, ...] or [catholic, jew, protestant, ...] that reflect the organization of social knowledge. He differentiates between exclusive devices, which only account for a portion of a population (ex. Occupation is generally not applicable to children) and Pn-adequate (Population-adequate) devices, such as Race, Age, or Gender, which are suitable to categorize any member of a population. Because everyone is categorizable with respect to multiple Pn-adequate devices, and because these devices are always potentially applicable, Sacks, as well as Schegloff (2006) note that the invocation of these category terms in conversational interaction presents a problem of relevance. A person’s membership to a category is not always grounds for referring to them as such. A speaker’s categorization of someone or something with respect to one device as opposed to any other must be motivated by a conversational goal.

One kind of pragmatic dispute that arises in political discourse concerns instances of cross-categorization (Arcuri 1982; Dechamps and Doise 1978) in which a speaker categorizes themselves or another person with respect to both a Pn-adequate device and an exclusive device. To explore the nature of such disputes, I present two examples in which the contested utterance categorizes a target along the dimensions of both gender and occupation.

The first example comes from a 2014 twitter exchange involving actress Hayley Atwell, who rose to prominence playing the title character of Agent Carter, a television show that is widely regarded as having an explicitly feminist message. After Atwell shared a picture of a young camerawoman working on the set of the show with the caption "Our badass female Camera Operator," another twitter user responded "Our badass Camera Operator, has a better ring to it," implying that Atwell’s choice to specifically highlight the woman’s gender was misguided or unnecessary. Atwell replied, “when women have equal pay in the workplace I won't have to make a point of it,” implying that drawing attention to the gender of accomplished women is necessary to resist sexist attitudes.

Other women do not share Atwell’s views on the matter. Consider singer-songwriter Neko Case’s response when Playboy Magazine tweeted a link to their review of her album with the caption, “Artist @NekoCase is breaking the mold of what women in the music industry
should be.” Case retweeted the tweet with the comment, “Am I? IM NOT A FUCKING “WOMAN IN MUSIC”, IM A MUSICIAN IN MUSIC.” In subsequent tweets, she stressed that “women [are] NOT a niche market” and bemoaned the fact that other women “do the ‘women in’ thing” in the name of feminism.

In neither example is the descriptive accuracy of the speaker’s categorization likely to be the basis for its rejection. Case’s uses of square quotes around “woman in music” suggests that her reaction does not concern whether both the properties of women and in music apply to her, but rather the speakers perception of how these properties interact with one another. Given that gender is one of many universally available categorization devices at the speakers disposal, the speaker is assumed to have some principled justification for invoking it with Case’s occupational categorization. Thus, the speaker is implicitly communicating an ideological stance about the place of women in the music industry, one which Case finds objectionable. Likewise @DavidPrush91’s claim that a *female camera operator* “has a better ring to it” presents the problem not as a matter of truth but appropriateness, suggesting that the inclusion of female is jarring in its unwarrantedness.

Atwell’s justification for using gendered qualifiers (women are not recognized or rewarded to the same degree as men) and Case’s objection to doing so (women are not a niche market) both rest on the assumption that a woman occupying the position in question is relevant because it deviates from an assumption or expectation that the audience is expected to have by virtue of community membership. What remains pragmatically ambiguous is the speaker’s attitude about this assumption, and by extension, how the speaker intends to affect the hearer’s attitude about the assumption.

On one hand, the discrepancy between the new information and the hearer’s expectations may be presented as evidence against those expectations. In this case, the speaker believes the expectations to be unwarranted and intends for the hearer to update their beliefs accordingly. One might draw attention to a female camera operator’s gender in the hopes that an audience will update their beliefs about women and camera operators, or more specifically, about likelihood that these two categories will overlap.

Another possibility is to present the new information as a noteworthy exception to an expectation that is intended to remain unchallenged. In this case, the communicative intentions of mentioning the gender of a female camera operator are similar to those of mentioning the height of an exceptionally tall person; the hearer is meant to recognize that the properties of the individual diverge from the typical properties of a group to which the individual belongs, but the intended affect is on the hearer’s representation of the individual, rather than of the group. When interpreted under this model, mentioning a female professional’s gender is often taken to indicate the speaker’s surprise at
seeing a woman in such a role, suggesting that the speaker has a narrow or stereotypical view of what a woman should be, as in the following exchange between comedian Mike Birbiglia and an audience member.

6. a) MB: Can I ask what did you get arrested for?
   b) AM: I got arrested by a woman cop and put in a headlock.
   c) MB: I don’t like the way you said woman cop....You know, women can be cops. It’s sort of part of the whole thing....You’re saying it like it’s an anomaly and it’s, like, a whole thing.
   d) AM: I only said it like that because I’ve been getting my balls busted over it for the last ten years.
   e) MB: Oh, okay. Well that doesn’t make sense also.

Here, Birbiglia draws the relevance implicature that, if the audience member found it necessary to mention that the police officer was a woman, there must be a conflict between his expectations about women and his expectations about cops, which the comedian attributes to archaic views about women. The audience member’s clarification of intent confirms Birbiglia’s analysis that his assessment of relevance was rooted in normative beliefs about gender roles, but reveals that these beliefs are more oriented towards male-female relations than gender-occupation combinations. His intent in mentioning officer’s gender was a) to contrast her female identity with his own male identity and b) to contrast the male and female parties’ respective roles in the interaction with a normative model of male-female interaction upheld with in his peer group. That his subordinate role in the interaction remains a source of embarrassment suggests that he himself subscribes to this model and mentioned the officer’s gender for a reason other than to challenge this model.

It is widely acknowledged in the field of pragmatics that correctly selecting from a range of possible implicatures requires reasoning about the speaker’s intent, which involves constructing a model of the speaker’s representation of the world (Garagnani 2000). It is clear from the examples above that different representations may generate not only divergent but opposite implicatures. In each case, the speaker explicates a target’s social-group affiliation to implicate contrast between the information conveyed in the explicature (ex. a woman cop) and a representation of that social group (women can't be/shouldn't be/usually aren't cops). The source of ambiguity is that, in generating an implicature,
the hearer may either refer to a first-order representation—the speaker’s beliefs—or a second-order representation—the speaker’s beliefs about others’ beliefs.

Of course, hearers can usually rely on a variety of contextual clues to assess a speaker’s personal beliefs about a social category they invoke. For example, Atwell’s status as a relatively high-profile, self-proclaimed feminist, her association with an explicitly feminist television show, and her use of the term badass to describe the camera operator provide solid evidence that she intends to challenge restrictive norms about women’s capabilities—and her response to @DavidPrush91 confirms this. Similarly, Playboy Magazine’s shaky relationship to feminism, and the headline’s use of the word should may prompt the interpretation that the author holds stereotypical beliefs about women in music. That said, both statements are presented on a medium—the Internet—that allows messages to be easily decontextualized and that lends itself communication to communication between strangers with little socio-cultural common ground and little background knowledge of one another.

Much of the debate surrounding the respective merits of difference-based and universalist approaches to recognition confronts this uncertain line between empowering and demeaning invocations of social group membership. Taylor’s (1994) argument for a politics of difference is that members of the dominant group constitute a “default” standard of humanity, with respect to which all other groups are somehow “marked” or “other.” The consequence of this in conversational interaction is that, if no details indicating a person’s social-group membership, hearers will assume that the person is white, male, heterosexual, cisgender, able-bodied, et cetera. The internalization of this idea is source of alienation for those who do not fit the default. Marginalized groups then need to make their identities explicit in order to counteract these assumptions.

Others see such the invocation of marginalized-group membership as exacerbating a symptom of the default-other relationship and replicating the speech strategies used by dominant groups to reinforce their default status. Fanon (1952) worries that linking a racial category to a particular activity or property in any capacity puts the target of categorization in a precarious position. He observes that a dominant racial group may appear to invoke a person’s racial group membership in a way that construes the group positively, but that this association can turn against the non-dominant group at the slightest misstep.

It was always the Negro teacher, the Negro doctor; brittle as I was becoming, I shivered at the slightest pretext. I knew, for instance, that if the physician made a mistake it would be the end of him and of all those who came after him. What could one expect, after all, from a Negro physician? As long
as everything went well, he was praised to the skies, but look out, no nonsense, under any conditions! The black physician can never be sure how close he is to disgrace. (Fanon 1952, 117)

By this analysis, even positive associations between social categories are rooted in a form of essentialism in which a person’s behavior is explained by their group membership, a treatment from which dominant groups seem to be exempt. This issue will be revisited in section 5, in which I discuss how the attribution of pathological or instinctive inclinations to marginalized groups constrains their potential as communicative agents.

4. Negative Validity Judgments in Political Discourse

While I have paid specific attention to the underlyingly pragmatic nature of disputes regarding speakers’ invocation of group-membership categories, it would be reductive to characterize the conflict as a merely a matter of linguistic misunderstanding. One defining characteristic of implicatures is that they are cancellable; in the case of misinterpretation the speaker may clarify the intended meaning and cancel the hearer’s incorrect implicature. In everyday conversation cancelling an implicature usually suffices to restore successful communication, often in a matter of seconds. This is often not the case in political discourse. For example, opponents of the BLM movement often continue to reject the validity of the utterance even after its proponents have cancelled the implicature that other lives than black ones don’t matter. In the next section, I examine the discourse surrounding the slogan Black Lives Matter to illuminate the role of various layers of context in producing different kinds negative validity judgments on the slogan Black Lives Matter.

Habernas (1984) proposes a framework in which the validity of a communicative contribution may be judged with respect to three domains: the objective world (a representation of linguistic context), the social world (social and sociocultural context), and the subjective world (cognitive context). Each domain requires a corresponding metric by which a contribution may be evaluated. Thus, the objective, social, and subjective worlds serves as anchors for judgments on a claim’s truth, appropriateness, and sincerity, respectively. In this section, I examine how BLM opponents use each of these metrics as a basis to challenge the validity of the slogan.

4.1. Appropriateness

An utterance may be deemed inappropriate if it fails to adhere to the communicative norms of a cultural community or of a particular institution or setting therein. These norms concern an utterance’s
adherence to the cooperative principle, to expectations of politeness, or standards of turn-taking and sequentially (Fetzer 2000).

Negotiations of the appropriateness of Black Lives Matter often start with challenges to the speaker’s adherence to the cooperative principle, particularly to the maxims of quantity or relevance. I refer here to accusations that persist even after a speaker has canceled the implicature by explaining the true intention of the slogan and establishing the issue of bias in policing as part of the relevant context. For example, Senator Bill Cassidy (R-La.) after having spoken with advocates of criminal justice reform, expressed sympathy for the goals of the BLM movement but suggested that the slogan be updated to make its intended implicature more explicit, saying, “I’ve heard someone say it should be ‘Black Lives Matter, Too,’ as opposed to, ‘We matter, no one else does.’ There is an understanding that it’s about all people” (qtd. in Weigel 2016). Senator Rand Paul (R-Ky.), also suggested that problem lies in the name: “I think they should change their name maybe—if they were ‘All Lives Matter’ or ‘Innocent Lives Matter’” (qtd. in Weigel 2016). Former New York mayor Rudolph Giuliani called the slogan “inherently racist” (qtd. in Twohey 2016), implying that there is no way for a cooperative conversation partner to say black lives matter while believing that all lives do.

Another strand of criticism against Black Lives Matter concerns its accordance with the face needs/wants of the addressee. The concept of face was first introduced by Goffman (1967) to refer to the positive public image that people try to maintain during social interactions. Brown and Levinson’s (1987) Politeness Theory integrated the concept with Gricean conversational logic, noting that many speech acts (e.g., orders, complaints, reminders) have potentially face-threatening effects, which speakers try to alleviate by performing these speech acts indirectly, thereby demonstrating concern for the face needs/wants of the involved parties. Politeness theory distinguishes between positive face—the desire to have one’s personality, achievements, and desires validated by one’s social group—and negative face—the desire to be able to speak and act free from imposition or coercion. A number of theorists have suggested that face concerns extend beyond one’s personal qualities to one’s group affiliations (familial, professional, ethnic, national, etc.). Not only is in-group membership itself a crucial component of positive face, group members see their individual face and the collective face of the group as deeply connected and strive to maintain both.

Such group-oriented face needs are invoked in criticisms of Blacks Lives Matter that describe the movement as divisive or appeal to a desire for colorblind harmony. Examples of this include Donald Trump calling the slogan “a very divisive term,” and Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker condemning “chants and rallies that fixate on racial division,” adding that, “the best path forward is through unity” (qtd. in Weigel 2016). In a CNN debate, a former superintendent of the Chicago Police Department told
BLM organizers, “I think all lives matter... For 35 years I’ve been trying to reduce crime and stop murder and it didn’t matter if they were black, white, green, or purple. So I’m a believer that we gotta get by the differences” (“Black White and Blue” 2016). This strand of criticism reflects a sentiment that, by voicing a grievance using race-specific terminology, Black Lives Matter threatens collective face needs rooted in the imagination of America as a unified, post-racial melting pot.

Mendleberg (2008) postulates a Norm of Racial Equality, under which explicit racism is highly frowned upon, that governs current political discourse. Most white Americans observe this norm and resent being perceived as individually either racist or as a member of a racist society or social group (Swanson, 2017). Utterances that draw attention to racial division or inequality thus pose a strong face threat to white Americans, both individually and as a group, and may be judged as inappropriate or impolite.

4.2. Truth

Judgments of validity rooted in the objective world evaluate the truth of and utterance or its presuppositions. While most negative validity claims against Black Lives Matter are not immediately anchored in the objective world--there is little explicit debate over the truth value of the slogan--one only need look one level deeper to see the importance of this domain in producing such judgments. Objections to the use of Black Lives Matter are often surface manifestations of a more fundamental disagreement over truth; not the truth of the utterance itself but rather what the speaker must believe to be true if the utterance is cooperative.

Olasov (2016) notes the semantic ambiguity of the word matter, which can be invoked to make either a descriptive claim (ex. Your grades won’t matter after college) or a normative claim--(ex. What matters is that you’re happy [i.e. ‘what should matter is that you’re happy’]). This kind of ambiguity is found elsewhere in political discourse; ‘X has a right to Y’ can refer to either or moral or legal right. In either case, people make normative claims because they believe the corresponding descriptive claim is false” and seek to “effect change in the descriptive reality.” In fact, it is by virtue of such a discrepancy that an utterance made in the normative sense may be considered relevant. The factual aspect of the Black Lives Matter debate, Olasov argues, does not concern the normative claim, which is relatively uncontentious, but rather its descriptive counterpart. Polling suggests that opponents of Black Lives Matter do not perceive a discrepancy between normative and descriptive claims about the value of Black life in America. Pew Research Center estimates of the proportions of Democrats and Republicans who believe Black and White Americans are treated equally corresponds roughly with the Center’s estimates of support for the BLM movement among the two parties (Horowitz and Livingston 2016).
4.3. Sincerity

While some have suggested the BLM movement change its slogan to make its intended message more explicit, others reject explanations of its intended message as insincere, projecting insidious intentions to the speaker that constrain how the utterance may be interpreted. One of the most common examples of this is the invocation of “black-on-black crime” to discredit the BLM movement by suggesting that its concern for black life is insincere, masking an “anti-law enforcement” or “anti-white” agenda. FOX News has been especially dedicated to portraying the movement as violent and extremist through selective coverage of BLM protests, often referred to on that platform as “riots” or mobs.” Bill O’Reilly designated BLM as a “hate group,” claiming that its members “want [police officers] dead” (qtd. in Love 2016). This narrative allows the slogan Black Lives Matter to be dismissed as a disingenuous representation of the movements true goals.

Judgments on the sincerity of those opposing bias are not themselves immune to bias; The BLM movement is construed as violent or criminal by the same racialized schema it seeks to disrupt—that which interprets blackness as threatening. Judith Butler, reflecting on the failure of video evidence to move jurors in the Rodney King case, writes that “the visual field is not neutral to the question of race; it is itself a racial formation, an episteme, hegemonic and forceful” (Butler 1993). She argues that both the officers who beat King and the jurors presented with the footage interpreted King’s actions through a filter that construed him as “an agent of violence” (143). In the next section, I will consider the implications of such perceptual distortions extending beyond the visual and imposing themselves on speech acts as well. I examine the ability of these distortions to strip illocutionary agents of their communicative potential and discuss the implications of this for the self-advocacy efforts of marginalized communities.

5. Who Gets to Do Things with Words?: Asymmetries in Illocutionary Potential

The concept of a speech act was first introduced in J.L. Austin’s How to Do Things With Words (1962), whose central argument is that utterances should not be conceived of as mere propositions to be evaluated as true or false, but rather as actions that produce an effect—saying something is doing something, and what a speaker means by saying something is determined by what they do by saying it. Austin proposes that a single utterance constitutes several different acts. The locutionary act is simply the act of performing an utterance—what is said, to use Gricean terms. The illocutionary act is determined by “illocutionary force” of an utterance, how the speaker intends it to be taken given the
context—what is meant. The perlocutionary act is the effect produced in
the hearer. An utterance may have a single perlocutionary act, such as
convincing, or it may have a perlocutionary sequence such as convincing
and then provoking action. If A tells B “It’s almost five o’clock” to remind
B to take a cake out of the oven, A’s utterance has the locutionary force of
stating that it’s almost five o’clock, the illocutionary force of suggesting
that B take the cake out of the oven soon, and the perlocutionary force of
a) convincing B they should take the cake out of the oven and b) causing
B to do so. A’s use of a declaration to make a request constitutes what
Searle (1969; 1979) calls an indirect speech act, in which a speaker
performs one speech act through another. In this section, I analyze
demands for recognition in their capacity as (often indirect) speech acts,
and consider potential barriers to the illocutionary uptake of these
demands.

5.1. Demands for Recognition as Speech Acts

Speech act theory allows us to understand the utterance Black Lives Matter not just as a truth-evaluable proposition but as an act intended to produce an effect in the world. Recall Olaslov’s (2016) observation that activists employ Black Lives Matter in the normative sense to “effect change in the descriptive reality.” Analyzing normative claims in terms of Searle’s (1979) taxonomy of speech acts, we may say
that, while they are typically expressive or representative in form, they
often constitute indirect speech acts with the additional illocutionary force
of a directive, as they are intended to elicit future action from the hearer
that will change the descriptive reality to match the normative
hypothetical reality. Slogans of political movements by nature almost
always carry some degree of directive illocutionary force, and the same
can be said of Blacks Lives Matter. In making this utterance, BLM
activists intend to do several things: express an opinion of how black lives
should be treated, alert the addressee of a discrepancy between how
black lives should be treated and how they are treated, and to convince
the addressee to subsequently change their behavior in a way that will
eliminate this discrepancy.

A similar analysis may be applied to other slogans employed by
the BLM movement, such as I Can’t Breathe (alternately We Can’t
Breathe). When employed as a political slogan, the utterance does not
constitute truth-evaluable description of the speaker’s immediate physical
state. Rather, it is a complex speech act whose success requires correct
interpretation—which itself requires several layers of pragmatic reasoning
—and subsequent action. The addressee is to recognize it as an
invocation of the last words of Eric Garner—a black man whose death
after being held in a chokehold by a police officer captured national
attention—and to recognize the significance of Garner’s death in the broader context of systemic, racialized police brutality. The addressee must also understand the utterance as having a metaphorical sense, referring to the feeling of suffocation felt under systematic racism. Lastly, the utterance is to be interpreted as a call to action, a plea for white America to release the black community from its metaphorical chokehold. In either case, these slogans constitute demands for recognition of basic humanity.

Crucially, successful speech acts require uptake; the addressee must correctly recognize the illocutionary force of an utterance—the intention of the speaker to produce a certain effect or action in the hearer—and must subsequently undergo that effect or perform that action. Austin argues that an utterance truly having its intended illocutionary force is contingent on the addressee’s recognition. For example, if A says “I’m cold” to request that B offer A their jacket, but B fails to recognize the utterance as request, A has not successfully made a request.

Austin contends that, rather than being true or false, a speech act may succeed or fail. A speech act cannot be successful if certain conditions are not in place, in which case it is said to be “unhappy” or “infelicitous.” The speaker must have the necessary authority and the circumstances must be appropriate. The act must be completed in full, correctly and without interruption. The speaker must make the utterance sincerely, with a genuine intention to produce a certain effect in the hearer. Austin (1962) and Searle (1979) both address in their analyses the role of social and institutional factors in determining the felicity or intensity of an illocutionary act, noting that speech acts such as sentencing, declaring war, or calling a fair ball require the speaker and the hearer to inhabit specific roles within a specific institution. Searle notes that status-based felicity conditions may be either dependent or independent of institutional ones; participants may be granted certain relative statuses by an institution or simply by an asymmetry in their capacity for raw force. For the latter case, Searle offers the example of an armed mugger who has the ability to make an order, as opposed to a request or a plea, simply because they have a gun and the mug-ee does not. Any attempt by the mug-ee at performing a speech act with comparable force (“No, you give me your money!”) will almost certainly result in a misfire.

5.2 Social Power and Illocutionary force

Several theorists have noted that power dynamics affecting illocutionary potential include may arise from the interlocutors’ respective locations within a societal social hierarchy. Particular attention has been afforded to the constraints that gendered power dynamics may impose on women’s speech acts. Hornsby (1993) identifies a type of silencing that does not result so much from an inability to speak as from an inability to make oneself heard. In certain circumstances, a woman may not be
able to say what she means, not because she lacks the words, or because she is unable to utter them, but because she cannot utter them as a successful speech act, because the desired illocutionary force is not available to her. A woman occupying a leadership role in an organization may be granted the institutional status to give orders to her male subordinates, and yet her social subordination within a gendered hierarchy may prevent her attempted orders from being accepted as such (Tumulty 2012). Hornsby and Langton (1998) argue that culturally sanctioned distortions of women's speech acts have ramifications for one's bodily autonomy; a woman will be unable to successfully perform a speech act refusing sexual advances if the addressee adheres to the notion that a woman's "no" means "yes."

A similar illocutionary disadvantage may account for observed gender- and race-based disparities in the successful expression of physical pain. Several studies suggest that medical professionals take longer to address the reported pain of black and/or female patients than to the same reports by whites and/or males, and that they then assess the pain as less severe and prescribe less intense treatment (Hoffman and Tarzian 2001). Among the suggested explanations for this phenomenon are conscious or unconscious perceptions of women as oversensitive, overdramatic, or irrational (Hoffman et al 2015) and of black people as more habituated to hardship as well as consciously held beliefs about biological differences between races. A more general explanation might be that the dehumanizing effect of construal of members of these social groups as objects for labor or sex affects has a dehumanizing affect that impairs others' capacity for empathy towards these groups. In either case, the marginalized speaker finds their ability to successful refuse compromised.

5.2.1 Recognition and Communicative Meaning

A relationship of mutual recognition is central to Grice's proposed requirements for communicative, or non-natural meaning (ex. John meant that he didn't like the film), which he distinguishes from natural meaning (ex. Smoke means fire). Crucially, communicative meaning (meaningNN), requires what Grice calls reflexive intentions; which he formulates as follows: "A meantNN something by x' is roughly equivalent to 'A uttered x with the intention of inducing a belief by means of the recognition of this intention" (95).

Among those that attempt to merge theories of recognition and with theories of communication, some conceive of reciprocal recognition as prerequisite to language use. Habermas situates negotiation-of-validity sequences within a theory of communication that requires interlocutors to mutually recognize one another as rational agents capable of postulating and evaluating validity claims. Under this model, the communicative standard expected of conversational partners is as follows: "Act with an
orientation to mutual understanding and allow everyone the communicative freedom to take positions on validity claims” (Habermas 1993, 66). According to Tomasello’s (1999) theory of language development, linguistic communication requires an understanding of oneself as engaged in a joint attentional activity with another intentional agent. In a joint attentional scene, two agents attend to a shared point of focus, as well as to each other’s attention (97).

Other theorists of language and recognition posit an inversion of this model in which speech acts, particularly those of naming or addressing, are a means through which relationships of mutual recognition are established. Butler argues that linguistic address has the power to constitute the addressee as subject positioned in relation to others. “It is by being interpellated within the terms of language that a certain social existence becomes possible” (Butler 1997, 5). Butler’s account grants certain speech acts capacity to construct and reproduce social hierarchies by construing the bodies of the interlocutors within relations of dominance and subordination or normality and deviance. For example, one may be constituted not only as a subject but as a racialized subject, a gendered subject, etc. (45)

The subordinating, alienating power of the speech act was famously observed by Franz Fanon in Black Skin White Masks (1952), in what he describes as a visceral encounter with white child’s utterance: “Look, a Negro!” This “corporeal malediction” as he calls it, instantaneously affects the bodily schema, which “crumbled, its place taken by a racial-epidermal schema...” Following Butler’s model, the utterance constitutes a perlocutionary act on Fanon’s body—he hears it and subsequently undergoes an internal psychological transformation—as well as an illocutionary act on his body and the world—the very act of saying “Look, A Negro!” not only reconstitutes Fanon within a subordinate social category but reinvokes and reauthorizes the category itself. (Butler 1997, 18). Thus “it is not a new man who has come in, but a new kind of man, a new genus” (Fanon 1952, 24): not a man but a black man.

Fanon’s account of interpellation diverges from Butler’s model in one crucial way. Whereas Butler describes the act of naming, even when done with the intention to subordinate, as constituting a subject—that is, a self-conscious agent capable of bestowing and receiving recognition. By his own analysis, Fanon not constituted as a subject by the utterance “Look, a Negro!” but rather “sealed into crushing objecthood” (Fanon 1952, 20). This is consistent with his critique of the Hegelian struggle for recognition, in which two agents, upon becoming aware of both their subjecthood and their objecthood with respect to the other, compete to assert themselves as the subject and the other as the object. Fanon emphasizes that such a struggle must begin from a place of reciprocal recognition, but that such reciprocity is lacking in the colonial context, where “one day the White master, without conflict recognized the Negro slave.” The recognition is one sided because the black man is
recognized only as an object, and not as another subject capable of reciprocating recognition.

The opening chapter of *Black Skins* addresses the issue of language and recognition in the context of the French-colonized Antilles. Fanon observes that for black Antilleans, proximity to whiteness, and thus to humanity is proportional to their mastery of “the Frenchman’s French,” as opposed to a non-standard variety or a Creole language. Black Antilleans who arrive in France speaking accented French or using Creolisms are automatically perceived as less intelligent and less human by white Frenchmen. Any grammatical errors they make are attributed not to the difficulties of speaking a second language but rather to an intellectual deficiency. The former treatment, Fanon explains is reserved for white European foreigners:

I meet a Russian or a German who speaks French badly. With gestures I try to give him the information that he requests, but at the same time I can hardly forget that he has a language of his own, a country, and that perhaps he is a lawyer or an engineer there. In any case, he is foreign to my group, and his standards must be different. When it comes to the case of the Negro, nothing of the kind. He has no culture, no civilization, no ‘long historical past.” (Fanon 1952, 34)

The communicative style of the white foreigner (or white speaker of a French minority language or dialect, such as Breton) is not essentialized or pathologized. Any analysis of their speech takes for granted their status as a rational, intentional agent. Meanwhile, the white French person who reverts to an oversimplified pidgin when addressing a black Antillean believes themselves to be adjusting to the reduced mental faculties of their addressee, as one might do when speaking to an elderly person with dementia (Fanon 1952, 32-33) or to a young child (31).

Crucially, Fanon notes, a black person may pose a question in unaccented, standard French, using a formal register, and still receive a response in pidgin. Like the use of epithets, this kind of code-switching relegates the addressee to the social role that they are expected to perform. Here a new predicament for black Antilleans emerges: mastery of standard French is a prerequisite for recognition, but one that is often off limits to them. Even a black speaker who has grown up speaking the dialect may be denied it as a mode of communication by the white addressee who will only acknowledge them insofar as they fulfill a caricature of blackness. Fanon notes that these expectations of black speech are perpetually shaped and fortified by the French media, lamenting the ubiquity of the friendly but simpleminded black man character who regurgitates stereotypical pidgin catch-phrases in French children’s books, film dubbings, and advertisements. (34)
This expectation for black speech to conform with a caricature is more recently observable in an early-2010’s internet trend of using autotune “songifying” local news interviews, usually with working-class speakers of African American Vernacular English (AAVE). First, there was the immensely popular “Bed Intruder Song,” an autotune mashup of soundbites from an interview with Antoine Dodson, a young black man recounting his sister’s attempted rape to a local news reporter. Subsequent interviewees to receive the autotune treatment include Sweet Brown, interviewed after escaping an apartment fire, and Charles Ramsey, who made national news after helping rescue three women held captive by his neighbor. The interviewees’ memeification brought them overnight viral fame, which all were able to capitalize on to some extent, but many writers have remarked that the testimonies seem to derive their entertainment value from the speakers’ animated delivery in a speech style coded as black and working class.

Others have argued that the perceived entertainment value the interviewees’ speech overshadows the original communicative intent of the speakers. Williams (2013) remarks, “It is unfortunate that people laugh because of what they perceive as ignorance that may become their amusement, while overlooking the detail and precision used to make sure the audience they are speaking to understand them.” The communicative meaning of the utterances is dwarfed by the symbolic meaning they have accrued. The practice of songifying them through editing and auto-tuning strips the speakers of their status as intentional illocutionary agents and renders them, and their speech, as objects to be freely manipulated and consumed for entertainment.

Johnstone (2009) has argued that, to be commodified, a speech style must first undergo a process of “enregistration,” in which it becomes interpretable within an ideological framework. This involves the development of indexical features—associations between linguistic form and social identity. Once a linguistic variant has acquired “first-order” indexical features linking it to a demographic group, it may then acquire “second-order” features that index characteristics stereotypically associated with the group such as class, education level, correctness, and intelligence (43).

While indexical features can be adopted with communicative intent—such as when code-switching to establish either solidarity or distance—it is hard to imagine that speakers have any intent of producing negative indexical associations such as ignorance, unintelligence, or incorrectness. Linguistic variants such as AAVE and Southern American English and registers such as vocal-fry all have all been demonstrated to produce negative judgments on speaker intelligence, but speakers of these varieties certainly do not intend to convey that they are unintelligent to the addressee, nor would an addressee be likely to perceive such an intention. In this case, it can be said that the hearer’s implicit bias attributes what Grice calls natural or non-communicative meaning from
the speaker’s speech. The nature of this ascribed natural meaning has an essentializing or pathologizing function that attributes some non-rational or non-human force to the speaker’s behavior. Since a hearer’s recognition of communicative meaning is bound up in their recognition of a rational, intentional agent, this in turn affects the hearer’s ability to attribute communicative meaning to the speaker’s speech.

The ability for a dominant class to embody and reinforce a standard of legitimate speech firmly linked to social status and physical characteristics form the basis for critiques offered by social theorists such as Bourdieu (1991) and Habermas (1984) that speech act theorists such as Searle and Austin do not go far enough in stating the overlap between social conditions and felicity conditions (Bourdieu 1991, 10–11). Among the most fundamental conditions for communication is a presumption of communicative competence, but the standard against which such competence is measured provided by discursive style of the dominant class. As Olson (2011) puts it,

Dialogue about marginalization must take place in the same milieu – the same social context, with all of its contending presuppositions – in which marginalization occurs. Can marginalized people, whose claims are (to some extent) delegitimized because they are not properly articulated in the hegemonic idiom, make claims about the unfairness of their very situation? This would require people to struggle over the public standards of deliberation within the actual tumult of real political interaction. (539)

Thus, marginalized people making demands for recognition find themselves ensnared in a viscous cycle in which the basic level of recognition they are asking for is a pre-condition for the successful uptake of their demands.

6. Conclusion

Theoretical conclusions draw a bleak picture regarding the potential for marginalized groups to demand recognition. Communicative strategies aimed at breaking down ideological barriers or to change one’s own social constitution must take into account the fact that interpretation is not independent from ideology, and that communicative potential is not independent from social status. At the very least, this would suggest a need for political discourse to take on a more self-aware or self-reflexive character. As discussed in section, political opponents find themselves at a discursive impasse when they interpret the rejection of an utterance’s pragmatic presuppositions as a rejection of its truth value. A greater understanding of pragmatic mechanisms may yield more productive discussions in the political sphere by facilitating the identification of
interlocutors’ actual point of disagreement. However, this is only possible to the extent that interlocutors mutually recognize one another as rational communicative agents, which poses a problem for marginalized people who are not denied this basic level of recognition.

Moreover, one must consider how the misrecognition—and by extension the illocutionary silencing—of a dominated class is often bound up with the material or physical interests of the dominant class. Fanon’s (1952, 172n8) challenge to the Hegelian master-slave dialectic—which conceives of the dominant and the dominated as engaged in a mutual struggle for recognition—is that “the master laughs at the consciousness of the slave. What he wants from the slave is not recognition but work.” This introduces another barrier to the illocutionary and perlocutionary uptake of Black Lives Matter, in the criminal justice system especially, the dehumanization of black people fuels a program of mass incarceration that generates cheap labor for the dominant class. To fully carry out the perlocutionary effects of Black Lives Matter would be to dismantle this very profitable system.

These considerations raise doubts as to the ability to talk one’s way out of a state of misrecognition, and suggest that communicative strategies may only ever play a supplementary role to more direct forms of political engagement. I by no means suggest here that movements centered around recognition have neglected broader forms of engagement—for example, Black Lives Matter has achieved massive feats of organization and mobilization. Rather, I question whether how slogans such as Black Lives Matter and All Lives Matter, whose interpretations are dependent on layers upon layers of presuppositions, can be productively invoked in deliberative contexts without explicit meta-discursive negotiation. For example, posing the question “Do black lives matter, or do all lives matter?” to crowd-pleasing political candidates pressed for time, or negotiating the use of social category terms on mediums such as twitter that invite decontextualization, may only serve to further obscure or distort the underlying ideological debates at hand.
Works cited


