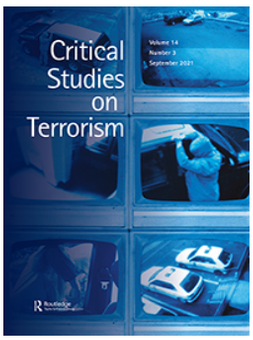

Critical Studies on Terrorism

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rter20

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To cite this article: Anna A. Meier (2022): Terror as justice, justice as terror: counterterrorism and anti-Black racism in the United States, Critical Studies on Terrorism, DOI: 10.1080/17539153.2022.2031132

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/17539153.2022.2031132

Published online: 17 Feb 2022.

CRITICAL STUDIES ON TERRORISM
https://doi.org/10.1080/17539153.2022.2031132

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Terror as justice, justice as terror: counterterrorism and anti-Black racism in the United States

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ABSTRACT

How do counterterrorism policies in the United States reproduce anti-Black racism? Research on U.S. domestic counterterrorism post-9/11 has largely focused on the experiences of Muslim Americans while marginalising both overlapping and separate effects of counterterrorism policy on non-Muslim people of colour, particularly non-Muslim Black communities. I argue that domestic counterterrorism policy, as an act of determining what kinds of political contention the state finds non-threatening, has roots in the historical treatment of Black resistance and continues to derive power and legitimacy from oppressing Black communities. Using the case of the Black Liberation Army and its members, I show that federal counterterrorism institutions were shaped by opposition to Black liberation, alongside more well-studied threads of xenophobia and Islamophobia. This article thus extends understandings of discrimination and prejudice within the U.S. counterterrorism apparatus and advocates for greater attention to anti-Blackness not only in policing but in security institutions more broadly.

KEYWORDS

Counterterrorism; racism; anti-Blackness; Black Liberation Army

Introduction

On 3 August 2017, the Federal Bureau of Investigation's Domestic Terrorism Analysis Unit released a report for law enforcement on "Black Identity Extremism" (BIE) in the United States (FBI 2017). The report echoed accusations of terrorism levelled at members of the Black Lives Matter movement by politicians, pundits, and law enforcement since its founding four years earlier.[1] Notably, it also described a longer history of so-called "BIE" violence, naming a single organisation, the 1960s–70s Black Liberation Army (BLA), as an archetype of the movement. In doing so, it established a through line from 20th-century understandings of Black liberation movements to 21st-century positionings of Black activists as terrorists.

In analysing counterterrorism practices in the U.S. in the post-9/11 era, scholars and policymakers alike have continually located threat within Muslim communities. On average, instances of violence by Muslim perpetrators receive 357% more media coverage than other attacks (Kearns et al. 2019), and such attacks are five times more likely to be called terrorism (Betus, Kearns, and Lemieux 2021). Likewise, critiques of U.S. counterterrorism have highlighted the construction of Muslims as suspect

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communities and critiqued an overwhelming emphasis on Islamist extremist violence to the exclusion of other ideologies and the violence perpetrated in their names (Kundnani 2015; Breen-Smyth 2014; Meier 2020). In this article, I extend the question of who is marginalised in the name of counterterrorism to consider reactions to and myth-making surrounding Black liberation movements in the U.S. Doing so, I argue, expands our understanding of how racialisation underpins U.S. counterterrorism policy – and how such racialisation reaches back in history long before 9/11, producing a continuum that 9/11 punctuated but did not radically change.

Certainly, scholars and activists have spent considerable time analysing the horrific experiences of Black Americans at the hands of law enforcement, including the FBI's notorious COINTELPRO programme, as well as the resilience of Black liberation movements in the face of this repression (Bloom & Martin. 2016; Churchill and Vander Wall 2001; Rhodes 2007; Balto 2019; Soss and Weaver 2017; Joseph 2006). Yet much of this analysis is lumped under the heading of "police brutality," marginalising the ways that counterterrorism and policing are part of the same law enforcement continuum that situates Black Americans as suspect communities. I argue, instead, for increased attention to Black Americans' treatment through the U.S. counterterrorism apparatus as a way of understanding that apparatus's deep historical roots. Neither counterterrorism as a policy area nor its relative ignorance of white supremacist violence are new; rather, these practices *as acts of counterterrorism* are only possible today due to decades of casting multiple racial Others, including Black people, as sources of *terrorist* violence.

As a first pass at bridging the artificial divide between work on counterterrorism and policing of Black Americans, as well as addressing the oversight of anti-Blackness within the terrorism literature, I use a case study of the Black Liberation Army (BLA), an offshoot of the more well-known Black Panther Party (BPP). Though long a target of more routine police surveillance and brutality, the BLA also came to be viewed as a terrorist entity during a period where older understandings of terrorism as a revolutionary activity met domestic desires to keep people of colour positioned as second-class citizens. This narration of the BLA as terrorists was recalled in 2013 when one of the BLA's most well-known members, Assata Shakur, became the first woman on the FBI's Most Wanted Terrorist List due to a crime she had allegedly committed 40 years earlier. I show that the firm situation of the BLA under the "terrorist" umbrella – a process that Dixit (2016) calls "terroristisation" – stretches back to the late 1960s. In doing so, I underscore the continuum of anti-Blackness within U.S. domestic counterterrorism policy that both encourages racism against other suspect communities and the positioning of non-Othered communities – namely, white people – outside the bounds of terrorism.

Bringing the study of anti-Blackness explicitly into work on terrorism in the United States underscores, further, critical terrorism studies' (CTS) peripheral engagement with racism as constitutive of the entire enterprise of counterterrorism. In choosing not to talk about anti-Blackness, CTS sets itself up to fail at discussing white supremacist violence under the umbrella of terrorism and, moreover, white supremacy within state institutions tasked with responding to that violence. This oversight is particularly concerning for a research area concerned with critiquing traditional constructions of the "terrorist" category and subsequent policy responses. By examining the construction of Black communities as legitimate targets of counterterrorism, I argue that CTS should engage with existing work on policing

and the expansion of the carceral state in order to investigate more fully the exercise of state power against those it deems as threats – an extension familiar to abolitionist activists and scholars yet usually missing from studies of terrorism and counterterrorism.

This article proceeds as follows. First, I lay out the current state of the CTS literature with regards to racism broadly and anti-Blackness specifically, arguing that oversight, especially of the latter, reflects the same problematic assumptions about who is and is not a "terrorist" that CTS claims to challenge. Then, I break down artificial barriers between U.S. counterterrorism and policing practices, demonstrating how these have never been neatly separated and have in fact helped to co-constitute the category of "terrorist." Although the word "terrorism" has not always been applied in the same ways that it is today, 21st-century conceptualisations have long roots in domestic resistance to hegemonic systems dictating who belongs in U.S. society and how. Then, I focus in on the Black Liberation Army and its positioning as a domestic terrorist archetype in the 1980s. I further show how the demonisation of the BLA continued into the 21st century with the targeting of Assata Shakur long after the organisation's official activities had largely ceased, creating a through line from the Black Power movement to contemporary Black resistance to state brutality. Finally, I return to the FBI's "Black Identity Extremist" report and contemporary discourse that locates the terrorist threat within Black communities, even as the term "terrorist" has become more closely associated with other identity groups, and discuss implications for both scholarly and policy approaches to counterterrorism.

Anti-Blackness and critical terrorism studies

Critical terrorism studies, despite its goal of "destabilis[ing] dominant interpretations" of terrorism and counterterrorism (Jackson 2007, 247), largely lacks nuanced conversations about race and racialisation – and, by extension, the role of white supremacy in the very state institutions CTS scholars often analyse. Though this oversight occurs against the backdrop of a larger erasure of race and racialisation by much of mainstream political science and international relations (Henderson 2013; Zvobgo and Loken 2020; Soss and Weaver 2017), it is especially egregious for a subfield focused on violence that disproportionately harms communities of colour.

Despite its concern with the racialisation of Muslim individuals, CTS has remained relatively silent on how other identity groups are also marginalised and made suspect by domestic and transnational counterterrorism apparatuses. Two major "state of the field" volumes on CTS make no mention of Black liberation movements or more recent uses of counterterrorism tools against Black communities (Jackson, Smyth, and Gunning 2009; Jackson 2016), and discussions of how counterterrorism creates "suspect communities" in which criminality is assumed tend to neglect engagement with anti-Blackness in the construction of such communities (e.g., Breen Smyth 2020, 75).[2] Even explicit treatments of CTS's insufficient engagement with race and racism do not discuss Black experiences with counterterrorism actors and policies at any length (e.g., Groothuis 2020). This oversight produces an incomplete understanding of the racialisation at the core of the "terrorist" category in many Western countries, including in the United States. While recent work explores the characterisation of anti-racist activism as "violent extremism"

(Viana and Dos Santos Da Silva 2021), more research is needed to highlight the foundational role that anti-Blackness has played in U.S. counterterrorism since long before the creation of the Black Lives Matter movement.[3]

Concerningly, this marginalisation of anti-Blackness in CTS has also inhibited the study of both institutional white supremacy and the white supremacist violence it enables. CTS has long been focused on criticising the role of state institutions in dictating the boundaries of "terrorism" as a particularly abhorrent and illegitimate category of violence, as well as what policies are permissible in combating such violence (Raphael 2009; Blakeley 2009; Al-Kassimi 2019). Yet the field has had comparatively little to say about white supremacy within those state institutions, particularly vis-á-vis Black communities. Dixit and Miller (this issue) underscore that white supremacy is often conceptualised as an organisational characteristic of non-state groups, rather than something embedded in systems of social relations or structures of state power. Moreover, while CTS has rightly focused on states as perpetrators of terrorising violence themselves (Herring 2008; Blakeley 2012), discussion of how epistemic state violence makes possible physical violence on behalf of hegemonic ideologies, such as white supremacy, has been relatively scant. The most extreme white supremacist ideologies flourish, in part, because of the widespread institutionalisation of white dominance in sociopolitical institutions and the normalisation of that dominance to the point where it seems so natural as to not merit noticing – part of a larger phenomenon that Fernández and Martini (this issue) call "banalisation" of the far right. Understanding epistemic violence directed at communities of colour, including Black communities, is essential for unsettling the broader normalised ideology of white supremacy and combating far-right violence – and requires, in fact, talking explicitly about white supremacy in conversations about the far right. Exploring anti-Blackness within the U.S. domestic counterterrorism apparatus aids in this larger goal.

By highlighting anti-Blackness, I introduce more complex conversations about race and counterterrorism to CTS. First, closer attention to anti-Blackness enables CTS to contribute more fully to larger conversations about racism in both social science and real-world policy spaces. Second, it underscores how complex the racialisation at the heart of U.S. terror narratives actually is, enabling and legitimising the targeting of an expansive constellation of racial Others due to a supposed "terrorist threat." And, importantly, it invites us to consider where else in society we observe practices that look like conventional conceptualisations of "counterterrorism." Counterterrorism's breadth is a feature, not a bug; accordingly, exploring where it dovetails with or subsumes other areas of security or public policy draws attention to how the goal of "countering terrorism" works within larger projects of state power and control.

Anti-Blackness as counterterrorism praxis

Counterterrorism, as Renard (2021) notes, has received little conceptual or theoretical attention compared to terrorism, with many scholars presenting the term as though it were self-explanatory. The U.S. Army Field Manual's definition, frequently cited, is rather broad, stating that counterterrorism consists of "operations that include offensive measures taken to prevent, deter, preempt, and respond to terrorism" (U.S. Army 2006, 4). Alternatively, counterterrorism has been described as a policymaking process (Lindekilde 2016), a domestic political process (Crenshaw 2001), and an overarching strategy pursued

by the "whole of society" (Lindahl 2017). What is common in all of these framings is the malleability of counterterrorism as a category: multiple strategies, policies, and actors could conceivably belong under its umbrella, provided they are aimed generally at a state-defined threat of "terrorism."

My approach in this article is to let counterterrorism remain broad – not to avoid defining it, but rather to make its breadth an object of inquiry. In doing so, the links between activities classified as "counterterrorism" and those classified as something else, such as "policing," become apparent. Meanwhile, topics traditionally filed under the study of policing or the carceral state, such as anti-Blackness and white supremacist "hate crimes," become more accessible to terrorism scholars (on treating white supremacist violence outside of a CT framing, see da Silva et al., this issue). More importantly, their *importance* to understanding counterterrorism is highlighted. The persistent scholarly bifurcation of counterterrorism and more traditional policing at the domestic level is not only incompatible with the historical record, but it also reduces the complexity of the racialisation at the heart of U.S. narratives surrounding terrorism. And, crucially, breaking down these conceptual silos addresses the troubling lack of attention to anti-Black racism and white supremacy in critical terrorism scholarship.

In the United States, activities labelled "policing" and those labelled "counterterrorism" have never been as neatly separated as these two categories suggest. In fact, the rhetorical work done by classifying some national security practices as "counterterrorism" helps legitimate other actions carried out against groups identified as potential terrorists, including police operations, immigration and customs enforcement, and border control.[4]

Though numerous government agencies engage in work labelled "counterterrorism," the bulk of U.S. domestic operations involving the identification of suspected terrorists and the use of force against them are undertaken by the Federal Bureau of Investigation. This was a deliberate transformation of the FBI's priorities following the 9/11 attacks (Chermak, Freilich, and Shemtob 2009; Walker 2002) – though, as we will see, the FBI's pre-9/11 activities also sometimes looked like contemporary counterterrorism measures and set the stage for counterterrorism organs that would emerge later. Simultaneously, the FBI also leads investigations into organised crime, white-collar crime, and cybercrime that does not fall under its definition of terrorism. As both a policing organ and a domestic intelligence agency, the FBI is a relatively unique organisation within Western state security apparatuses, wherein domestic intelligence and policing are often assigned to different agencies.[5] Thus, U.S. counterterrorism and policing efforts occupy the same space in a very practical sense, not only discursively. The bifurcation of counterterrorism and policing does not accurately describe how these practices actually occur in the U.S. context.

I propose, instead, viewing counterterrorism and policing as "two arms of the same state apparatus" (Husain 2020c). Scholars of policing have observed how international counterinsurgency operations against leftist and communist insurgents during the Cold War, including the training of police and military forces abroad by U.S. agents, influenced policing domestically, bringing international security concerns into the domestic law enforcement space (Seigel 2018; Schrader 2019). Though the U.S.'s domestic and international security priorities are deeply entangled, domestic policing has long been a matter of repressing activity by historically excluded communities, whether racial, political, or both (Muhammad 2019; Cornell 2016). In the late Cold War, and especially

following 9/11, the categories of racial and political Other collapsed more forcefully into each other in policing and counterterrorism activities targeting Muslims – and, this article argues, Black people, Muslim or otherwise.

The increasing role of activities framed as countering "terrorism" within the overall portfolios of police agencies in the U.S. has been well-documented (e.g., Bayley and Weisburd 2009). Indeed, police and counterterrorism agents are frequently paired together to engage in surveillance and intelligence-gathering, including through Joint Terrorism Task Forces (JTTFs) in more than 200 U.S. cities (Soufan 2021) and "fusion centres" designed to enable closer cooperation (Davis et al. 2010). The Department of Justice has also commissioned research on how to use "community policing" as not only a strategy for local crime management but also for preventing terrorism and violent extremism (Schanzer et al. 2016; Snodgrass 2020). An assumption persists that local police will engage in counterterrorism activities irrespective of whether they are explicitly directed to do so by a federal agency (Davis et al. 2010). Consequently, policing and counterterrorism do not occur in the same space only theoretically, but also empirically. Altogether, I encourage a reading of domestic security practices as the purview of what Nikhil Pal Singh calls the "carceral, war-on-terror state" (Singh 2017, 149), which underscores both the analogous goals of policing and counterterrorism and the analogous foundations in anti-Black racism.[6]

Scholars of race and ethnicity have spilled considerable ink to complicate our understandings of Islamophobia and anti-Blackness as separate phenomena (Auston 2017; Husain 2019; Torres 2013; Norris 2019). Certainly individuals can and do experience both, and Husain (2020b) shows that this intersectional oppression is especially complicated for Black Muslims, who are acutely aware of the ways Blackness has been situated in opposition to Islam (and, implicitly, brownness) by the state in the post-9/11 era. I acknowledge this complexity while focusing on the experiences of groups and movements constructed as explicitly Black, regardless of whether some members are also Muslim.

Historically, the focus of much literature on racialisation and terrorism has been on Muslims as a racial category, targeted by the U.S. counterterrorism apparatus both prior to and after the 9/11 attacks (Shamas 2018; Cainkar and Selod 2018). Violence by the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) and its offshoots beginning in the 1970s, overlapping as it did with socialist and communist ideas at a time when communism was the primary international bogeyman in the Western imagination, opened the door for ideas about terrorism to shift from wars of national liberation to racialised peoples fighting for leftist causes. Crystallised by the emergence of Hizballah and Hamas and early al-Qaeda attacks prior to 9/11, the U.S.'s equation of "terrorism" with "Islam" continues to foster surveillance of, and hate crimes against, Muslim Americans (Alsultany 2013; Kundnani 2015; Selod 2018).

As this brief historical overview suggests, "terrorism" in the U.S. imagination has long encompassed a racial and ideological Other, frequently located on the political left in opposition to structures of power comprising the state. As Newell (2020) and Erlenbusch-Anderson (2018) have shown, the prototypical terrorist in the 20th century has ranged from anarchists in the 1910s to the governments of Middle Eastern states such as Lebanon and Iran in the early 1990s. What these prototypes have in common is their challenging of the liberal state, viewed as doubly threatening when coming from Black or brown people whose subjugation has been central to U.S. state-building.

Concurrently throughout the 20th century, U.S. *policing* became increasingly focused on Black liberation movements as sources of threat. A vast body of scholarship and activist writing has traced violence by police against Black activists and communities rightly or wrongly associated with them (Davis 1999; Gilmore 2007; Taylor 2016; Khan-Cullors and bandele 2018). During the 1960s, the FBI's surveillance of Black, Muslim, and Black Muslim communities reached new heights, targeting these racialised communities during and after the Civil Rights Movement and setting the stage for patterns of assumed criminality that continue to this day (Curtis 2013). The policing of Black individuals is further sustained by a white racial foil, reinforcing and emboldening white supremacist violence. As comparative non-targets of police violence, far-right and white supremacist actors receive the message that they will not be hurt or killed if they commit crimes. Thus, their relative risk is low, even if they come into contact with law enforcement. In fact, police themselves may belong to far-right or white supremacist organisations or express support for those ideologies, further decreasing the likelihood that white supremacists will be viewed as transgressors (German 2020; Miller-Idriss 2020).[7]

At the same time that the FBI was ramping up its targeting of Black Americans, it was also cracking down on white supremacist organisations as part of its overall COINTELPRO efforts. In 1964, under pressure from the Johnson White House, the FBI added a counter-intelligence programme – a COINTELPRO – against "white hate groups," expanding its primary domestic counterterrorism tool of the era to include organisations with ideologies closer to the mainstream (Winter 2018a, 624, 2018b). The House of Representatives' Committee on Un-American Activities also took up the Ku Klux Klan as an object of study, bemoaning in a 1967 report the Klan's use of "terrorism" (U.S. House 1967). Yet these counterterrorism efforts did not signal a genuine desire to view white supremacists as a threat on par with how the Bureau positioned Black and leftist activists. Whereas the FBI viewed leftist ideologies as fundamental threats to the status quo, its problem with the KKK was the organisation's violence, not its ideology. As Cunningham (2003, 353) argues, "Agents saw Klansmen, unlike student protestors, as basically patriotic and sympathetic to many mainstream American political ideals." The goal, then, was to control KKK chapters rather than to dismantle them. Thus, counterterrorism efforts against white supremacist actors, though part of the Cold War FBI's overall portfolio, did not assess those actors as the same sort of existential threats as other ideological movements of the time.

Counterterrorism efforts against the Klan, moreover, did not seek to address racism as a foundational ideology underlying Klan activities (Winter 2018b, 111). Violence was undesirable and subsequently stigmatised, but condemning racism itself would have meant raising questions about equality at a time when the U.S. sought to portray itself as a democratic defender of human rights. In effect, the focus on controlling violence meant ignoring and perpetuating racism – and, subsequently, ignoring security institutions' role in its perpetuation. FBI efforts targeting the Klan, then, do not in and of themselves demonstrate an anti-racist bent, or even equal opportunity repression. Rather, the FBI used the "white hate groups" COINTELPRO to escape accusations that it was unfairly targeting certain groups, even as it continued to disproportionately use violence against Black Americans (O'Reilly 1989).

The state security apparatus, of which counterterrorism institutions are a part, perpetuates structural white supremacy through this narrative – and, moreover, uses the opprobrium associated with "terrorism" to justify selective violence against racialised

communities. The terrorist, after all, cannot be reasoned with or understood; instead, they must be removed from the board. Anti-Black racism therefore becomes not only embedded within, but normatively and urgently allowable under, the counterterrorism umbrella. As counterterrorism and policing became more entangled during the Cold War, as the below analysis will describe, they became two parallel arms of official white supremacy, serving to subjugate Black Americans at a time when calls for civil rights surged and the growing Black Power movement presented a real challenge to established sociopolitical hierarchies.

One article can neither fully bridge the artificial divide between counterterrorism and policing, nor can it fill the gap in the CTS literature. I aim, instead, to illustrate the possibilities of such a research programme by establishing the role of anti-Blackness in shaping U.S. domestic counterterrorism practices. The U.S. has a long history of violence against Black Americans; since at least the Civil Rights era, this violence has typically been associated with the police. As I have argued, police violence targeting Black Americans should also be understood as part of the U.S.'s history of domestic counterterrorism. Put simply, anti-Black racism in policing has created a larger script in which the Black criminal/white innocent dichotomy extends to other areas of and tools in security policy. As such, the experiences of Black liberation activists must be brought explicitly into our narratives of U.S. domestic counterterrorism. I do this by examining the Black Liberation Army (BLA), an organisation that remains a target of counterterrorist efforts today despite its formal dissolution almost 40 years ago.

The Black Liberation Army

The more violent and lesser-known offshoot of the Black Panther Party (BPP), the BLA nevertheless occupies an outsized space in conceptualisations of domestic terrorism in the U.S. Yet it has received almost no attention from terrorism scholars, critical or otherwise. It therefore presents a natural case with which to begin the study of historical anti-Blackness in the U.S. counterterrorism apparatus. The BLA's specific targeting of police officers also meant that the organisation drew attention from law enforcement immediately, allowing for the analysis of how law enforcement and counterterrorism interests can co-constitute each other when dealing with anti-state violence by non-white individuals.

The BLA emerged from the New York chapter of the BPP in 1971, announcing its presence with an attack on two New York Police Department (NYPD) officers in June 1971. Dissatisfied with the larger BPP's prioritisation of public goods provision over violent revolutionary action, a small group of activists broke away to form a more militant group that would end up being responsible for at least 20 deaths, mostly of police officers (Rosenau 2013). Like the BPP, the BLA belonged to the larger Black Power movement seeking self-determination for Black communities in the U.S. and pushed socialist, abolitionist ideals through revolutionary violence and the creation of an armed front (BLA 1970). Effectively decimated by police actions by 1974, the BLA would nevertheless continue to engage in guerrilla activities until at least 1981, when BLA members stole $1.6 million from an armoured car belonging to private security company Brink's and killed three people.

Along with the Weather Underground, the Symbionese Liberation Army, and other leftist groups of the era, the BLA is commonly understood nowadays as a terrorist organisation. It appears in both the Global Terrorism Database and the Terrorism

Research & Analytics Consortium databases as a terrorist actor, and a 2012 report by the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation clearly situated the BLA within a narrative of U.S. domestic terrorism (ICSR 2012). During its existence, however, understandings of what the BLA was were more varied, only solidifying with time. NYPD documents from 1972, following the BLA murder of two police officers in New York City's East Village, indicate that tensions existed between those who felt the BLA was a loose collection of activists and those who perceived a "nationwide black conspiracy" (Burrough 2015). Assata Shakur, a prominent member of the BLA, would later describe the BLA as "various organisations and collectives" in her autobiography, supporting the idea of a loose network (Shakur 1987, 241). NYPD intelligence itself stated the BLA probably had at most 30 "hardcore" members and around 100 supporters (Kaufman 1973). Nevertheless, the impulse to create myths around the BLA persisted, with NYPD Deputy Commissioner Robert Daley insisting that the BLA had hundreds of assassins organised in cells across the country, ready and waiting (Burrough 2015).

Meanwhile, the FBI did not typically refer to the BLA as "terrorists," indicating a departure from how other federal institutions, including the White House, had referred to Black liberation activists in the past.[8] At the time, no federal mechanism existed for formally designating organisations as "terrorist," and there is no way to designate purely domestic organisations to this day. Accordingly, discourse was based on conventional wisdom, historical precedent, and stereotypes. As an example, consider that a 1973 FBI bulletin drew a clear distinction between "terrorists" and "guerrillas," with the BLA identified as the latter due to their attempts at "revolution" (FBI 1973, 4). The semantics of this distinction in the 1970s were undergoing rapid contestation, particularly following the Munich hostage crisis in 1972 and similar instances of transnational political violence. Despite not always calling the BLA "terrorists" in the 1970s, the FBI nevertheless made the organisation one of its highest priorities at the behest of the NYPD and the White House (Burrough 2015), a threat level that the present-day FBI identifies with "protect[ing] the U.S. from a terrorist attack" (FBI 2021).

Whether or not the term "terrorist" was used explicitly, the BLA occupied a place in the national imagination nowadays reserved for those receiving the "terrorist" label – a positioning thrown into sharp relief when Assata Shakur was made a Most Wanted Terrorist in 2013, as discussed below. The elision of "highest priority" with "terrorist threat" can be seen in the original FBI-NYPD partnership targeting the BLA in 1971, dubbed "Newkill" (bin Wahad 2016); this type of federal and local cooperation would become the model for Joint Terrorism Task Forces (JTTFs) established across the country to bring together police officers and intelligence analysts for counterterrorism purposes. Accordingly, even though precise understandings of "terrorism" have changed over time, the contemporary positioning of some Black activists as terrorists has a direct linkage to practices in the 1970s directed against analogous activists.

By the 1980s, the situation of the BLA within a narrative of U.S. domestic terrorism – and specifically a narrative that had expanded the "terrorist" category beyond those actors using guerrilla tactics – was starting to solidify at the national level, drawing on earlier discourses at the local level within the NYPD. In 1981, the robbery and killings that would come to be known as the Brink's robbery put the BLA squarely in the national spotlight. On October 20, members of the BLA and the May 19 Communist Organisation (M19CO) attacked a Brink's armoured car in Clarkstown, NY. In the ensuing shootout and

car chase, two police officers and a Brink's security guard were killed and four others wounded, including one M19CO member. Subsequent raids on safehouses used by the militants led to the arrests of further BLA and M19CO members in the coming months.

The robbery came to serve as a linchpin in subsequent narratives of BLA activities, used by both intelligence agencies and police as evidence of an ongoing terrorist threat stemming from the Black Power movement. A 1985 report by the non-profit Nathan Hale Institute, prepared for the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), positioned the BLA as a component of an "underground terrorist movement" and highlighted members' involvement in the Brink's robbery as evidence that "remnants" of the 1960s Black Power movement still posed a threat to the U.S., retroactively situating 1960s organisations within an emerging contemporary framework for "terrorism" (Francis 1985, 17). In the same year, the New York State Division of Criminal Justice Services advocated for understanding the Brink's robbery as a "terrorist act," a framing that takes several pages of explanation to move from typical law enforcement understandings at the time of terrorism as assassinations and hostage-takings to the robbery as an act designed to provide support for revolutionary activities. Whether or not the robbery *was* terrorism is beside the point; narrating it as a terrorist act allowed the State of New York to perpetuate the idea of Black liberation as a clandestine and criminal threat necessitating monitoring of Black communities, even though the Brink's robbery was the last major act of violence carried out by the BLA. Indeed, New York's Policy Study Group on Terrorism described BLA recruitment as "constant," hinting at a persistent violent threat that would readily attack again if security agencies were not vigilant (Zimmerman 1985, 8). In this way, combating the BLA, and Black liberation organisations more generally, became part of the discourse of U.S. counterterrorism.

This frame of a persistent and sinister underground threat mirrors discourse directed at transnational terrorist threats emanating from majority-non-white countries during the same period. Writing in 1972, Martha Crenshaw characterised revolutionary terrorism abroad – itself an amalgamation of the "terrorist" and "guerrilla" categories kept separate by some analysts – as "unpredictable but often anonymous," noting that the terrorist's advantage laid in their ability to strike without warning (Crenshaw 1972, 385). The revolutionary terrorist's activities, however, originated abroad: terrorism was a problem in newly independent states, and when it bled over into North American or European contexts, it was due to sympathies with revolutions in the colonised world. Extending the term to domestic activists in the U.S. meant, therefore, Othering them, emphasising their linkages to overseas movements, and casting them as external to the (white) American ingroup. The BLA, as a Black organisation with socialist ideals, was an easy target for this discursive manoeuvre.

Bringing this narrative of revolutionary terrorism into the domestic space further required presenting the BLA and similar organisations as nebulous networks hiding in the shadows – analogous to revolutionary guerrilla networks abroad – necessitating significant counterterrorism resources due to the difficulty of predicting when and where attacks would occur. In fact, the FBI attempted to link the BLA to the PLO and other armed groups in the Middle East and North Africa (Rosenau 2013); if proven, such links would have situated the BLA firmly within a discourse that understood "terrorism" as foreign, whether it occurred within U.S. borders or not. Moreover, the association of that foreignness, and subsequently of "terrorism," with Black and brown individuals dovetailed

with the BLA's own emphasis on pan-Africanism and U.S. Black communities' African roots, providing a ready script for authorities to co-opt. Accordingly, it was not a stretch for the emerging U.S. counterterrorism apparatus to situate the BLA within larger, racialised narratives of terrorism and expand those narratives to more explicitly include Black Americans, a process made easier by the racialisation of Black people within law enforcement more generally. Such narratives would become much more explicit when interest in the BLA resurfaced almost 30 years later – a seemingly sudden return to the past made possible by the foundational role anti-Blackness assumed in U.S. domestic counterterrorism in the 1980s.

Assata Shakur

In the early 21st century, threats from other directions turned federal attention away from successor organisations to the BLA. Thus, the announcement on 2 May 2013 that the FBI was adding prominent BLA member Assata Shakur to its Most Wanted Terrorist List caught many off guard. Shakur, also known as Joanne Chesimard, had allegedly shot a New Jersey state trooper in May 1973, 40 years earlier, and had spent the bulk of the time since living as a political refugee in Cuba. Though she was convicted of a violent act, Shakur's inclusion alongside individuals such as al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri nevertheless felt discordant. To paraphrase writer and filmmaker dream hampton, why would the FBI make its first officially listed woman terrorist a "65 year old grandmother in Cuba?" (Smith 2013).

The listing of Shakur, particularly as the first woman on the Most Wanted Terrorist list, sent a clear message that the U.S. domestic counterterrorism apparatus located threat within the Black community – a continuation of discursive moves begun during the Cold War to make Black activists not only presumed criminals, but presumed terrorists. Shakur's targeting creates a through line from 21st-century counterterrorism to law enforcement operations against Black liberation movements in the 1960s and 1970s, illustrating how anti-Blackness remains a component of U.S. discourse surrounding what constitutes a terrorist threat.

Shakur joined the BLA following a brief time with the BPP. Historians dispute the size of her role: while some state that she took on a leadership role in the organisation, others argue that the inflation of her role was encouraged by law enforcement to aid her eventual prosecution and conviction, with the media representing her as the "mother hen" of the BLA (Davis 2016, 78). What is certain is that Shakur was present on the New Jersey Turnpike on 2 May 1973 when state troopers pulled her and two other BLA members over for a faulty tail light. A shootout ensued, during which one BLA member and one state trooper were killed. By her own account, Shakur was shot in the back with her hands in the air, and forensic evidence suggests she did not fire a weapon; nevertheless, she was arrested, charged, and convicted of first-degree murder (Shakur 2000; Goodman 2013).

Following her escape from prison in 1979 and flight to Cuba in 1980, Shakur became, ironically, what law enforcement feared she already was: a central figure in the ongoing struggle for Black liberation. Her writings continued to appear in zines and online forums, as well as in her autobiography, *Assata*. Her legacy also continues to influence Black communities. In 2011, an invitation for the rapper Common to appear at a White House

poetry reading generated backlash from the New Jersey State Police, as he had released a song describing Shakur's life in favourable terms. Yet she had not engaged in violence in 40 years when she became the first woman on the FBI's Most Wanted Terrorist list.

Created in late 2001 following 9/11, the Most Wanted Terrorist list includes 25 individuals, both U.S. citizens and foreign nationals, as of March 2021. As Husain (2020a) argues, the list serves to cast the U.S. counterterrorism apparatus as neutral and legitimate, painting listed individuals as responsible for a wide range of anti-racist, anti-colonial, and anti-capitalist resistance rather than as racialised actors (though no white individuals appeared on the list as of March 2021). Shakur was added on 2 May 2013, exactly 40 years after the New Jersey Turnpike incident. The FBI made clear that the date was intentional, referencing the "anniversary of the cold-blooded murder" in the first sentence of their press release on the listing. "Joanne Chesimard [Assata Shakur] is a domestic terrorist," FBI agent Aaron Ford asserted (FBI 2013). She was the first woman to be listed and remains one of only two women Most Wanted Terrorists.[9] Thus, her listing had symbolic power irrespective of its timing: terrorism in the 2010s, according to the U.S. government, looked like a left-wing Black woman.

Yet the timing of the listing was significant in other ways as well. A month after Shakur's listing, George Zimmerman would head to trial for fatally shooting unarmed Black teenager Trayvon Martin, and the Black Lives Matter movement would form following his acquittal. This uptick in Black left-wing activism had close parallels to the 1992 Los Angeles riots following the police beating of Rodney King – and before that, to the Black Power activism of the 1960s and 1970s. Listing Shakur sent a clear message that the FBI intended to treat any new wave of activism as harshly as possible: much like in the 1960s and 1970s, Black left-wing movements would be met with surveillance, assumed criminality, and the use of force. Like in the 1960s and 1970s, they would be situated within a space characterised by "terrorist" narratives and the associated normative baggage, alongside law enforcement action. Unlike in the 1960s and 1970s, however, additional counterterrorism tools at the state's disposal in the 21st century would be brought to bear. In effect, the 21st-century response would be an intensification of the 20th-century response, rather than a significant departure.

Shakur's listing also reflected continued constraints on the U.S. domestic counterterrorism apparatus at home. There continues to be no federal mechanism for formally designating U.S. organisations as "terrorist": though the FBI can open terrorism investigations into such organisations, the ability to charge someone with terrorism is heavily restricted, organisations' propaganda cannot be outlawed, and financial assets cannot be frozen. Yet the FBI's Most Wanted List offered an opening to cast a Black liberation activist not only discursively, but legally, as a terrorist. Despite the time that had passed since Shakur's alleged crime, her fugitive status, as well as the guilty verdict in her case, made her an easy target for suggesting that not only she, but the broader Black liberation movement of which she was a part, belonged under the "terrorist" umbrella.

As Angela Davis put it, "To retroactively implicate Assata Shakur … is also to bring those who have inherited her legacy, and who identify with continued struggles against racism and capitalism, under the canopy of 'terrorist violence'" (Davis 2016, 78). Explicitly, Shakur's listing presents the terrorist as a racialised figure, broadening the contemporary imagination beyond (brown) Muslims as terrorists to include other racialised categories and thus stoke support for even more widespread counterterrorism measures against

a threat larger than originally thought. The "terrorist" label, furthermore, shuts down additional conversation about Shakur and what she and other Black liberation activists fought for. Shakur's Most Wanted Terrorist poster does not list a motive; contained within the "terrorist" label is all one needs to know.

The "terrorist" label standing in for complex understandings of group motivations and goals is observable in continued state responses to Black activism. During his presidency, Donald Trump and figures in his administration repeatedly called for Black Lives Matter (BLM) to be designated a terrorist organisation, despite such an action being impossible under U.S. law.[10] While some have pointed to Trump's treatment of BLM as exceptional or extreme in the larger context of U.S. terrorism discourse, the case of the BLA and Assata Shakur reveals a longer historical trend that both made Trump's comments possible and underscores their relative banality. Insistence that a Black left-wing movement is composed of terrorists should not come as a surprise; instead, it is a natural outgrowth of a counterterrorism apparatus built in no small part by and through anti-Blackness – an important but underexplored component of structural white supremacy within the U.S. counterterrorism apparatus.

Conclusion

What constitutes "counterterrorism," and how do counterterrorism practices gain legitimacy as necessary acts of targeted violence? This article has illustrated one foundational component of the domestic counterterrorism apparatus in the U.S. – anti-Blackness – and how the racial ordering of U.S. society pervades not only policing, but all areas of the security apparatus. As observed in the case of the Black Liberation Army, law enforcement and emerging counterterrorism interests co-constituted each other during the 1970s and 1980s, perpetuating a system where Black criminality is presumed and sometimes escalated to perceptions of Black terrorism, all while justifying the forceful repression of Black communities.

Anti-Blackness continues to shape domestic counterterrorism practices today. Despite its short-lived existence, the Black Liberation Army retains a prominent place in contemporary understandings of left-wing violence labelled "terrorism." In constructing the threat of "Black Identity Extremists" (BIE) in 2017, the FBI identified the BLA retroactively as a BIE group, establishing a through line from 20th-century understandings of Black liberation movements to 21st-century positionings of Black activists as terrorists (FBI, Domestic Terrorism Analysis Unit 2017). These positionings fortify institutions of white supremacy within the U.S. counterterrorism apparatus, reinforcing an intergroup hierarchy where state repression of communities of colour is not only resilient, but routine.

Illuminating the historical role of anti-Blackness in the U.S. counterterrorism apparatus does more than shine light on the deeply racist nature of counterterrorism. It also links contemporary counterterrorism to the historical subjugation of people of colour through colonial institutions, both at home and abroad (Abu-Bakare 2020; McQuade 2020), positioning domestic counterterrorism as an extension of colonial practices that aim to protect and "civilize" populations under threat from revolutionaries. Likewise, Black Power activists in the U.S. also learned from and formed alliances with revolutionary movements in newly independent African states (Tyson 1999; Baldwin 2006), explicitly connecting Cold War decolonisation abroad to domestic liberation struggles and raising further

questions about the intersections of anticolonial movements and the construction of the "terrorist." Moreover, discussing anti-Blackness in counterterrorism also expands our understanding of the effects of counterterrorism on non-Muslim communities of colour (or those perceived to be non-Muslim). While counterterrorism practices in the U.S. and elsewhere will likely continue to harm Muslims, worldwide uprisings following the police killing of George Floyd in May 2020 suggest that protest movements may engender widespread responses not only from police, but also actors in the counterterrorism space, directed towards other racialised groups and those fighting alongside them.

Ultimately, the innate racialisation of the concept of terrorism in the West means that counterterrorism spaces will always produce racist policies and behaviours – something which scholars of terrorism, critical or otherwise, should take seriously in conversations about reform and justice. As Jarvis (this issue) argues, expanding counterterrorism to include white supremacist violence risks introducing the security apparatus into more and more areas of U.S. political and social life, with effects hitting communities of colour the hardest. Attempts to apply counterterrorism policies in more uniform or equitable ways are likely to reproduce patterns of racialisation because such racialisation, including anti-Blackness, is structurally embedded in the institutions behind these policies.

Notes

1. See, for example, Aronsen (2020), Sky News (2020), and CBS Local (2016) on U.S. Representative Steve King (R-IA), Sky News journalist James Morrow, and Minneapolis Police Union president Lt. Bob Kroll, respectively.
2. For a notable exception, see Gentry (2020), 150–54.
3. One explanation for the oversight in the CTS literature is that CTS is a largely European enterprise. As such, the lack of consideration of Black leftist movements within the discourses of terrorism and counterterrorism makes sense insofar as these movements were a U.S. phenomenon. Such an explanation, however, obscures the transnational nature of Black activist spaces – and, more concerningly, continues a longstanding erasure of anti-Blackness in European countries (Pitts 2019; Gürsel, Müller, and Varma 2021).
4. For example, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security identifies "screening and vetting" as among the agency's primary counterterrorism functions. Critical infrastructure projects and "community resilience" may also fall under the counterterrorism umbrella. See DHS (2019), 3–5.
5. For example, in Germany, the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution (*Verfassungsschutz*) oversees domestic intelligence, whilst the Federal Criminal Police (*Bundeskriminalamt)* oversees policing. In the United Kingdom, MI5 oversees intelligence and the National Crime Agency oversees policing.
6. For a discussion of the centrality of anti-Blackness in the carceral system, see Alexander (2010) and Gilmore (2007).
7. Indeed, the FBI in the 1960s chose to pursue primarily covert activities targeting the Ku Klux Klan and similar organisations because it did not want to compromise its relationship with local police departments, many of whom supported the Klan's goals (Cunningham 2003, 342).
8. For example, after the arrest of Black Panther affiliate and Communist Party member Angela Davis, then-President Richard Nixon congratulated the FBI on capturing a "terrorist." See Roman (2020), 89.
9. The other is Ahlam Ahmad Al-Tamimi, a Jordanian involved in the bombing of a Jerusalem restaurant in August 2001 that killed two U.S. nationals.

10. See, for example, Byman (2020). There is no mechanism in the U.S. Code by which an organisation operating primarily in the United States can be legally designated as terrorist. Such official legal designations are reserved for organisations headquartered abroad.

Acknowledgments

The author would like to thank Hannah Chapman, Rachel Jacobs, Rachel Schwartz, Sam Vortherms, and two anonymous reviewers for helpful feedback. Many thanks also to Raquel da Silva and Alice Martini for shepherding this special issue along, and to Verena Erlenbusch-Anderson for much-needed encouragement.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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