



## OFFICER SAFETY TIME: Police Scenario Training and Thinking Threat First

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*I'm not trying to set you up to think you'll get killed on every call or make you paranoid, a SWAT team officer told a class of recruits. Don't approach a suicidal-with-a-gun call the way you would a barking-dog call . . . but also, can anything happen? Yes.<sup>1</sup> On a sunny spring morning in 2018, SWAT team members were leading a module on basic tactical maneuvers in a Maryland police training academy. The Baltimore Police Department was laboring under a consent decree nearby,<sup>2</sup> and departments nationwide were talking the language of reform. Even in departments like this one, which enjoyed a spotless reputation with its majority-white population, academy training had self-consciously shifted to signal a commitment to gentler, service-oriented policing. Under pressure from reform movements and politicians, academies such as this one sought to instill a “guardian” mind-set, in which officers’ primary mandate is to protect civilians, contra a pervasive “warrior” training style that teaches police to anticipate ever-present threats to their own survival and to eliminate enemies (Carlson 2020; Stoughton 2015). Recruits wrote personal mission statements and learned that their ultimate purpose was to serve the community. Nonetheless, at the indisputable core of academy pedagogy was the commonsense mantra that officer safety comes first.*

Tactical maneuvers training began inside a classroom adorned with posters bearing catchphrases such as “You can never have enough bullets,” then moved outside for role-play scenario exercises. Recruits learned how to approach buildings, move through rooms, and consider angles from which someone could shoot them. *You always have to be aware, set yourself up in case it breaks bad*, the SWAT officer explained. *It’ll be 1 percent of calls, but you have to always be thinking tactically*. Tactical thinking means that one must “play the what-if game,” he said, even in the least threatening situations. What if someone ambushes me from that shed during a noise complaint call? What if I arrive at a mental health check and someone walks out of the house waving a shovel? Where will I stand, run, hide, aim? Recruits practiced responding to low-stakes scenarios, learning how to strategize what the SWAT officer called their “bail-out plan” without either metaphorically or literally “throw[ing] a flashbang on a noise complaint.” They learned to transmute their fear into tactical awareness—in short, to think threat first.

U.S. police reformers often hail scenario or “reality-based” exercises like this tactical maneuvers training as potential antidotes to the “fear-based” ethos of warrior-style policing, and as particularly promising modalities for promoting de-escalation and teaching judicious uses of force.<sup>3</sup> In reality-based training, officers act out immersive, real-life scenarios such as making arrests, responding to overdose calls, or deciding whether to shoot someone. Scenarios involve role-playing with colleagues or in virtual reality simulators, and feature prominently in SWAT team practices and training sites such as police academies.<sup>4</sup> As the reformist juxtaposition of “fear” with “reality” suggests, scenarios offer solutions to a specific framing of preventable police violence: as a product of impulse stemming from unconscious fear and implicit bias, particularly against Black people and other people of color figured as inherently threatening (see [Muhammad 2011](#)).<sup>5</sup> Scenario trainings promise to allay that impulse by allowing officers to *rehearse* reality (see [Aushana 2020](#)), iteratively unraveling and restaging stressful encounters in scenes that “distend time and space, allowing the officer to develop strategies that slow down the crisis situation, manage the pace and time of affective response and expand the repertoire of patterns an officer might draw on in the stress of the encounter” ([Alvarez 2020](#), 69). In other words, the slowed, repetitive timeframes of scenario exercises are meant to teach police to align their decisions with the world-as-is and not with what they anxiously imagine it could be. Critics, however, suggest that scenario trainings instead amplify fear by dramatizing improbable worst-case situations: gunmen lurking in

car trunks, grandmothers and children poised to ambush the unsuspecting cop (Sierra-Arévalo 2021; Taddonio 2021). Scenarios in this framing invert the desired deceleration of time, instead quickening it against a backdrop of omnipresent peril. They thereby render officers “trigger-happy”: more apt to read danger in every innocent gesture and more prone to impulsive, irreversible violence.<sup>6</sup>

As both the promises of and skepticism about reality-based police trainings indicate, temporality is a key logic in scenario exercises, albeit one often left implicit in public debates. This essay shares the skepticism but departs from questions of whether scenarios deploy deceleration or acceleration to suppress or amplify officer fear to instead analyze how scenarios *translate* fear through the less well-understood temporal formations undergirding police scenario trainings. Specifically, I argue that scenarios recruit officers into what I call *officer safety time*, a temporal regime that governs modern U.S. policing writ large but reaches perhaps its fullest expression in scenario trainings. As I discuss below, officer safety time is composed of a sequencing (“think threat first”) and mood (the subjunctive) that are inscribed into a habitus (command presence) to control the presumed vector of threat (the criminalized Black body) and clinch the primacy of personal security. This concept demonstrates how scenarios deploy temporality to hail police as simultaneously threatened and threatening, and more broadly, to cultivate the temporal orders of state violence in its workers. Officer safety time also illustrates how the logics of policing absorb efforts to minimize racialized police violence—and thereby immunize policing against substantive reform.

In this essay, I examine officer safety time through fieldwork I conducted from 2015 to 2018 with police departments in Maryland, where I observed scenario trainings in police academies and SWAT practices. I draw on ethnographic literature on police and military training, along with studies of scenario exercises, which often consider large-scale, preplanned trainings in fields such as public health, and the anthropology of time and futurity, which tends to focus on the temporalities of everyday life. Building on these literatures’ analytical frames, I chart how the temporality of small-scale world-building exercises reworks and channels the racialized fear of powerful state agents. In the following sections, I begin by discussing the above literatures, then turn to an ethnographic analysis of how scenarios produce officer safety time. I first explore how scenarios transform fear into the normatively colorblind pragmatics of tactical awareness by teaching officers to anticipate possible dangers before responding with controlled expertise. This sequencing—thinking threat first—is designed

to replace anxious impulse with calm calculation, while producing police as tactical experts. Thinking threat first mandates attending to what could be or could have been—the subjunctive mood—rather than only a phenomenological experience of the present or a probabilistic assessment of calculable futures (see Samimian-Darash 2022).<sup>7</sup> I therefore turn next to the subjunctive by dwelling on virtual scenario trainings, vaunted under a technophilic reformist paradigm for their promise to produce “better” uses of force. I argue that virtual reality materializes a conviction that threat *could* exist, but that its approach to violence is not exhausted by phrases such as *trigger-happy*: instead, it seals violence into a single decision point evacuated of alternate futurities. Finally, I trace how scenarios write officer safety time into the subjects and objects of police work. I attend to how officers learn to inhabit “command presence,” a heteromale habitus of state power that teaches officers to personify both authority and vulnerability to preempt potential attack. While violence is theoretically latent in any body, this presumptively colorblind regime rests on anti-Black racial imaginaries, visible in the objects of scenario training and reframed as mere common sense. I conclude by discussing the stakes of these arguments for the broader temporality of reformism, which cyclically repeats solutions to police violence as if trapped in an unending present.

Scholars often frame police perceptions of threat as primarily *spatialized*: officers learn to see danger “around every corner” (Anderson 2021; Joubert 2022; Lynch 2018), even if the “racial production of the visible” (Butler 1993, 16) schematizes some corners as more threatening than others. Trainings prescribe attention to alleyways and thresholds, doors slightly ajar, the configuration of bodies in a room. Officers’ street experience teaches that violence and criminality lurk in everyday milieus, an epistemology of place that Carl Klockars (1980, 39) calls an “ecology of guilt.” This ecology, while not unique to the United States, acquires a particular immediacy in a country with more guns than people: the possibility that anyone may be armed conjures visions of an ambush behind every tree. Yet while the spatiality of threat—and the concomitant racial spatialization of police power (e.g., Bass 2001; Bell 2020)—has been widely discussed in scholarly writing, its temporality has received less direct scrutiny. I argue that temporality is also key to analyzing how scenario trainings instill the purportedly proper and reasonable modality of threat appraisal, wherein danger not only looms around every corner but also must be perceived in the right sequencing and mood. This temporal order proves vital to justifying racialized state violence to its practitioners and the public. For instance, reading threat in subjunctive

terms is instrumentally useful, as police conceptions of “what could have been” can hardly be corrected even when wrong.

I focus throughout this essay on academies, where the temporalities of policing are first cultivated, and specifically on two academies composed of predominantly white male recruits. My own whiteness not only facilitated research access but also meant that I was hailed as always already recruited to the common sense of policing (see [Katzenstein 2023](#) for further discussion). My white womanhood in particular, with its connotations of imperiled innocence and its structural entanglements in anti-Black policing (see [Wang 2012](#)), resonated with police temporal regimes. White women who call police on people birding or barbecuing while Black often display a subjunctive certainty of racialized danger, an “epistemic role-reversal of victim and perpetrator” ([Light 2021](#), 915) that treats Black presence as innately threatening ([McNamarah 2019](#)). This approach to threat finds a powerful echo in officer safety time—a resonance that perhaps facilitated a sense of easy translation for my officer interlocutors. To analyze their temporal operations, I center the production of imaginaries that shape reality beyond local context and in fact attempt to transcend specificities of place.<sup>8</sup> Importantly, these processes are not transmitted seamlessly: I occasionally encountered officers (primarily Black, female, and/or LGBTQ) who critiqued overextensions of officer safety discourse or challenged police racism. Here I focus less on how individuals absorb, contest, or implement teachings and more on how trainings themselves reproduce the dominant temporality of officer safety time.

### THINKING THREAT

Scholarship on policing has long examined how trainings socialize officers into police epistemologies of threat, violence, and authority. However, many early U.S.-based studies from organizational theory and criminology analyze police training as if detached from the broader worlds that officers occupy. For instance, [John Van Maanen’s \(1973\)](#) study of police academy training insightfully frames recruits’ subculture as a rational response to their normative social role, yet the nature of that role—enforcers of the race/class status quo, and hence antagonists to multiracial working-class movements ([Kelley 1996](#))—is merely hinted at. Some current scholarship on police training similarly treats it in isolation from the political functions of police, pronouncing the effectiveness of various pedagogies or suggesting methods for “culture” change. Such research, while often critical of police militarism, tends to orient itself to reformist concerns by seeking to professionalize and improve trainings (e.g., [Bayley 2018](#); [Brooks](#)

2021; Walker 2012). By contrast, ethnographers of police from less practice-oriented traditions have largely decentered reformist questions in favor of exploring political processes of subjectivization, such as how police trainings reproduce hegemonic masculinity (Kraska 1996; Prokos and Padavic 2002), generate socio-techno professional subjects (Akarsu 2018; Larkins and Durão 2023; Stalcup and Hahn 2016), translate human rights discourse (Babül 2017), socialize officers into a “danger imperative” and construct police warriors (Sierra-Arévalo 2021; Simon 2023), script police violence (Anderson 2021; Aushana 2020), and mold a “transcendental postracial ‘blue identity’” founded in white supremacy (Beliso-De Jesús 2020, 146–47). These works focus on the imperfectly homogenizing work of police training regimes: the worlds they build, the affects they generate, and the epistemologies they foster.

Such analyses also resonate with ethnographies of U.S. military simulation training, not simply because police have adopted “militarized” training but also because police and war powers have always been entangled in the settler-colonial history of the United States (Gamal 2016; Neocleous 2014; Seigel 2019). How soldiers comprehend and navigate an apparently deadly world figures centrally in this literature. In some contexts, the supposed enemy is conceived as an anonymous specter, potentially anywhere and everywhere (Allen 2011). In others, the spectral image takes form as a racialized and essentialized Other whose purported identity is conscripted into imperial occupation (Belcher 2014; Greenburg 2023; Rice 2016). Military trainings not only attempt to realistically simulate the world inhabited by such figures but also contain elements of the “mythic,” of “culturally tutored imagination” steeped in latent American anxieties (Lutz 2001, 87). These literatures demonstrate the basic governing conviction of military and police scenario trainings: that threat can be grasped, and mobilized against, through simulated realities whose mythic visions of the future bespeak their imaginaries in the present.

As this brief review suggests, research on scenario trainings in institutions of state violence, as well as in public health, disaster preparedness, and climate-change adaptation, has fruitfully intervened in anthropological debates on temporality (see Bear 2016; Bryant and Knight 2019; Fabian 1983; Munn 1992; Tamarkin 2018). Work on scenarios often explores relationships between the present and future, given that scenarios orient practitioners to anticipation: a regime of “inhabit[ing] time out of place” through “the telescoping of temporal possibilities” (Adams, Murphy, and Clarke 2009, 247–49). By producing knowledge about prospective futures while generating further uncertainties, scenarios

enable practitioners to prepare for the plausible, the potential, and even the unthinkable (Aradau and van Munster 2012; Faubion 2019; Lakoff 2008; Rickards et al. 2014). Yet the trainings discussed in scenario literatures are often events par excellence: massive, highly coordinated multi-agency exercises that invite scholarly focus on design and planning (for some exceptions, see Aushana 2020; Beliso-De Jesús 2020; Rice 2016; Simon 2023). Small-scale police scenario trainings are not necessarily less scripted per se, given that police departments share best practices, attend regional workshops, and use training materials produced by national organizations. They are, however, less planned, logistically simpler—often involving a handful of participants within a single agency—and more everyday and routine. Their ordinariness enables a closer focus not only on the modes of reasoning at stake in scenario exercises but also on how scenarios work to inscribe narratives of the future into trainees’ common sense and embodied orientations to threat. Moreover, literature on state violence and temporality tends to focus on the *longue durée* of racial-colonial chronopolitics (Hanchard 1999; Mills 2020) or on the temporalities that police produce through governing others (Andrejevic, Dencik, and Treré 2020; Boyce 2020; Sheehy 2019; Smith 2021; cf. Feldman 2017; Haanstad 2009). Here, I focus on the temporalities that govern officers themselves—which in turn prefigure the temporalities they impose on the policed—and on how the world-building technology of scenario training translates fear into officer safety time.

From their first week in academy, the recruits from the academy scene that opens this essay were primed to prioritize officer safety. They were initially instructed to stand against the wall when waiting in the hallways outside their classroom, and to not make eye contact with passersby. Later they were taught to silently scan people up and down. Finally, they were allowed to greet passersby with “good morning, sir/ma’am.” The point, their supervisor told me, was that recruits must learn to see everyone as possible attackers and size them up quickly before acknowledging their presence, an awareness of danger that should theoretically exceed, or precede, race and gender. In other words, they should *think threat first*. This anticipatory approach “calls for a heralding of the emergent ‘almost’ as an ethicized”—and strategic—“state of being” (Adams, Murphy, and Clarke 2009, 254). During the academy module on tactical maneuvers mentioned above, the SWAT team members leading the training attempted to translate this state of being into commonsense praxis through temporal, as well as spatial, readings of danger. Never turn your back on any potential threat, they instructed recruits. When approaching a house, always glance into parked cars

to make sure nobody's there. Think threat first, then layer on your communications, your mental health training, your de-escalation.

This normative sequencing could be read as merely heightening recruits' anxieties about a world rife with probable ambush. Indeed, in practice, officers often metabolize the mandate to think threat first as a reminder that they are "locked in intermittent and unpredictable combat with unknown but highly lethal enemies. As a result, officers learn to be afraid" (Stoughton 2015, 257). Thinking threat first, moreover, is an approach underwritten by U.S. case law, which assesses accusations of wrongful police violence through a "reasonable" officer's perception of potential danger at the moment of violence, rather than through any retrospective evaluation of material risk (Feldman 2017; Obasogie and Newman 2018). Yet instructors rarely sought to simply amplify fear, which they believed to be unproductive; instead, they strived to translate it into the pragmatic sequencing of officer safety time. Trainers frequently emphasized that "thinking threat" should mostly remain undetected, present only in recruits' minds. Only in 1 percent of cases will they need to manifest their calculations and take action. *You should treat every inmate like they're about to escape*, a prison officer told the recruits in a later academy module. *Like you treat every person like they might have the worst disease, like you treat every call like anything could happen. You don't necessarily act on it, but you have it in your head.* It's not that everyone is a threat. It's that anyone could be, and therefore officers must continually envision how to mitigate their vulnerability. One officer referred to the proper threat preparedness mind-set as the "duck analogy": *The duck looks graceful as shit but underneath is paddling hard. One never sees the feet.*

Many trainers underscored the tactical importance of this distinction between awareness and action. If officers were to see actual danger—rather than its potentiality—everywhere, their constant fear could incapacitate their decision-making capacity, with dire results. For one, this could produce impulsive reactions and therefore departmental liability. *Someone holding a cell phone in the dark, and you getting too close and getting scared, is how cops mess up and shoot unarmed people*, a SWAT officer told recruits, perhaps in a nod to the recent killing of Stephon Clark,<sup>9</sup> as they practiced responding to an overdose call. Fearful, reactive officers might also become visibly anxious, which trainers explained can undermine police authority. As a supervisor counseled recruits: *The biggest thing is, don't come in tense. Not everyone's out to kill you. Be aware . . . but relax. There's a big difference between being nervous and being aware. If you're nervous, shitbags are gonna see it.*<sup>10</sup> The ideal mode of thinking threat, in short, remains silent and produces a

kind of preparedness indiscernible to the public eye. Beneath the surface, officers should be watching their angles, scanning for observation points, and paddling like hell.

Thinking threat first, then, does not translate straightforwardly to anxious or trigger-happy, but rather to a confident, calm mind-set of tactical awareness that characterizes the sequencing of officer safety time. Scenario trainings encouraged restraint where possible, emphasized tailoring force to context instead of mindlessly reacting, and therefore figured officers as professional violence experts (Akarsu 2018; Katzenstein 2023). The threat these experts would face was presented as anonymous, a free-floating signifier detached from racialized bodies, skirting charges of racism while preparing officers for peril conceived as simultaneously everywhere and anywhere (Allen 2011). Given the mandate to gauge potentially ubiquitous—or ubiquitously potential—attacks on their own vulnerability without succumbing to needless fear, thinking threat first was simply a “natural” response.

### REALIZING VIOLENCE

Tactical awareness reaches its zenith in virtual reality (VR) simulators, the vanguard of technophilic reform efforts. As Black-led movements against U.S. police violence captured public attention in 2014–2016, VR training received favorable media coverage for its promise to immersively and accurately mimic police worlds, and to thereby help trainees suppress fear, minimize use of force, and develop better judgment under realistically stressful conditions. Virtual reality platforms by companies such as Axon, VirTra, and Apex Officer claim to provide a simulated realism too expensive or difficult for real-life role-play to emulate, using professional actors, “photo-realistic” graphics, and large scenario libraries with various backdrops. Through VR headsets or videos projected onto walls or panels, simulators play pre-programmed scenarios in which characters react automatically to the officer’s actions—such as dropping to the ground when shot in the head, or screaming when shot in the arm—or, in some programs, can be directed by the simulator’s operator to respond appropriately. For instance, if an officer gives a convincing verbal command, the operator can select an option for “man gets on his knees” rather than “man gets hostile.”

Optimism around VR police training emerges from a long genealogy of technophilia in police reform. For instance, purported technological fixes to racialized violence, such as body cameras, gained wide currency after the 2014 Ferguson uprising. Such efforts fit within a tradition of liberal reformism in which

police violence is figured as a redressable deviation from the norm, rather than as the systemic anti-Black grounding of the carceral system and U.S. democracy itself (Murakawa 2014; Vargas and James 2013; see Jaffe and Pilo' 2023). Whereas VR claims to offer technical solutions to both perceived lacunae in police training and the broader problematics of racialized violence, I argue that VR scenarios instead justify that violence by materializing latent threat within circumscribed worlds. Their “operational horizon” and “field of political reasoning” (Ahmann 2019, 3) is the subjunctive mood, the could-be or could-have-been of officer safety time, which structures assessments of danger and predetermines the only “reasonable” responses to it.

In the center of a simulator, the room darkened, I stood empty-handed next to my officer interlocutor. A training instructor switched on the program and projected onto the walls a wraparound image of the lobby of a police station—the very station in which we stood. Explaining that the software allowed them to insert their own photographs, he watched with us as actors onscreen moved realistically against the backdrop of the lobby, playing employees and visitors. The instructor then demonstrated various scenarios in which a shooter attacks the police station: strolling into the lobby and opening fire, popping out from a hallway, ambushing officers in the parking lot. Such scenarios, the instructor said, aimed to inculcate constant vigilance. He underlined this approach with another one set in the station’s parking lot. The scene opens on a woman lying on the pavement, groaning and clutching her bloody stomach. A little girl stands nearby, looking unruffled, apparently playing with a phone. Suddenly the phone transforms into a gun and she shoots at you. The instructor explained that if you shoot back and then try to render aid, another woman may leap out from behind the car and fire at you as well.

Most other scenarios that I later observed used the software’s inbuilt backgrounds, but the shooting-at-the-station scenarios illuminated an important facet of officer safety time. They invited officers to viscerally inhabit their own environment in the subjunctive, as a space of potential besiegement by unpredictable violence, while leaving unaddressed the absurdity of an armed child in a police department parking lot. Such invitations are clearly designed to kindle fear, yet—as with the sequencing of officer safety time—it would be a mistake to limit one’s analysis to such assertions. Virtual reality scenarios deploy the “unreal enemy” (Allen 2011) to hammer home the message that probabilities matter less than possibilities—if it *could* happen, no matter how unlikely, it must be prepared for. This seemingly open-ended, if alarming, imaginary of the future in

fact “confine[d] the possible” (Ahmann 2019, 4) by enclosing it in the subjunctive mood.

This mood governed a multi-hour VR scenario training I observed at an academy. Recruits entered the simulator in ones and twos, armed with training guns and deactivated Tasers, while their classmates watched. Their instructor, Adam, ran recruits through various scenarios, each oriented around a clear lesson. Not all involved shooting people, but all sought to instill a commonsense temporality. In one scenario, after an authoritative voice-over proclaims that aggressive dogs should be considered a weapon, you must neutralize a white woman’s dog or risk it attacking you or a playground full of children. The scenario invariably shows the snarling animal breaking free of its leash and racing toward the playground in the absence of decisive police action. This prefiguration of possibility was nonetheless not neatly contained in the moment of decision: if you kill the dog, the scenario offers a brief glimpse of the woman kneeling by its body, shouting *you shot my dog, why did you do that?* This temporal excess might be read as preparing trainees to live in the messy reality following the one enclosed by the scenario. Adam explained that recruits can justify the “public relations nightmare” of “dispatching Fido” by emphasizing the inevitability of harm the dog could unleash. Recruits thereby learned to inhabit and articulate the subjunctive mood authoritatively enough to inoculate themselves against future backlash to their decisions.

Other scenarios inserted weapons in unexpected moments. In one, a Black teenager suspected of robbery flees on your arrival. When you command him to stop, he may peacefully comply while a gun lies untouched in his hoodie pocket—*see, you don’t have to shoot just because he has a weapon*, Adam insisted to me in this rare example of de-escalation—or he may wheel around to shoot you. In another scenario, you shoot a white man who draws a gun during a traffic stop. *There’s no such thing as a low-risk traffic stop*, Adam reminded the recruits. *After you’ve shot him, what do you do first?* The recruits, uncertain, stumbled over their answers. *Render aid? No, he could have another gun*, Adam said. *You maintain lethal coverage* (keep a weapon aimed at him), *then search him*, then *render aid*. Here the police logic of threat stood at odds with notions of care, which were drummed out of the recruits with terrifying realism: perhaps, as you try to stanch his bleeding, the wounded driver will put a bullet through your head.

By presenting unlikely situations that challenged recruits’ intuitive sense of risk, the scenarios discussed thus far framed future dangers as unknowable and likelihood as therefore irrelevant to a subjunctive assessment of threat, even

when facing the paradigmatic innocence of a little girl with a phone. This is not to say that likelihood played no role in real-world decision-making; as described above, trainers averred that recruits must discern genuine versus potential threat. Rather, the abovementioned scenarios deployed the unexpected to engender certitude that any given situation contains the possibility of violence. These scenarios thus hinged on a form of *epistemic foreclosure*: the erasure of realities without threat, effected precisely through the seemingly open indeterminacy of subjunctive reasoning.

Another genre of VR scenarios confronted officers from the start with clear and present danger, rather than its subjunctive potentiality, and required them to distinguish lethal from non-lethal threats to their safety. Unlike real-life situations where officers misrecognize a phone as a gun, cases of evident threat often translate into supposedly justifiable police killings that rarely spark public outcry. Within the simulator, such scenarios not only precluded the possibility of a world without omnipresent violence but also predetermined the impossibility of de-escalation, insisting that a refusal to abide by subjunctive logics of endangerment inevitably exacerbates violence. In a 2014 news special called “Cops under Fire,” for instance, CNN’s Don Lemon played his studio audience a simulator training video of a domestic violence scene between a white couple. A man screams and curses at a woman, his face contorted as he shoves her against a wall. Lemon paused the video with the man’s hand raised threateningly out of sight. “How many of you would shoot?” he asked. Few of the mostly Black audience members polled said they would, aside from an attorney for Darren Wilson, the former police officer who killed Michael Brown in Ferguson in 2014. Wilson’s attorney gravely explained that the man will harm you or the woman, so not only can you legally shoot him, but perhaps you should. Lemon then resumed the video, revealing that the man is indeed holding a gun, which he turns on the woman and then on you. Lemon chided his audience: “The woman ends up dead, the officer could end up dead, and the suspect ends up dead as well, right?”<sup>11</sup>

My own experience in a simulator similarly revealed how such ambivalent scenarios are designed to narrow the ethical choices available to participants. Throughout my fieldwork, officers labored to conscript me into the epistemic foreclosure of officer safety time, drawing in part on notions of embodied whiteness as innately entwined with police logics. For instance, some told me they hoped trainings “opened my eyes” to the routine perils they confront and, by implication, the reasonableness of their responses. Virtual reality scenarios offered

a powerful way for them to proclaim to me the utter futility of operating outside the subjunctive. During a break between recruit groups, Adam handed me a training gun and played a scenario that opens with a call about a fired Black employee refusing to leave his employer's premises. The employee sits in his pickup truck outside a building, as his boss pleads through the truck's window for him to leave. Suddenly the boss yells "he's got a gun!" and dashes back inside. Adam paused the scene to ask what I would do. *I guess look for cover, and talk to him*, I said, fumbling for the most peaceful option. *So talk to him*, Adam said. Mimicking the language I had heard in trainings, I began repeating *hey man, come out and talk to me, it doesn't have to be like this*. The man slowly emerges from his pickup, holding a gun to his temple, and walks toward the building. I watched helplessly as he enters; then, with several shots and screaming, the scenario ends. *Did it make you think?* Adam asked. *What did you just allow to happen? You allowed someone who's just been fired . . . to go back into his workplace and kill people. Could you justify shooting him before he got there? Yes, you had to shoot him.* Adam could have selected a de-escalatory option once I began talking, but he aimed to prove that from the moment the man stepped out with a gun, you could rightfully kill him. Whether the man could have dropped the gun in another programmed decision point was immaterial. What mattered was the single branching path that invariably led him to commit mass murder, to jeopardize your safety and the safety of innocent civilians. That path foreclosed all the others.

Such scenarios—redolent of American fears and realities of mass shootings, with the archetypally white shooter played by a Black man—are statistically unlikely yet ubiquitous, both real and unreal. Other scenarios “make real” a gunman stalking your precinct's halls, a second shooter, a phone that is a gun. If in real life, someone holding a gun may not necessarily shoot at an officer, in the simulator they almost certainly will—and can you afford to wait and see? *What did you just allow to happen?* This is not to suggest that the gun is always a mirage or that threats are all fabrications of officer safety time. It is that scenarios do not simply suppress or amplify fear, but rather, reorient it within an enclosed logic of preparedness. As I have shown, threat assessments primarily function not in the simple past tense of what did happen, nor even in the future-oriented calculus of what was likely to happen. Instead, they operate in the “conditional” (Massumi 2015) or “modal” logic (Faubion 2019) of the subjunctive: what might be, what could have been. According to Chloe Ahmann (2019, 2–11), subjunctive politics “impose an economy of choices by foreclosing certain futures,” as though the remaining options “faithfully exhausted all that might occur.” In the simulator, the

many potential outcomes of a situation are eclipsed by the subjunctive certainty that threat could manifest at any moment. This foreclosure in turn induces a radical presentism—if you do not somehow stop the fired employee right now, he could kill you and his coworkers—and endlessly justifies the force required to, as my interlocutors often said, “stop threat and live.”

### COMMANDING OBEDIENCE

The subjunctive mood of officer safety time cannot be understood absent a reading of the bodies—both subjects and objects—that are shaped by it. Scenario training is not only scripted but also *scripting* (see [Aushana 2020](#)), in that it invites a normative embodied orientation toward the threat it teaches officers to read subjunctively. This orientation in police parlance is “command presence,” an unspoken language of authority and vulnerability that reveals the racial imaginaries simmering beneath purportedly colorblind epistemologies of danger. Command presence is the governing habitus and directionality of officer safety time. As I argue below, it points to tensions within what I call *police common sense* ([Katzenstein 2023](#)), a collective approach to self-defense that sutures together mutually contradictory stories—officers are rightful holders of ultimate authority, officers are endangered; threat is colorblind, threat is the unruly Black body—without resolving their dissonance.

From early in their training, recruits learn that their elementary tool for exercising control is command presence, which ideally manifests police dominance and professionalism in the form of demeanor, tone, and attire. Police often view this display of strength as a kind of de-escalatory strategy to diminish subjunctive threat: if officers project their authority, civilians will be less likely to challenge or attack them. Trainers therefore work to imbue underconfident recruits with an ability to command. During one academy module, recruits were funneled through a series of multi-person role-play scenario exercises designed to test their command presence. Other officers from the agency played the role of civilians, while academy instructors observed. In one exercise, two volunteer officers sat in a parked car, while recruits play-acted one at a time at performing a routine traffic stop. The instructor told the volunteers that when the recruit begins the stop, *Jump out and act like a flaming asshole. If they bring good strong command presence and show they're in charge, then you calm down and get back in the car. . . . If they're acting all shy and sheepish like yesterday, and don't put on their big-boy pants, then you escalate.* Recruits who managed to subdue the unruly “civilians” did so by loudly insisting that they get back in the car, while others who

struggled to assert dominance had to face mimed shootouts. The exercise concretized the link between a failure to project authority and inevitable violence.

Like policing itself, command presence hinges on performative heteromascularity (Cooper 2009; Prokos and Padavic 2002), stereotypically requiring a booming voice and imposing stature. Those whose bodies deviate from the prototypical large man are considered more vulnerable to disrespect and attack, so to maintain officer safety, they must mimic or even exceed hegemonically masculine traits (Beliso-De Jesús 2020).<sup>12</sup> For instance, in one paramilitary academy class I observed, a female lieutenant frustrated with a small female recruit's high voice eventually screamed in the woman's ear, "Put some bass in your voice, freakshow!"<sup>13</sup> Another class had a short white female recruit, Michelle, who often hesitated in scenario exercises and spoke politely when she was meant to be aggressive. Her instructors frequently complained out of earshot that she was shy and nervous, traits unbecoming an officer. However, when Michelle did act with confidence, they praised her effusively. During one exercise that required recruits to catch, search, and maintain control of a fleeing volunteer, Michelle grabbed the volunteer "like she owned him," her instructor gushed. He told her afterward that *you may have to take your authority up a notch, as both a small female and a new cop. You'll be challenged, so you may have to escalate more quickly*. Trainers translated a pragmatic recognition of how authority operates socially—recruits like Michelle could not manifest authority as legibly as large men—into the commonsense expectation that their safety might require escalatory force. To command the obedience required for officer safety, recruits had to cultivate a convincingly dominant masculine affect, and resort to violence if that affect failed to produce proper compliance.

Such command presence scenarios also highlighted who was imagined as the main targets of heteromascularity control. For instance, the largely white volunteer officers playing civilians often jokingly mimicked Black complaints of police. *Fuck you, why'd you stop me? Is it the color of my skin?* one role-playing white officer asked a white recruit attempting to make a traffic stop. During another exercise, the instructor distinguished the level of command presence they considered necessary in Riverside—the poorer, Blacker district in their area—from what was required in the whiter, wealthier Clinton.<sup>14</sup> *Maybe it's different in Clinton, but in Riverside, they'll walk all over you*, he explained. *You have to maintain control*. Poor Black residents were framed as naturally hostile and meriting harsh treatment, an impression reinforced during a difficult scenario: a noise complaint call where a crowd of ten volunteers pretended to be holding a party. *Be mouthy,*

the instructor told volunteers before recruits arrived. *You've all been in Riverside.* While recruits performed the exercise, the volunteers ignored them, comically taunted them, and shouted “five-oh!” in exaggerated accents meant to imitate hyperpoliced Black communities. One volunteer advanced on Michelle and her skinny male partner, smiling maliciously through their polite demands to remove his hands from his pockets, and managed to back them up a hill before they summoned an aggressive response. Afterward, an instructor scolded the two recruits: You have to have a better command presence. *They were taking it easy on you. Behave like that out in Riverside and you'll get eaten alive.*

Here, command presence clearly had an object: defiant and uncooperative Black civilians. Officers who were otherwise concerned not to appear racist took few pains to hide from me this commonsense apprehension, which was shared by many interlocutors across different agencies. Black civilians were figured as more likely to act “disorderly,” resist arrest, and otherwise require forcible control—a belief often articulated as realistic and therefore “not about race.” This understanding of noncompliance was simply the tip of anti-Black dehumanization and classed contempt. Officers marked poor Black neighborhoods as “problem areas” and “shitholes,” or derisively compared them to the “Third World,” a colonial construction of racial abjection that [Aisha Beliso-De Jesús \(2020, 145\)](#) calls “jungle logic.” A few officers noted casually that they could “do more” in poor Black areas, get away with more violations, under the banner of suppressing crime and asserting authority. A retired Black officer and reform advocate criticized police who deploy more violent and invasive tactics in poor Black neighborhoods. However, “they can’t abuse white people,” the retired officer told me. “They know that too. You’ll lose your job. Quick.”

Scholars, Black liberation movements, and residents of hyperpoliced neighborhoods have leveled and lived this argument for generations. As [Robin D. G. Kelley \(2016, 28–29\)](#) argues, members of poor Black communities “targeted by the state are not [considered] rights-bearing individuals to be protected but criminals poised to violate the law who thus require vigilant watch—not unlike prisoners.” This marking upholds police harassment of and violence against Black civilians, justified by the “ideological currency of black criminality” ([Muhammad 2011, 3](#)), or the indexing of Blackness as inherently criminal. It also operates in the broader imaginaries of white supremacy, in which Black people are “the carriers of terror, terror’s embodiment” rather than the “ground of terror’s possibility” ([Sharpe 2016, 79](#)). The concept of command presence has historically received criticism precisely for facilitating anti-Black police terror. For instance,

the Christopher Commission's 1991 evaluation of the Los Angeles Police Department's use of "excessive force" linked "command presence" to needless confrontations ([Independent Commission on the Los Angeles Police Department 1991](#), 99). However, it is also important to note that long before command presence materializes as physical violence, it prefigures, through subjunctive logics rendered commonsensical, a racialized object of control: the "thug" poised to attack the weak and unimposing, who understands only the language of dominance.

The racial imagination of command presence and its embodied heteromasculine posture represent a microcosmic expression of state power—one specific to U.S. racial formations, even if anti-Blackness, settler dispossession, and patriarchy also resonate elsewhere. The institution of U.S. policing is rooted in slave patrols and colonial occupation ([Singh 2017](#)); it also traces its lineage, as [Markus Dubber \(2005\)](#) suggests, to the nearly limitless authority of the ancient Greek patriarch. These histories echo through the teaching of command presence. Scenario trainings attempt to forge the human material of the police recruit into a physical embodiment of state power, fostering a habitus designed to convey indisputable authority to wield absolute control over the racialized poor. At the same time, trainings acknowledge the tenuousness of that authority, and pivot around an attentiveness to the officer's own vulnerability (see [Jauregui 2016](#)). Command-presence scenario training therefore illuminates the contradictions of holding police power in one's body. On the one hand, the notion that control and authority naturally belong to police, as wearers of the badge and agents of the state, is considered commonsensical. On the other, that control is figured less as a moral imperative of enforcing allegiance to the law and more as a contingent and foundational necessity for officer safety, for the security of the subjunctively threatened human body representing governmental authority. Scenario trainings teach that body how to envision and defend its vulnerability by asserting heteromasculine and white supremacist dominance as a matter of police common sense. This vision—its temporal logics, its translations and contradictions, its prescriptions for survival, and its vectors of threat and objects of control—is the realm of officer safety time.

## REFORM AND REALITY

When Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin murdered George Floyd in 2020, as when five Memphis police officers beat Tyre Nichols to death in 2023, many commentators noted that their respective departments were considered models of reform. Both agencies offered numerous trainings on reformers' wish

lists, including scenarios. Yet such training did little to protect Floyd or Nichols. Moreover, Chauvin himself was a field training officer, responsible for guiding new officers in the field—as was Kimberly Potter, the Minneapolis officer who killed twenty-year-old Daunte Wright as Chauvin’s trial unfolded in April 2021. Such spectacularly visible failures of reform policy stand within a broader pattern of failure:<sup>15</sup> many reform paradigms, including improved training, have not realized their promises to remedy police violence, even by their own standards (Akbar 2020; Skogan 2008). After Floyd’s murder, abolitionist ideas—drawing on the long-standing work of Black feminist thinkers like Angela Davis (2003), Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2022), and Mariame Kaba (2021)—gained broad circulation among a public increasingly disillusioned with the promises of reform. Growing numbers of organizers, progressive politicians, and even some police themselves have advocated for investing more in social safety nets and shifting certain duties away from police. Police reformers, however, have continued to frame training as a vital antidote to police violence.<sup>16</sup> Often absent from reformist assumptions is the question of how trainings work in practice: not only how they might be “imperfect” at preventing future Chauvins or Potters but also how even the most promising training reforms reinscribe racialized violence.

Reformers have hoped that scenario training will slow the accelerated temporality of police decision-making that presumptively generates needless violence. In this essay, I have argued that scenarios instead reinforce the logics of officer safety time, while creating such durable epistemic foreclosure that even critics of police often find themselves speaking in its terms. This foreclosure, with its commonsensical priority on police survival, in turn narrows the horizon of institutional possibilities to those imaginable within police common sense. Officer safety time thereby reinforces the broader temporality of reformism, or what I call *reformist time*: the simultaneous reach toward an improved future and refusal of historical continuity that together mire police reform in the endless present. Reformist time names the fact that reforms operate in a sticky cyclical-ity, with ideas such as “improved training” repeated over and over for decades. It does not necessitate an amnesia toward past policy failures per se; indeed, proposals for structural change would make little sense absent an acknowledgment of institutional history, however sanitized. Rather, reformist time attributes failure to shortcomings of implementation—limited funding, insufficient knowledge, bureaucratic barriers, or “cultural” resistance—to be learned from but relegated squarely to the past. It thereby licenses the recirculation of “reform templates [that] circulate in an economy of hope” (Akarsu 2018, 12) *as if* these

proposals were discontinuous with historical failures. This reformist construction of police temporality as a halting march toward a less violent, more professional, and less racist police force is precisely what draws reform into a radical presentism that obviates its own aspirations.

As I write this conclusion, the prospects for federally mandated police reform are fading under the second Trump administration, whose Department of Justice has frozen consent decrees. A civilian reformer I interviewed once referred to cycles of reform as a “ping-pong match” between attention, retrenchment, and indifference, and the United States may be entering another period of anti-reform backlash. Yet while the new administration’s long-term impacts on reform programs remain to be seen, local and state efforts to implement scenario trainings continue. Moreover, such trainings do not belong to liberal reformist projects alone. Cities like Atlanta and Baltimore project spending hundreds of millions of dollars for new police training facilities, or “cop cities,” designed to enable “tactical rehearsals” of urban warfare (Schrader 2024), and trainings continue to circulate between the United States and Israel amid ongoing genocide and dispossession in Palestine (Erakat 2024). The stakes of grasping how trainings work in practice remain high.

Ultimately, scenario trainings designed to suppress fear cannot unwind the mandate to think threat first—and in fact naturalize that edict by channeling fear into tactical awareness. “Reality-based” trainings cannot change the deeply engrained notion that officers must be prepared for inevitable threat, even when the gun is just a phone—and in fact enclose that threat in subjunctive racialized logics. Training reforms may reinforce police legitimacy, and serve as rationales to siphon more public funds into police departments, but they do not remake—and instead often strengthen—the temporal orders of state violence and the pragmatics of police common sense. Attempts to reckon with police violence through training thus run aground on the unassailable shoals and foreclosed possibilities of officer safety time.

## ABSTRACT

*U.S. police reform advocates often press police departments to replace “fear-based” survival trainings with scenario or “reality-based” trainings, which involve immersive role-playing scenarios such as effecting an arrest. Temporality is a key facet of these exercises: by decelerating and replaying stressful situations, scenarios promise to allay the impulsive fear presumed to drive racialized police violence. Drawing on ethnography with officers in Maryland, I argue that scenarios instead translate fear through what I call “officer safety time.” This hegemonic temporal regime encourages police*

*to “think threat first,” read danger in the subjunctive mood, and inhabit a hetero-masculine habitus of state power. While presumptively color-blind, officer safety time seals anti-Black violence into a single decision point evacuated of alternate futurities. I argue that scenarios deploy temporality to hail police as simultaneously threatened and threatening, and more broadly, cultivate the temporal orders of state violence in police—while immunizing them against substantive reform. [policing; temporality; scenarios; training; anti-Blackness; violence; United States]*

## NOTES

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1. I use italics to signify unrecorded dialogue reconstructed from detailed field notes.
2. Police consent decrees are legal agreements with the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) in which departments and their municipalities commit to broad reforms.
3. See the President’s Task Force on 21st Century Policing’s 2015 “Final Report of the President’s Task Force on 21st Century Policing” (available at <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/GOVPUB-J36-PURL-gpo64136/pdf/GOVPUB-J36-PURL-gpo64136.pdf>) and the Police Executive Research Forum’s 2022 “Transforming Police Recruit Training: 40 Guiding Principles” (available at <https://www.policeforum.org/assets/TransformingRecruitTraining.pdf>).
4. Police academies train new police recruits for a career in law enforcement. Academy instruction may encompass use of force, vehicle operations, report writing, crisis negotiation, and the like. Unlike many countries, the United States does not have national police academies for local police; instead, training commissions in each state set their own requirements. I have anonymized the agencies and pseudonymized the officers discussed in this essay.
5. In other words, racism and anti-Blackness specifically are relegated to the unconscious, while conscious consideration is framed as the realm of non-bias and equal treatment.
6. Whether this state of affairs is ameliorable through better training or inherent to police work represents a key point of struggle between advocates for police reform and abolition, respectively (Akbar 2020).

7. It is important to note that [Limor Samimian-Darash's \(2022, 53\)](#) examination of scenario design in Israel does not sufficiently engage with the politics of how “threat” is construed. The book focuses on nationwide civil defense exercises that generate “narratives of plausible futures” involving rocket attacks and bombings, which are envisioned as logistical threats devoid of the political—just as my interlocutors’ scenarios imagine uncertain dangers lurking in the unruly Black body, absent engagement with the politics of these imaginings. However, any critical analysis of such narratives is at best incomplete without deconstructing their vectors of threat, and the settler-colonial purposes for which they are furnished.
8. While it is important to distinguish police conceptions of danger from material risk (see, e.g., [Woods 2019](#)), this essay traces how scenarios imagine threat and shape responses to it, rather than contrasting the specter of threat with local realities.
9. In 2018, two Sacramento police officers killed Stephon Clark, a twenty-two-year-old Black man, claiming they believed Clark pointed a gun at them. He was carrying only a cell phone.
10. *Shitbag* was a common classed/raced epithet in my fieldwork, a term of derogation synonymous with casual uses of *criminal* or [John Van Maanen's \(1978\)](#) classic definition of “the asshole.”
11. The full video, “Would You Shoot If You Were a Cop?” is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7JrZKZxzYX0>
12. [Bonnie McElhinny's \(2017\)](#) female officer interlocutors framed the occupational requirement they felt to perform “masculine” objectivity—i.e., toughness and emotionlessness—not as “acting manly,” but rather as acting “like cops.” In other words, they contested the association between objectivity and masculinity by claiming the former without the latter.
13. Instructors often used ableist terms when shouting at recruits. The shouting, one of their instructors explained to me, inoculated recruits from future stress. The ableism was common across departments.
14. I use pseudonyms for district names to avoid compromising the department’s anonymity.
15. I deploy this framework here advisedly, as simplistic binaries of success or failure can obscure thinking about reform as an analytical object ([Hornberger 2010](#)), and failure can be productive ([Jaffe and Pilo' 2023](#)).
16. See the Institute for Criminal Justice Training Reform’s “Not Enough Training” (available at <https://www.trainingreform.org/not-enough-training>) and the Police Executive Research Forum’s 2022 “Transforming Police Recruit Training: 40 Guiding Principles” (available at <https://www.policeforum.org/assets/TransformingRecruitTraining.pdf>).

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