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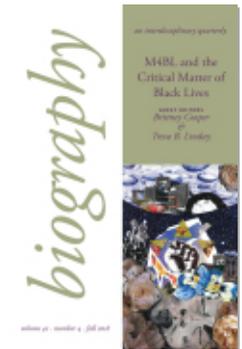
## Black Lives as Snuff: The Silent Complicity in Viewing Black Death

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# BLACK LIVES AS SNUFF

## THE SILENT COMPLICITY IN VIEWING BLACK DEATH

RASUL A. MOWATT

### STAND BY ON SET

The aim of this photo essay, through simulated director cues, is to question viewers' intent in the consumption of videos that make a spectacle of the violence perpetrated on Black bodies. In the vein of the underlying principle of Black Lives Matter, does a Black life really matter for those of us who proclaim it? The ubiquity of social media has fostered an ever-increasing, mediated culture and mode of communication on the injustice of racialized violence. What are the politics of the gaze at play in this culture of viewing Black death? With the proliferation of videos that are taken from a scene, posted, and shared, have we truly become more engaged citizens, staunch activists, and effective community organizers? Or have we sat back, copied and pasted a link, and made a statement of our dismay in the spirit of social change *online* while offline nothing changes at all? We proceed with our weekend plans, go to work, do household chores, and continue our random daily activities.

"Snuff" is a movie genre depicting the murder, dismemberment, or suicide of a person, often times for the viewer's pleasure (Johnson and Schaefer 40, 48). It has been argued that *snuff* films depicting the *actual* murder, dismemberment, or suicide of a person are an urban myth, despite the degree of independent and mainstream films that allude to their existence (Donovan 189–90). And like snuff films, the images of the bodies of Black people as well as the recordings of the *actual* killing of the Black person are commodities for multiple purposes.

Viewers' silent complicity in viewing videos of Black deaths is discussed in this essay in four key areas: 1) an examination of the videos of known state-sanctioned deaths of Black victims as cues for reaction and actions; 2) a

discussion of the quiet murmurs in cases of the known deaths of women and transpersons at the hands of law enforcement, with and without video cues that disrupt our reactions and actions; and, 3) an inquiry into the silence in cases of the injury to Black women at the hands of law enforcement, without cues for reaction and action and without satisfying our consumptive desires for more videos and more information. The concluding aim is 4) raising these questions to make the unbridled beauty in #BlackLivesMatter an external and internal call for justice, as much about substance as it is about form.

### STAND BY TO RECORD

A Point Blank Project protest representative stated, “It can happen at any place, at any time, to anybody. And that’s what’s scary is waking up and not knowing when it can happen to you, or your loved ones. . . . Pictures can show a thousand words. . . . Having images that people can convey on their own is more powerful than trying to tell them” (Monroe). “A picture can show a thousand words” is an often-repeated statement that no longer carries the truth that it was initially intended to convey, a truth it never really had. But can they, pictures, show any number of words? Do they convey any meaning other than death? A picture, a video, or a painting does not show or tell a thousand or even ten words. Especially when it captures the death of a Black person. A picture can show one thing. It tells one story. It tells one word. Death.

In a 2002 *New Yorker* feature on images of war, Susan Sontag notes, “The problem is not that people remember through photographs but that they remember only the photographs . . . that the photographic image eclipses other forms of understanding—and remembering. . . . To remember is, more and more, not to recall a story but to be able to call up a picture.” In our righteous zeal to call out police brutality, racism, and White supremacy, have we erred in our use of these images to tell a truth? To tell a story of suffering? To be a call for action?

But who is “we”? The ensuing discussion throughout this essay is directed at many different viewers of these videos. The “we” are Black viewers seeking understanding, consolation, or even justice; viewers of color finding similarities in expressions of oppression; viewers as allies who find themselves questioning the systems that create disparity and inequity in treatment, access, and opportunity; media representatives who use these videos in ways that may not be as intended in their original production or for purposes other than social justice; and lastly, consumers of these videos who may or may not have any intended purpose other than to watch, who have yet to come to a purpose beyond being a voyeur in the lives and fates of other citizens.

Cue scene one. Ready to record.





Figure 3. The caption originally printed with this image reads, "Almost a year after Mr. Garner died, a sidewalk memorial still marks where he was fatally injured" (Baker, Goodman, and Mueller). Reproduced courtesy of Andrew Spear/*The New York Times*/Redux.



Figure 4. Photo of Mendocino High School girls varsity players, posted on *Mendocinosportsplus* Facebook page on December 28, 2014. The girls were later banned from tournament play for wearing the shirts. Reproduced courtesy of Paul McCarthy/*Mendocinosportsplus*.

We launch a necessary yet incomplete critique in each act of a play in ally theater, key strokes and posts in desktop activism, or the faint murmur of battle cries in weekend social justice warring. They, allies, have no right. They, allies, have no business. They, allies, shouldn't. They, allies, better. Step back. Take a seat. Know their place.

The predominantly White North Carolina Mendocino High School girls and boys varsity basketball teams were certainly put in their place. On social media, their photograph was circulated without context to highlight people's disgust at how White allies were popularizing and taking over the work of so many Black organizers and activists (figure 4). In real life, their photograph and actions landed them a rescinded invitation from the Fort Bragg High School holiday tournament. Their photograph and actions landed them the condemnation of the county's Deputy Sheriffs' Association. One of the photographed, Naomi Baker (then age seventeen), stated in an interview, "You can't say all cops are good . . . you can't say all cops are bad. . . . We are just trying to say something on police brutality" (Boren).

So, what is their place? What is our place? What is our place in the remembrance, memorialization, and even strategic use of those who have violently died by the hands of the state or vigilantes? What is our place in the use of their names, their memories, and their images, especially the lasting images of their deaths, caught on film or a recording?

We are not Ms. Carr mourning her son Eric (figure 2). We are not of the community that he lived in or the streets he frequented (figure 3). Eric Garner's very visible death is a hallmark in the question of whether police have the capacity and power bestowed upon them for summary execution (NAACP). If they do not, are these then extrajudicial killings? But whether they are or not, what responsibility do we have as viewers of these recorded acts? Are we consciously or subconsciously enjoying the aesthetics of torture? Are we intentionally or unintentionally predisposing ourselves to a pedagogy of pain? Like the punishment technique of "death by a thousand cuts," are the roles of the recorders and viewers just as problematic as the torturers and executioners? (Stabler 307–9).

#### **GO TO BLACK: CUE SCENE TWO AND THE IMAGING OF WHITE SUPREMACY**

In *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Sontag challenges viewers of images of war to see "whether when we look at the same photograph we feel the same things" if looked upon multiple times, in multiple sittings (4). Her challenge is severe, with no chance to counter her, because she is right. The photographs of World War I that she is referencing were shock therapy. Each photograph was of war, is war. And war never looks like anything other than a human "abomination." A feat of "barbarity." It must be stopped, no matter the cost. But Sontag closes with the obvious question, "who believes today that war can be abolished? No one, not even pacifists" (5).

Who believes today that White Supremacy can be abolished? Silence. Like photographs of war, photographs and videos of Black death speak to a story of White Supremacy. Maybe it is the perpetrators in their zeal and intent. Maybe it is the victim and the manner in which they need to “put them down” with such ferocity. Maybe it is us in how we consume and collect so many images yet have little to show for them. As Sontag extends her challenge with photographs of the victims of war, she acknowledges how they fall into a certain rhetorical use, as “they create the illusion of consensus” (6). We believe the images can unite us, the people of goodwill, the superficial White allies, and the righteously indignant potential victims of color. To do what? Feel sadness and anger, post, and repeat. The geopolitical call to end the reign of the warlord Joseph Kony led to a universal call on the internet for his execution. But nothing emerged from this call, despite the irony that it ushered in a collective call for the summary execution of a Black African man (Leonard 2). It seems to be easy to conceive of death if the target is Black.

Cue scene two. Stand by to record. Ready.

**TAKE TWO: TAMIR RICE, NOVEMBER 22, 2014**



Figures 5 and 6. Screenshots from *News 5 Cleveland* of the released park surveillance camera footage in the death of Tamir Rice in Cuddell Commons.

A twelve-year-old boy is shot in a public park, Cudell Commons, located in the greater Cleveland area, in very close proximity to the Cudell Recreation Center, a center that he and his sister frequented (Mowatt 54). The two responding officers were dispatched with only the following information, “Cudell Rec Center . . . there’s a black male sitting on a swing . . . pulling a gun out of his pants and pointing it at people” (Morgan 3). According to the 224-page five-month investigative report of the Cuyahoga County Prosecutor and Sheriff’s Office on the use of deadly force by the City of Cleveland Division of Police, the marked police department vehicle entered the park area, moved past the playground area, and then “came to rest between the gazebo and wooden vehicle barriers located on the grass between the gazebo and the parking lot” (3). Within two seconds, two rounds were fired into the abdomen of young Tamir Rice “at a distance between the 4.5 feet and 7 feet”; “3.5 minutes” after the officers’ initial arrival, a request for Emergency Medical Service was sent, although no medical assistance was given prior to the paramedics’ arrival. Tamir Rice “expired” at 12:54 a.m. on November 23, 2014 (4).

“Did you hear what they said?” we proclaim, a similar outcry to Gil Scott-Heron’s beloved song, as we post another video of another Black death at the hands of law enforcement. Tamir Rice was dead. The video, a video, any video has been uploaded from a live source, Facebook Live, Instagram Stories, then circulated from one user to another, and becomes a trending topic significant enough to be shown on major privatized media sources. As of November 2017, the video of Tamir Rice’s murder has received 1,490,014 views on YouTube, 10,377 upvotes on Reddit, 8,779 Tweets, and 72,678 Instagram posts. There is a terror in the sheer number of videos in the archive. The accumulation of the death, the loss of life, and the un-mattering of lives takes a toll. What is the appropriate number to bear witness? The cycle of viewing and posting has been repeated without fail for each video death since the death of Oscar Grant in 2008, although the spectacle of the violence perpetrated on Black bodies has existed for more than one hundred years.

In *Lynching Photographs*, Dora Apel and Shawn Michelle Smith ask, “Why take photographs of atrocity and body horror? Who has the right to look at such photos? Is looking a voyeuristic indulgence, a triumphal act, or an experience in shame? The answers to these questions inevitably depend upon who is doing the shooting and the looking, and thus it matters how and where the pictures are presented” (43). But what does it mean that these videos of Black death are “produced” and shared? How are these videos being consumed, both consciously and unconsciously? What are our actions once we “see” and share? How do our actions condone the necropolitics at play? Do our actions really counter the sovereignty of the state? Do they really counter White Supremacy?

The determination of who dies, how they die, who is allowed to live, and how they live is within the realm of necropolitics (Mbembe 12–15). Playing back these recordings without direct action is simply an exercise that seems to extend the sovereign power of the state. The facts of who dies and who gets punished make this abundantly clear. Michael Moore proclaimed on Twitter that he could “stand in the middle of 5th Ave., pull over an African American [*sic*] w/a broken taillight, shoot him, claim self defense & get away w/ it!” But as Durham contends, the virtual displays of these deaths are race plays of the first order. For potential victims, they strike fear. For allies, they incite momentary anger. For others, they confirm that the machine functions, and no new updates are needed.



Figure 7. Black Lives Matter protesters from New York City pose with Ohio police on Monday outside the GOP convention in Cleveland. Photographer: James West. Reprinted by permission of Mother Jones.

A 2016 *Mother Jones* article headline reads, “This Photo of Ohio Cops Posing with Black Lives Matter Protestors in Cleveland Is Awesome” (West) (figure 7). But why? How is it awesome? Is it because the cops chose to pose with the protestors? Is it because the protestors chose to pose with the cops? Does that somehow satisfy the need for perceived unity? Or is it that Tamir Rice has been found alive? Do we seem to forget the anger about the death as time moves on, especially as the death seems less immediate? What then does his death represent to us for it to be quenched by a photo of cops and protestors posing together? Many of us are fully aware that police officers are simply servants of the state, so their representation in an image does not relinquish

the state of its responsibilities of due process and due diligence. But we are additionally aware that those protestors do not represent the totality of those proclaiming #BlackLivesMatter, so their representation in an image does not qualify as the collective acceptance of an unwritten treaty or peace accord.

So once again, in the vein of the underlying principle of Black Lives Matter, does a Black life really matter to those of us who proclaim it?

### **GO TO BLACK: CUE SCENE THREE & THE UBIQUITY OF COMPUTER-MEDIATED CULTURE**

The ubiquity of social media has fostered an ever-increasing mediated culture and mode of communication on the injustices of racialized violence. However, what are the politics of the gaze at play in this culture of viewing and consuming Black death (Mueller and Issa 131–33)? The computer-mediated culture of the internet has fostered two urban myths tied to Black death: 1) posting about it is Black, and 2) posting about it will create change.

The struggle between understanding Blackness as an ethic rather than an essence is evident in this questioning of posting and our consumption of these videos. Each posting exerts a notion of Black essentialism (Jenkins 130). Is posting Black? Is not posting Black? Which stance is the authentic one? One's feelings, perspectives, and opinions are the only ones that bear any authenticity. The computer-mediated culture of YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook reinforces a need to find others who think and feel exactly the same. Who cosigns those thoughts and feelings without criticism and scrutiny? If someone counters your post, you "unfriend." Accuracy of content is never held accountable by and among users for any collective memory or responsibility. The individual is both a person and a perspective. The individual is supreme. The individual is as Black as they say they are.

This situation begins to breed a regional identity of Blackness rather than a transnational identity despite the facilitation of transnational knowledge of these experiences. The sharing and knowledge is one directional, as the horror of state violence is more salient in the United States and not throughout the diaspora. An identity of Blackness that is not filled with nuance and expanse, but more importantly with depth of the experiences of state violence as a worldwide phenomenon. This restriction counters the eras of Black Power and Black Consciousness that swept across the United States, the United Kingdom, South Africa, the Caribbean, and beyond. Blackness was an ethic, a standard to measure up to by big women and men who wore even bigger shoes. For us to slip on those shoes would require thinking and action, a conjoined attitude and behavior. Ultimately, what one says is never enough to

measure up to what one does. What does Blackness say about the treatment of the dead?

In *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, bell hooks, while praising the use of mass-media-produced images as a pedagogical tool for counter-messaging resistance work, also notes that images “maintain oppression, exploitation, and overall domination of black people” (2). Further, since the time of slavery, White Supremacists “have recognized that control over images is central to the maintenance of any system of racial domination” (2). Does posting conform to a notion of Blackness, or does posting conform to the whims and wishes of White Supremacy? Are we posting as a liberated mind or as a colonized mind? How many videos have we posted at this point? How many postings have we liked? How many postings have we commented on? How many tweets have we followed or retweeted? How many times have we tagged someone related to another killing, another death? What else have we done?

A 2016 article in the Radical Chic section of *The Daily Beast*, “Protestors, You Better Dress for Success,” warns protestors of Black Lives Matter that “while we have long been a nation of causes, times change and so do fashion, communications, and the messages that help promote a cause,” so they would do well to “study past movements to plan how to best present their causes and themselves to the public for success” (Mills). According to the author, the past movements chose their appearance with intentionality rather than for fashion appeal. But even this interpretation is limited by a reading and viewing of past movements through social media. The Harlem Renaissance, Negritude, Civil Rights, Black Consciousness, and Black Power are reduced to just a few snapshots and clicks.

The black beret, the kente cloth, the beads, the danshiki, and the combat boots were each selected for their known meanings and expanded to further important meanings for members (Ogbar 118; Vargas 95–97). But should this modern focus on fashion not be disconcerting? The response to Black death, #BlackLivesMatter, is now a location to present and perform fashionably. A panel at SXSW 2017 on Black (Power) Fashion discussed how the fashion industry “is integrating unapologetic Blackness into runway collections and advertising” (Mosley). But should we not question our actions? Should we have some measure of regret in our choice of actions and activities?

Cue scene three. Stand by to record. Ready.

**TAKE THREE: PHILANDO CASTILE, JULY 6, 2016**

Figure 8. Screenshot from Ramsey County of Diamond Reynolds's video of Philando Castile's death that has been further cropped to show only a segment of the screen as a method of respecting the dead, how they died, and to prevent their perpetual re-killing in media.

Computer-mediated culture rests on keystrokes as the acceptable limits of action. When we click “post,” we are given immediate gratification and notification of the impact of our “action” as we accumulate likes, see shares, approve tags, and receive comments. We brought awareness to others of this injustice. The growing oral culture of the internet has even adapted to our “activist” behaviors. Facebook Live, launched on April 16, 2016, became the method for Diamond Reynolds (Philando Castile's girlfriend) to record and display his death for our viewing (figure 8).

The computer-mediated culture of the internet may “confine our ability to discern the true character of human experience and expression” (Fernback 43). The computer-mediated culture of the internet may situate the image and recordings of Black people, Black bodies, and Black death as products of the platforms and structures within YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook. They become a tool. They become an algorithm. They become a notification because “you seemed to be interested in Black Lives Matter.” The viewing and posting through these media are within the guidelines and political concerns of those entities that are likely to be in no way congruent to those who wish to act, resist, and struggle against state violence.

For media outlets, they increase clicks with each breaking news notification. For non-Black allies, they are used as proof of their steadfastness in support and their resolve in viewing the image repeatedly. For detractors, they are

used as second-by-second discussion pieces on the likelihood that Black death is justified, especially to prevent some future crime (for example, that Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown were weed-smoking, gang-sign-throwing, YouTube thugs), while for many Black viewers and activists, they are a rallying symbol for solidarity.

They become an aesthetic. They become an ornament. They become an object. They become a tool. But they are still the body of a dead mother, father, son, daughter. This discussion in terms of snuff films provides a point of caution that the use of the image and recording must come with care and respect, care and respect for the dead. This care and respect should be seen as the necessary boundary between the approved and rightful use of their images for struggle and their use that only continues the disposability of Black people and the Black body. This care and respect must be granted by loved ones and not assumed.

We will make cardboard cutouts of lynching victims of the past and post them around a college campus, without explanation or clarity as was the case with an anonymous Bay Area art collective at the University of California, Berkeley (Alexander). And without that clarity, many take offense to these postings and even think of them as anti-Black attacks. An artist in their innovative guerilla form of protest simply seemed to not account for the effect of viewing the image of the lynched hanging from trees and light posts as a revictimization of the historically lynched or the infliction of trauma on the very population they were calling viewers to support. But in the current era, lynchings and lynching photographs have been inserted into posts, discussions, and conversations with little care and acknowledgment of the deaths.

At the 2017 Whitney Biennial, violence was taken up as a core theme by many of the assembled artists. One painting, Dana Schutz's "Open Casket," depicts the open casket view of Emmett Till, the thirteen-year-old Black Chicago boy who was lynched in 1955 while visiting relatives in Mississippi. Schutz's depiction rightfully garnered critiques, as (political) art should.

But one protestor, Pastiche Lumumba, argued that "there's a history of white people taking pictures of lynchings. In 2017, for us to have a White woman painting that image with no context . . . that's a grossly deficient way of using one's privilege" (qtd. in Jaremko-Greenwold). Another protestor, Parker Bright, who wore a homemade "Black Death Spectacle" T-shirt, commented, "I told people they could go Google search Emmett Till's open casket and see a more impactful image that doesn't simplify or reduce or flatten Till's body. . . . I was more interested in having people confront a living, breathing black body as opposed to one that didn't really have a choice" (qtd. in Jaremko-Greenwold). In the same exhibit, another artist, Henry Taylor, with

“The Times They Ain’t A Changing, Fast Enough,” received no scrutiny since “this image” was painted by a Black artist “with the understanding it could be *him*, whereas Schutz will never have the same relationship to the anti-black violence that she depicted” (Jaremko-Greenwold). But is the issue the use and depiction of the death of a Black person? No matter the identity of the artist?

#### GO TO BLACK: CUE SCENE FOUR AND THE NEGATIVE VALUE OF BLACK LIFE

But we will protect an indignant call to destroy a painting. We will protect the fury to post what we will. We will protect our privilege to tweet. As Sontag states, “People don’t become inured to what they are shown—if that’s the right way to describe what happens—because of the *quantity* of images dumped on them. It is passivity that dulls feeling. The states described as apathy, moral or emotional anesthesia, are full of feelings; the feelings are rage and frustration” (*Regarding* 102). The fight becomes something other than anti-state violence.

Modern justification by Black protestors of the posting and use of imagery of Black death often invokes the efforts of Mamie Till-Mobley, the mother of Emmett Till. Once the body of Emmett Till was brought back to A. A. Rayner funeral home in Chicago, she immediately wanted a photograph by a *Jet* magazine photographer and then an open-casket ceremony for mass viewing to be used as organizing mechanisms against lynching. As Emmett Till’s mother controlled the production and circulation of her son’s destroyed body, “Emmett Till’s life became a life that counted, a loss that mattered, and a death to be mourned” (Apel and Smith 64). But we, as people who become active in the calls for justice in cases of racialized violence, are not Mamie Till-Mobley. This is not our son. We did not make these images. And many of us have little to do with legislation or policy for his protection, or of the many other little Black boys and girls who have also fallen victim to racial violence. Many more of us have little to do with providing actual safety or protection to the next victim. Meanwhile, the family of Michael Brown took a different stance: “We don’t want that out there,” said Eric Davis, Brown’s cousin, referring to the sharing and posting of the image of Brown’s dead body lying in the middle of Canfield Drive for hours (Lussenhop).

Regardless of whether or not families call to circulate or not to circulate these images, the rage and frustration these images produce oftentimes turn into nothing. Maybe our indictment of Dana Schutz’s painting is projection. In interpreting what we see, “Nothing means anything on its own. Meaning comes not from seeing or even observation alone, for there is no ‘alone’ of this sort. Neither is meaning lying around nature waiting to be scooped up by the senses; rather it is constructed. ‘Constructed’ in this context, means produced in acts of interpretations” (Steedman 54). Meanings are neither automatic

nor automatically clear. The construction of meaning occurs through the art of interpretation. For Dora Apel, “there are two possible reactions to public pictures of violence: guilt and shame.” Guilt is considered unproductive, as we spiral into an ever-increasing cycle of what we feel and how we feel. Shame is thought to have “the potential to raise questions and encourage some form of moral confrontation or political intervention” (52). If we proclaim that Black Lives Matter, we are also asking why don’t Black lives matter? In Western thought, Blackness has no value: it means nothing; it operates as a negative value. At best, this zero value results in marginalization, seclusion, or even invisibility. But at worst, as a negative value Black life requires opposition and even elimination. A determination must be made against negative life to preserve positive life. This logic works for those whom we accuse of seeking to eliminate it, the state. But this also works for those of us, whom this essay seeks to challenge, that do little when the life (the allegedly negative and condemnable life) is taken. Over the long term, are guilt and shame effective ways to galvanize attention?

Cue scene four. Stand by to record. Ready.

**TAKE FOUR: SANDRA BLAND, JULY 13, 2015**

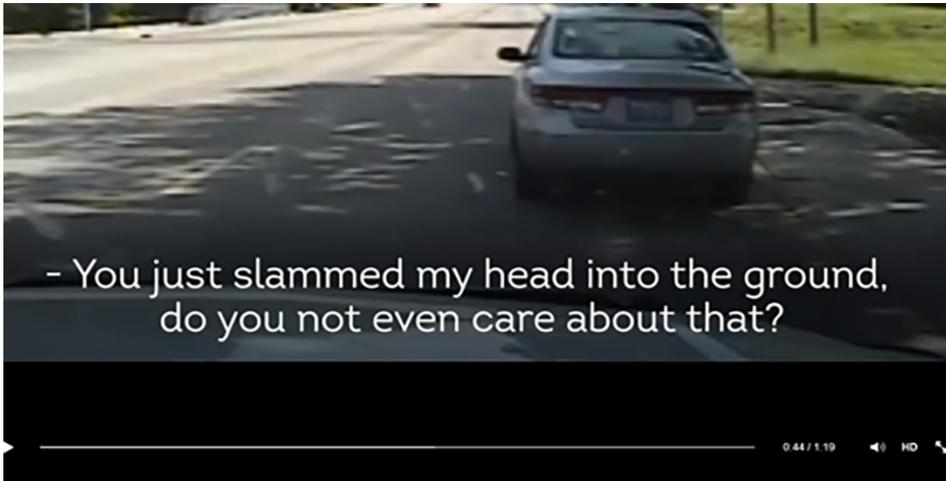


Figure 9. Screenshot of CNN subtitled replay of police dashcam footage of the Sandra Bland stop (Ford).

The quiet murmur about Sandra Bland’s death indicts those of us who seek justice in cases of racialized violence but have nevertheless been silent. We see her excitement about a new job at Prairie View A&M University in a Skype

video chat. We hear her disgust at being stopped for a minor traffic violation (Smyser). We see her again at various points in the jail. But we do not see her death (figure 10). We waited for a new video to show us her death. Any evidence of death. A dangling body. A scream off-camera. A shoe on the ground. Anything to justify the supposed preparation for our supposed actions in our supposed state of furious and righteous anger.

What I argue is that because we don't see her death, Sandra's Black life seems no longer to matter in certain ways. She is like an actor for a film that has yet to be released. Not seeing her death adds even more credence to how we must #SayHerName, even though our proclamation of her name may still be hollow. Black women oftentimes do not serve our appetites as actors for snuff-like clips. It is ironic that Donovan notes, "in most versions [of snuff films], the killers are men and the victims women—women who thought they would be making a conventional pornographic film" (194). The victims of alleged snuff films are always from disposable populations, always being readied for disposal, after giving pleasure to the powerful. Thus, women are the chosen "actors" in snuff films. Yet the majority of videos or recordings of Black death at the hands of the state depict victims who are men. The gender may have changed, but the status of the person as disposable has not. Due to our hyper-attentiveness to Black men and their subjection to state violence, the depiction of their injury and death titillates us far more. However, Black people are a wholesale disposable people.



Figure 10. CCTV footage of Sandra Bland in the Waller County jail.

Instead of clandestine viewers of snuff films, viewers of videos of Black death are quite public. They create YouTube channels and clips. They are featured reporters on televised media outlets. And they are us, who view both. Instead of unknown movie directors, we have police dashcams, smartphones, and surveillance cameras. The fisheye lens of a surveillance camera in the Waller County jail offers what is meant to be a panoramic view, capturing everything (figure 10). We were being primed for Sandra's death before her death. We were shown her mugshot before death, as if she had already joined the dead. We were being updated hourly by CNN and others.

But what is captured is a capture, an arrest, which still ultimately resulted in a death. Thus, the depiction in all the videos remains the same: the depiction of death, despite the absence of footage of the actual death. Unrecorded, Sandra Bland's death denies the pleasure and appeal of snuff. The death of a woman, on film, for our pleasure. The lack of video of her death resulted in the silence, the small protests, and the lack of rallies. But it is her video-recorded traffic stop that will prevent her from being fully forgotten like countless others: Michelle Lee Shirley, thirty-nine; Deborah Danner, sixty-six; Symone Marshall, twenty-two; Dominique Battle, sixteen; Ashaunti Butler, fifteen; Laniya Miller, fifteen; Kisha Michael, thirty-one; Glynnia McMillen, sixteen . . . to name a few beyond the more known, such as Rekia Boyd, twenty-two; Aiyana Mo'Nay Stanley-Jones, seven; or Eleanor Bumpurs, sixty-six.

Despite the dearth of research on Black women and those who are not recognized as cis-men in computer-mediated culture, their impact is most apparent in both #BlackLivesMatter and #SayHerName. Extending #BlackLivesMatter with the hashtag #SayHerName forces Black men and others also to acknowledge the killings or deaths of Black women, Black queer, and Black trans folk by police and others. Black women in dual roles as audience and producers ensures that the deaths of women, without video, are not forgotten. By rewriting themselves into these virtual spaces, they have asserted themselves into real-life spaces. The violence inflicted upon them cannot be silenced as long as we have a name (Neely 8–10; Rapp, Button, Fluery-Steiner, and Fleury-Steiner 247). Further, their political intent in virtual spaces seems to be a precursor to political action in public spaces (Gabriel 1623). These virtual spaces become houses for “anger and frustrations, rage and redemption” that grant Black feminist bloggers sites “to think about and through the racist, classist, sexist, ableist, heterosexist notions of reality in popular culture and everyday life” (Boylorn 77).

In *Lynching Photographs*, Dora Apel and Shawn Smith argue that “shame produced by a community identification with actions that are locally sanctioned but rejected in larger contexts” is not adequately accounted for (54).

Bland's home community of Naperville, Illinois (outside of Chicago), felt a certain type of rage, as this was the eleventh of such police stops she had endured in her life, with fines as proof. Black women, as a whole, felt a certain type of anger both at her death and the need to raise awareness of it since this was the closest of any type of footage that was available at the time of a Black woman who died at the hands of the state.

Stand by to record. Hold.

### **GO TO BLACK: DISRUPTING THE SCENE, THE CUE, AND THE CONSUMPTION**

In "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," Stuart Hall emphasizes,

The ways in which Black people, Black experiences, were positioned and subjected in the dominant regimes of representation were the effects of a critical exercise of cultural power and normalization. Not only, in Said's "orientalist" sense, were we constructed as different and other within the categories of knowledge of the West by those regimes. They had the power to make us see and experiences ourselves as "Other." (225)

Korryn Gaines, age twenty-three, was killed just over a year after Sandra Bland. An officer with the Baltimore County Police Department shot her dead, with portions of the incident caught on Gaines's camera. However, there was very little rage regarding the conduct of the police raid on her apartment that resulted in her death, despite partial footage of the deadly encounter (Mire). Because she is seen loading a shotgun, shown in other videos righteously indignant at being stopped, and vocal on social media against the state, she is seen as unworthy of support or understanding. Whose Black life matters? The "good" Black people? The "bad" Black people? The "well-behaved" Black people?

Gaines's death can be viewed in the same context of police invasion of the private as happened in the deaths of Kenneth Chamberlain, tasered and shot in the head on March 5, 2012; Ramarley Graham, shot while in his bathroom on February 2, 2012; Aiyana Mo'Nay Stanley-Jones, shot in the head while laying down on the couch on May 16, 2010; Eleanor Bumpurs, shot twice with a twelve-gauge shotgun on October 29, 1984; and Fred Hampton and Mark Clark, one shot point-blank in the head and the other in the heart, on December 4, 1969. Should the state still have the ability to kill a person in their place of residence? As we learned after Gaines's death, none of the members of the raiding SWAT unit had body cameras, although officers outside did, and none of the mental-health clinicians assigned to the mobile crisis team were ever called to deescalate the situation (Shen). Gaines's death disrupts us, disrupts our ability to neatly fit it into our box of "snuff." She

served as her own director, scripting her own context, and framing her own death within a larger context of control and power. Her death occurred out of frame, offscreen, and it is what occurred outside the frame that merits our attention. Gaines's death returns us to Hall: "It is one thing to position a subject or set of peoples as the Other of a dominant discourse. It is quite another thing to subject them to that 'knowledge,' not only as a matter of imposed will and domination, but by the power of inner compulsion and conformation to the norm" (225). To be condemnable to summary execution at any moment, and then to be subject to the videos and pictures of summary execution only compounds the realities of being dominated peoples. We will be victimized at all costs. But, Black women oftentimes do not conform to our needs as consumers of video, photographs, or accounts of Black shootings. While she was defiant in her interactions with police, Gaines still sought their aid in her and her children's abuse at the hands of her ex-partner, Kareem Courtney, yet received little assistance. Even the availability of her videos becomes a question: as other videos continued to be circulated on Facebook after the incident, Gaines's was taken down by the social media site. No snuff for our pleasure, no snuff for our viewing. But also, no evidence for reactions and actions calling for justice.

Quintonio LeGrier and Bettie Jones, December 26, 2015. A day after Christmas in Chicago, police shot and killed Quintonio LeGrier six times and shot Bettie Jones once. Officers were responding to a domestic disturbance call. Quintonio's father called the police after his son threatened him and asked Bettie to let them in. She did. She died (Gorner).

No footage of either death. Their death is unseen. A rally, outrage, protest (except at the local level) are all unseen. However, this silence is new. The silence that comes from a killing, a death. This silence represents a lack of concern for the welfare and well-being of like others. News must now be seen, rather than just being heard or read, to elicit a response. No snuff.

Chyna Gibson, thirty-one, shot to death outside of a shopping center on February 27, 2017; Jaquarrius Holland, eighteen, dragged out of a vehicle on February 19, 2017; and Ciara McElveen, twenty-five, shot during an argument on February 29, 2017. These three transwomen, all killed in brutal fashion. Women, queer, lesbian, bi, and trans people hold an invisible mark that coincides with their invisibility. The mark places them into a number of risk categories, yet in the discourse of those risk categories they are often invisible or ignored (Logie and Gibson 29–30). Rape. Sexual assault. Sexual abuse. Domestic violence. Partner violence. Dating violence. And even structural violence, as they are further victimized when they seek assistance or aid, without treatment, protection, or advocacy. When they warn the police of an

impending assault. When they tell a counselor of their abuse. When they inform family members about another family member. If they are a sex worker, they have no civil rights (MacKinnon 13; Mullin and Linz 449). If they are not a sex worker, they often are assumed to be one, and they have no civil rights. But the reality cannot be denied: they are assaulted in large numbers. They are killed in large numbers. They are destroyed in large numbers. No video for any of them. No national outrage. No snuff.

The Holtzclaw case, in which Daniel Ken Holtzclaw was found guilty on 18 of 36 charges, and is serving a 263-year prison sentence. The survivors: S. H. (December 2013), T. B. (February to April 2014), C. R. (March 2014), F. (April 2014), R. C. (April 2014), R. G. (April 2014), T. M. (May 2014), S. B. (May 2014), S. E. (May 2014), C. J. (May 2014), K. (June 2014), A. (June 2014), and J. (June 2014). Fear of death, injury, or imprisonment hovered over the head of each survivor. This fear served as the basis for their exploitation and assault. But quite possibly, without any video the fear of death, injury, or imprisonment was even greater. No evidence to champion the injustice. No evidence to answer the questions from loved ones. No evidence to defend them, even in death, "I didn't know what else to say. The only thing that would come to my mind because I thought when I walked away he was going to shoot me in the back. The only thing I could say, was 'Thank you, sir. Thank you, sir, for not taking me to jail'" (Testa).

Black death is often tied to our outrage at police encounters that quickly escalate into police brutality, police shootings, police beatings, and police killings. I suppose that death makes the occurrences more salient in our minds. It confirms our suspicions. It corroborates our beliefs. But what about Black life? The life that many of us possess before the chokehold, the baton bashing, the Taser surge, the shotgun pump, or the gunshot? What about Black life? The life that may not be extinguished in the police encounter but still dimmed in some way? What about Black life?

Consider the following paraphrases and direct quotations from Jessica Testa's article, "The 13 Women Who Accused a Cop of Sexual Assault, in Their Own Words," published in *BuzzFeedNews* on December 9, 2015:

The life that exists in a stylish skirt for work that you eyed at some department store to solicit praises from your coworkers, but that is now pulled up over your belly as you lay on a dirty mattress in a warehouse? What about Black life? The life that exists in-between your legs that is now smudged with semen, urine, and feces that are not your own. What about Black life? The life that grows darker with every pump from this non-lover, server, and protector. This is the Black life of the survivors of Holtzclaw.

"How do I know you don't have anything in your bra?" he said, as he began to instruct her to expose her breasts and genitals. As his flashlight illuminated her body, he began to touch himself.

“Don’t make me do this,” J. said in her testimony, “I try to bend my head down, but I was looking at that gun in his holster . . . he was going to shoot me in my head.”

Early morning on 18 June 2014, Jannie Ligons. J. was on her way to her daughter’s house when Officer Holtzclaw began following her then drove past her. She awakened her daughter, her daughter’s children, and her daughter’s boyfriend. Her daughter screamed and cried at what her mother was telling her. They drove to the nearest police station that appeared deserted, but finally caught the attention of police officers in two patrol vehicles, who informed the captain, who then processed the initial report and scene investigation.

Jannie Ligons. J.’s allegations initiated the investigation that led to several women’s names. Only thirteen women chose to come forward.

What the dashcam never saw is what we never saw. And what we never see is what we never care about. And since it appears on no dashcam, no footage, no recording, there is still the specter of weak evidence that hovers over the charges. And since all of the survivors are Black, Black women, they have been reduced to sex workers, ex-offenders, drug addicts (current or recovering), and Black Lives Matter opportunists as depicted in a *20/20* feature on the case, “What the Dash Cam Never Saw” (Chang).

Holtzclaw. Thirteen Women. Thirteen Black lives. Holtzclaw found guilty of eighteen of thirty-six charges.

All alive.

No video for any of them. No national outrage.

But would the appearance of video footage of a forced oral sodomy, anal sodomy, vaginal penetration, and sexual coercion confirm or awaken the unconvinced or the unmoving? At Abu Ghraib, Iraqi prisoners succumbed to a host of mistreatments, torture, and even murder. Much of their maltreatment was captured in photographs taken for extended enjoyment by enlisted women and men stationed at the prison (Sontag, *Regarding* 76–81). Their treatment extended the politics of the gaze from women who were traditionally subjected to domination of men to the captured Iraqi others who were now being subjected to torture and abuse by the agents of the United States. The discovery of the photographs did not raise issues of war crimes. The discovery of the photographs did not condemn US foreign policy. The discovery of the photographs did not halt the war. The discovery of the photographs simply seemed to capture the acts of bad actors, hazing rituals inappropriately rendered in the wrong context, and cases of prisoner sexual abuse (Tétreault 33–34).

Just as Lynndie England became a scapegoat for Abu Ghraib (Harp and Struckman 3–5), Daniel Holtzclaw becomes a scapegoat for Oklahoma City. Both are individual actors. But neither are operating in a vacuum, without some measure of clearance. Both are scapegoats for state violence. No snuff.

In 2015 a New York Festival panel of Ta-Nehisi Coates, Danai Gurira, David Simon, Claudia Rankine, and Jesse Williams, moderated by Jelani Cobb, discussed the racial climate in America. David Simon of *The Wire* fame indicated the modern era has changed things with the impact of mobile devices that is “the revolution”: “You now have a community that has armed itself with something it never had before which is actual evidence,” Williams added (Lartey).

Coates retorts to the two, “How decisive was video with John Crawford?”

“I think it’s something,” Coates said of video footage, “but I think people can see what they want to see” (Lartey).

In the Ava Duverney and Netflix documentary, *13th*, Charles Rangel, Congressman of New York’s 13th District, remarks, “The difference now is where someone can hold up one these [cell phones], get what’s going on, they can put it YouTube, and the whole world has to deal with it. That’s what’s new. It’s not the protests. It’s not the brutality. It’s the fact that we can force a conversation about it.” But is our comfort in conversations turning into water-cooler conversations, barber-shop conversations, coffee-table conversations, and Twitter conversations . . . and not policy conversations, as Brock has critiqued (“Who do you think you are?” 15–16; “From the Blackhand Side” 531)? In *13th*, Corey Greene, formerly incarcerated activist and cofounder of H.O.L.L.A., posits, “For many of us, whose families lived through this, we don’t need to see pictures to understand what’s going on. It’s really to speak to the masses who have been ignoring this for the majority of



Figure 11. Cropped image of photograph from the lynching of Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith in Marion, IN, on August 7, 1930. Original photograph by Laurence Beitler. It is cropped as a method of respecting the dead, how they died, and to prevent their perpetual re-killing in media.

their life. But I also think there's trouble just showing Black bodies as dead bodies, too. Too much of anything becomes unhealthy, un-useful." Preceding Greene's assertion in *13th*, Gina Clayton, attorney and founder of Essie Justice Group, stated, "I think they need to be seen, if the family is okay with it. It wasn't until things were made visual in the Civil Rights movement that we really saw folks come out and being shocked into movement." Following up on these comments in *13th*, Van Jones, CNN contributor and Founder of Dream Corps, remarks, "You just have to shock people into paying attention." Really? Will they pay attention? Do you have to continuously shock in order for attention to be paid?

A picture can supposedly show a thousand words. And quite possibly none of those words can be "justice" or "action." What happens when we remove the victims, the murdered from the frame or shot?

Our attention is on the crowd, everyday citizens. Our attention is on the tree, a stand-in for the institutions that make injustice possible and protection unenforceable. Our pleasure is snuffed out with the absence of the body (figure 11). Our actions in the gazing and sharing of the videos and images of the death of Black people perpetuate a transgression against the lives of those lives we say matter each time we click, comment, post, and repeat. But does the erasing of the lynching or the noose rectify what is missing in our viewing of the images?

The use and reuse of the video and images serves as an e-lynching, which is similar to its historical namesake, rallies its audience to make communal spectacle and be entertained by the terrorizing violation of Black people's bodies, and serves to paralyze modes of resistance to White supremacy. The use and reuse of the images works as a revictimization of those who have been killed. It also works as a doubling down on the weight of the psychological trauma in the depictions. If the images do not do the work we think they are doing, then they serve another purpose of spectacle. Nataleah Hunter-Young asks us to consider the following reasons that many have chosen not to view any videos or look at any images: "1. I do not need to see it to know; 2. I don't want to participate in the spectacle of their/her/his/my death; and 3. Sharing this imagery does not ameliorate our present condition as Black people."

Like a feeble excuse, does the erasure of the victim absolve the state of its handling of the death of its citizenry. We are fully aware that the act has occurred with or without the erasure. Even the state showed its awareness of the harm of the popularity of public executions by instituting midnight mandates, scheduling them late at night to dissuade the public from seeing them as entertainment (Madow). State-conducted executions took on a different role in society than state-sanctioned but publicly performed lynchings. Apel and Smith argue that "a community that feels publicly shamed . . . suffers a

form of ethical and political embarrassment that emphasizes the social component of human dignity, choice, and responsibility.” They go further to indicate that shame’s “antithesis is often considered honor” (54). How do we honor the dead? How do we honor justice?

Does the consistent viewing absolve us of the nominal actions we partake in? There is something in the gruesome spectacle of lynching, at least, that we must confront and not deny (Apel 457–58; McTaggart 792). By forcing ourselves to stay fixated on the image, do we move past gaze? The terror was not just theirs but it is also ours, and maybe that terror will force us to do something about the reality of state and state-sanctioned violence (Mowatt, “Terror” 1). Or maybe not. Sontag cautions us that overexposure to the images will deaden our senses and sensibilities (20). Instead of moving us to action, the image only moves us to consumption. Further consumption. Consumption of the Black dead. The only action becomes consumption.

Our silence when there is no video, when there is no picture, when it is a woman, when it is a transwoman, reveals a disingenuous aspect of our outrage when the death is “off-screen,” while our silence in the cases of Black sex workers supports acts of racial or gender cleansing, if we invoke the memory of Ashton O’Hara of Detroit, the “Grim-Sleeper” victims, or the missing girls of DC.

### **CLOSE SCENE: CONCLUSION**

In 2013, the emerging use of the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter on social media reflected not only the rapid-fire reaction of an extraordinary number of Black users of Twitter but also the budding civic activism tied to wrongful deaths (“From the Blackhand Side” 530–31). The outcry by these users, who comprise nearly 25 percent of all users, was initially linked to the acquittal of George Zimmerman, who was responsible for the death of seventeen-year-old Trayvon Martin in Sanford, Florida. This consistent chant of “Black Lives Matter” began to take the form of organized activities offline as much as online. Individuals personalized their reaction to Trayvon’s death, “donned hoodies and shared ‘selfies’ with an occasional accompanying caption: ‘I am Trayvon’ not only to raise awareness of the incident and the outcomes of the trial, but also to stand in solidarity with the deceased” (Durham 2). Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and other platforms created “new jobs” for many of us to organize in our bereavement. A movement emerged that articulated the anger and grief at the death of Tamir Rice of Cleveland and Eric Garner of New York in 2014, Walter Scott of Charleston, and Sandra Bland in Waller County, Texas, in 2015, while also raising issue with past wrongful deaths of Rekia Boyd of Chicago in 2012 and many others.

Many have incorrectly tied the Movement for Black Lives with the past activity of the Occupy Wall Street movement, as the focus has been solely on the protesting and not the nature of the protesting. Kumkar noted that the Occupy Wall Street movement was based on the unequal distribution of wealth in the United States and held the declaration that “all our grievances are interconnected” (221). However, the very nature of the Movement for Black Lives is exclusive rather than inclusive, as the emphasis is on the racialized violence inflicted upon Black people. Alliances and coalitions with other causes and the violence heaped upon other peoples may be a part of its activities, but the nature of the movement remains the same. The very nature of the Movement for Black Lives calls for identification and not just efficacy, as it moves a person from online to offline (Brunsting and Postmes 547). The awareness of Black bodies as disposable is coupled with the growing awareness that those same bodies are targeted and hunted by law enforcement and citizen alike.

As we think about how these deaths turn into galvanizing events and subsequent protests, we can think of the events as a form of solidarity that “transcends temporal and spatial limits of a protest event, as well as limits of interactions with physically co-present participants” (Golova 232). These protests could be seen as events that require us not to see them “as primarily personal or private responses, but as social reactions that answer to power, discipline, resistance, performance and the species desire for elevation” (Rojek 17). These protests raise issues, create awareness, and challenge power, but also establish a collective identity around the notion of the disposability, value, and rendering of a Black body. As we see the mothers and fathers of the various victims of state-sanctioned killings, vigilante killings, and in-group homicide gather together and speak at various rallies, a new form of support system is created around the activism created by the Movement for Black Lives (Burke et al. 1–2).

In a chapter titled “Violence, Mourning, Politics,” Judith Butler asks, “who counts as human? Whose lives count as lives? And, finally, what makes for a grievable life?” (20). For the Black body, the racialized notions of the “savage,” “thug,” “criminal,” and “beast” are heaped upon the body at birth, follow it through life, and even remain with it in death (Goff et al. 539). When death becomes violent and political, the disparagement of the deceased’s character and destruction of the body runs counter to a collective notion of humanity. The reaction to this type of death and bereavement is a context that has not been considered in all fields of study, and the health implications for the living remain unknown or inaccurately accounted for (Fitzpatrick and Tran 77).



Figure 12. Ebony G. Patterson's "Invisible Presence: Bling Memories" performance on April 27, 2014 in Kingston, Jamaica. Photograph: Monique Gilpin and Philip Rhoden. Reproduction courtesy of the artist and Monique Meloche Gallery, Chicago.

Mourning becomes less a testament to one's vulnerability than a strident form of resistance to the very same structures that took the deceased's life. The role of Black Lives Matter becomes a counter to the perceived inevitability of a state-sanctioned death; creates a larger grieving group of community members (Burke et al. 2), challenging the traditional forms of sharing loss with solely family and friends; and questions whether or not protest is a new form of coping that must be considered (Goff et al. 537–39).

In the case of a political death, the body is no longer private: it is in the public domain, as Mamie Till-Mobley espoused in showing the tortured body of her dead son Emmett Till (129–34). For within the Movement for Black Lives, within the minds of the collective, particularly those who identify as Black, we are simply saying to one another what Ta-Nehisi Coates eloquently stated: “you are all we have, and you come to us endangered” (82). The killing, the death, and the rendered body become a rallying cry that is one part protest for social change and one part communal bereavement. Maybe only in death can Black people actually be seen. And this is where the treatment of the dead becomes important. Their image cannot be appropriated without sanctity. Their name cannot be invoked without respect. Their memory cannot be used in empty action. Visibility is the only chance for survival. As Jamaican artist Ebony G. Patterson indicates, “social media creates an opportunity for visibility in the way larger popular culture does. . . . But I was interested in the kind of visibility that was created. These images become spectacle, become object, and there is a disengagement with value” (Frank) (figure 12).

Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi gifted us with a beautiful idea and principle. A discipline to believe in. A metaphor for a carceral system and violent society. A call to action. A guidepost for assessment. A reminder that #WhiteSupremacyKills. The concluding aim here is to raise these questions, to present this challenge to make the unbridled beauty in #BlackLivesMatter as much about substance as it is about form. As we say Eric Garner's final exclamation, which was not “I can't breathe” but instead, “It stops today!” (Capelouto).

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