

**SIGHTS OF RACIAL VIOLENCE:
New Media Technologies and Acts of Watching, Memory, and Legitimation**

by

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DEDICATION

For my mother and my grandmother— for us.

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Temporality has been crucial for this project in many ways: the interplay of memory and image, the tenuous writing of history and its inevitable rewriting, but also in the difficulties of thinking deeply about a subject that inspires rage, fatigue, and hopelessness. These feelings delayed the completion of the project in unforeseen ways. If the project had been completed in the ideal time allotted by initial funding possibilities, it would look very different and would be far less rich. Thus, I want to acknowledge the many non-starts, refusals, and reluctancies that inevitably were overcome by the immediacy of the project and many Internet-deprived hours of coffee shop work. This was made possible by the generous support of the American Culture department, without which I might never have been able to see the Black Lives Matter movement make a constitutive mark on this dissertation.

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ABSTRACT

SIGHTS OF RACIAL VIOLENCE:

New Media Technologies and Acts of Watching, Memory, and Legitimation

by

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This dissertation explores the relationship between race, technology, and media cultures by examining the phenomenon of watching anti-Black violence in twentieth- and twenty-first-century American culture. Through selected case studies, *Sights of Racial Violence* excavates a history between spectacular anti-Black violence and new media, revealing how racial violence is instrumentalized as a legitimizing force for new media technologies in moments of instantiation and industry crisis. The questions that guide this historical inquiry are: What are the cartographies of the relationships between new media, social worth, and racial violence? How does the intersection of racial violence and new media affect imaginings of race, technology, and racial progress? And finally, how does this relationship create particular modes of spectatorship in the consumption or witnessing of racial violence? To answer these questions, each chapter of *Sights of Racial Violence* focuses on an iconic instance wherein highly visible, state-sanctioned racial violence intersects with the emergence of new media technology: television's proliferation into the American home and civil rights violence in the 1960s; the Rodney King beating tape and camcorder technology in 1992; Rodney King's appearance on reality television in 2004's post-

network age; and, finally, Twitter and the #BlackLivesMatter hashtags memorializing Sandra Bland's death in 2015.

Using primarily textual analysis, I examine televisual representations in tandem with online audience reactions and media industry history. My reading of these sources seeks to understand how cultural memory and the historical and social architectures of spectatorship inform how we watch, witness, and understand spectacular racial violence. From television to Twitter and from the civil rights movement to #BlackLivesMatter, this trans-media history produces dynamic effects and consequences that range from shifts in racial formations and the legibilities of racial progress to critiques of the very nature of the visual and the creation of spectacular “newness” of technology. In the end, this dissertation dismantles the persistent belief that technology operates as a type of public accountability, delivering protection and freedom from racial violence. Instead, *Sights of Racial Violence* illuminates how racial violence offered opportunities for new media technologies to utilize its images and social importance as a conduit for legitimation.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION: New Media and the Spectacle of Racial Violence

To photograph people is to violate them, by seeing them as they never see themselves, by having knowledge of them that they can never have; it turns people into objects that can be symbolically possessed. Just as a camera is a sublimation of the gun, to photograph someone is a subliminal murder—a soft murder, appropriate to a sad, frightened time.

SUSAN SONTAG
On Photography

We are here to say to the white men that we no longer will let them use clubs on us in the dark corners. We're going to make them do it in the glaring light of television.
MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.

In early May 2015, the Obama administration allocated twenty million dollars towards the implementation of police body cameras¹ as part of a solution to the highly disturbing incidents of anti-Black police brutality gaining media attention. This growing list included Oscar Grant in Oakland, California, whose death by a BART transit police was captured by mobile phone video on New Year's Day 2009; Trayvon Martin in Florida, whose devastating final cry was recorded by a 9-1-1 operator in February of 2012; Mike Brown, whose bullet-ridden body lay on a Ferguson, Missouri, street for four hours in August 2014; Eric Garner, whom bystanders recorded dying from an illegal chokehold administered by New York police in July 2014; and Walter Scott, who was videotaped being gunned down by a police officer as Scott ran *away* from him in April 2015. The administration's action and advocacy reflected under a widely-held assumption— that the technological capacities of police body cameras will create more

¹ Julia Edwards, "Obama Administration Says to Provide \$20 Million for Police Body Cameras," *Reuters*, May 1, 2015.

transparency, accountability, and safety— and pointed to a type of investment in technological seeing as a remedy to racial violence.

Technological utopianism, or that idea that technology is inherently liberatory, drives the increasing regularity with which anti-Black violence has been recorded, disseminated, watched, and circulated. Victims of the horrible instances of racial state sanctioned violence have articulated this sentiment as well. During a panel commemorating the twentieth anniversary of the 1992 riots, Rodney King sat down with National Public Radio's Pat Morrison and reflected, "I was one of the lucky ones, to have had it caught on tape.... It's a blessing that the camera was there." King's comment implies that the presence of media technology, epitomized by the infamous George Holiday home videotape, represents a seemingly newfound accountability in the face of racism and racial violence. That King is at once grateful for this technology *despite* its failure to convince the jurors of the illegality of the beating is pivotal and indexes the vast worlds of contradiction, complexity, and ideology that comprise American discourses about progress, violence, technology, media, and race.

Over twenty years later, the camera was there yet again. Sandra Bland, a twenty-eight year-old Black woman was pulled over in Prairie View, Texas, for a failure to signal—a minor traffic violation. The police officer nonetheless, quickly escalated to physical force. When she saw a bystander filming the incident, a handcuffed Bland cried out, "Thank you for recording! Thank you!" before being placed into the back of the police vehicle. She would die three days later in an unmonitored jail cell on July 13, 2015, from what police allege was a suicide by hanging. More than isolated incidents, King and Bland's experiences and words signal the persistent belief that racial violence's visibility alone will provide the indisputable visual evidence and documentation necessary to reform it.

In these aforementioned instances, the presence of media technology becomes a torturous hope—that technology’s ability to visually document racial violence will provide accountability at the very least and act as a protective savior at best. Yet such gains in the technological capacity to produce visibility have failed to deliver the emancipation and justice promised by and popularly associated with media technology. In fact, the sheer number of Black deaths, with young Black men numbering nine times the national average killed by police in 2015,² speaks to racial violence’s continued presence in spite of the ubiquity of recording devices. This dissertation complicates the belief that racial violence’s visibility alone will provide the visual evidence and documentation necessary to reform it, and charts instead how media technology’s heroism became such an entrenched and persistent idea.

Sights of Racial Violence: New Media Technologies and Acts of Watching, Memory, and Legitimation investigates the relationship between race, technology, and media cultures by examining the phenomenon of watching anti-Black violence in twentieth- and twenty-first-century American culture. Through selected case studies across different media platforms such as television, camcorders, and social media, this dissertation excavates a persistent trans-media history between spectacular anti-Black violence and new media, revealing how racial violence is instrumentalized as a legitimizing force for new media technologies in moments of instantiation and industry crisis. The questions that guide this historical inquiry are: What exactly are the cartographies of this hidden relationship between new media, social worth, and racial violence? How does the relationship between racial violence and new media affect imaginings of race, technology, and racial progress? And finally, how does this relationship create particular modes

² Jon Swaine et. al, “It’s an Epidemic: Young Black Men Killed by US Police at Highest Rate in Year of 1,134 Deaths,” *The Guardian*, December 31, 2015, <http://www.rawstory.com/2015/12/its-an-epidemic-us-police-killed-1134-young-black-men-in-2015/>.

of spectatorship in the consumption of racial violence? To answer these questions, each chapter of *Sights of Racial Violence* focuses on an iconic instance wherein highly visible, state-sanctioned racial violence intersects with the emergence of new forms of media technology: television's proliferation into the American home and civil rights violence in the early 1960s; the Rodney King beating tape and camcorder technology in 1992; Rodney King's appearance on reality television in 2004's post-network age; and, finally, Twitter and the #BlackLivesMatter hashtags memorializing Sandra Bland's death in 2015.

Drawing on primarily textual analysis informed by media industry history and online audience reactions, this dissertation posits that the dynamics of cultural memory and the historical and social architectures of spectatorship inform how we watch, witness, and understand spectacular racial violence. From television to Twitter and from the civil rights movement to #BlackLivesMatter, my project dismantles the persistent belief that technology operates as a type of public accountability, delivering protection and freedom from racial violence. Instead, *Sights of Racial Violence* charts an overlooked history of how iconic racial violence offered opportunities for new media technologies to utilize its images and social importance as a conduit for legitimation.

This project uses a range of theoretical and disciplinary insights from critical ethnic studies, spectatorship studies, cultural studies, memory studies, and digital media studies. Specifically, I focus on how subjective and contextual relations inform our viewing practices (of multiple media forms) and what these social practices can reveal. From the aforementioned instances of mediated anti-Black violence, it is evident that the expanding media capacities to visually capture racial violence have produced more spectators than ever before. Older spectatorship models have often elided the acts that constitute watching, making invisible the

somatic and psychic worlds of moviegoers, the spaces in which they watch, and the memories invoked by the social architectures of watching. Inspired by the critical interventions of Jacqueline Najuma Stewart, Miriam Hansen, and Barbara Klinger, I give analytical weight to the constellation of affects, histories, and technologies activated in watching, and employ a necessary plurality of theoretical paradigms. In part, this dissertation attempts to interrogate this invisible spectator, to render them visible in history through variegated means.

Methods

To do so, this dissertation conducts close readings of various media texts including television shows, videotaped footage, reality television, Twitter feeds, online audience/user responses, and editorials of watching. *Sights of Racial Violence* uses visual and textual analysis to examine these media texts, in dialogue with industrial and popular discourses, to decode how these cultural objects imagine, reflect back, and reproduce racial violence and demonstrate how acts of watching/witnessing are a crucial aspect of how media technology operates.

Through these close readings, I attend to aesthetic codes, histories, and imaginaries invoked by representations like the television show *Mad Men*'s portrayal of television spectators, for example. While I examine the portrayal of televised civil rights violence's impact on white characters, I also contend that we learn more about this representation when we consider the show's critical self-reflexivity. In John Caldwell's *Production Culture*, he argues that the industry has shifted, with "film and television today reflecting obsessively back upon themselves and invest[ing] considerable energy in over-producing and distributing this industrial self-analysis to the public."³ Though Caldwell's claims focus on mostly trade press, catalogues and

³ John Caldwell, *Production Culture: Industrial Reflexivity and Critical Practice in Film and Television* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 1.

manuals for professionals, and entertainment show business news shows, I use his insights to examine *Mad Men* as a textual representation and, simultaneously, a reflexive theorization that indexes how the television industry itself imagines the medium. Put in another way, I argue that *Mad Men* operates as more than a discrete textual representation of 1960s audiences watching televisual racial violence; it constitutes a metacommentary that theorizes how the industry views present-day audiences, television history, and the legacy of racial violence. Close reading enables me to explore how such representations serve as collision points of both the imagined past and the self-mythologizing of the present.

With regard to the specificity of television, camcorder technology, and social media, technological and industrial particularities are crucial to how representations of racial violence appear, how they are circulated, and the ways that we respond, witness, or watch. While other textual approaches might examine collective images within one medium, *Sights of Racial Violence* is deeply attentive to the technological specificities of multiple visual media and how they compare to and influence with one another. The dissertation's last chapter, for example, uses digital studies methods to analyze the media platform of Twitter, its technological situatedness, and its modes of visualization and user interactivity. By examining how #BlackLivesMatter Twitter users create content and respond to previous visual representations of racial violence, I am able to connect remediations of past violence and the potentials of the platform. This trans-media excavation reveals historical formations of feeling, the implications and ramifications of new media, and the ongoing sights and uses of racial violence.

The Implications of Watching

By examining different media forms, I hope to provide multiple avenues of investigation for what Saidiya Hartman queries of the implications of watching: “Are we witnesses who confirm the truth of what happened in the face of the world-destroying capacities of pain, the distortions of torture, the sheer unrepresentability of terror, and the repression of dominant accounts? Or are we voyeurs fascinated with and repelled by exhibitions of terror and suffering? What does the exposure of the violated body yield?”⁴ Hartman’s pressing questions require a consideration of the disparity between Susan Sontag’s rumination on the violence of photography and King’s impassioned advocacy for images to serve as a public accountability. These two divergent responses constitute a guiding tension within debates over the uses of media technology and the spectacle of racial violence.

Sontag herself publicly explored contrasting positions on the uses of representation, first arguing in *On Photography* that images of atrocity inures the spectator to violence, only to recant this later in *Regarding the Pain of Others* by concluding that the interpretive contexts produced a wide array of readings that can affect viewers deeply. King’s quote is significant for many reasons, not the least of which is his open acknowledgement of, to employ media scholar Sasha Torres’s phrasing, the uses of the cycle of violence and publicity in order to appeal to the moral urgency of the imagined/mythic white American viewer. King articulates the idea that the strategic and necessary use of television to expose racial violence will facilitate accountability and an obligation of witnessing. The implications of such a belief posit that the recording of racial violence constitutes a type of liberatory act. And while the cameras of journalists and news crews did ensure a degree of safety during certain civil rights marches,⁵ the contemporary state

⁴ Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 3.

⁵ Sasha Torres, *Black, White, and In Color: Television and Black Civil Rights* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003).

of ubiquitous recording devices and the accumulating instances of Black lives lost to police violence has proven this equation invalid. Between the violence of and necessity for representation, these two statements represent the oscillating poles of discourse surrounding racial violence's relationship to new media technologies.

Rather than replicating the debates over whether racial violence incites people to action or deadens them to its horrors (the divergent responses to the Rodney King beating videotape, for example, suggest that it can be both), what these ideas surrounding images of racial violence make clear are that the acts of watching and the spectatorial practices are crucial to textual interpretation and feeling. Accordingly, *Sights of Racial Violence* demonstrates how the act of watching is a performative act, producing dynamic effects and consequences that range from shifts in racial formations and the very legibilities of racial progress to critiques of the nature of the visual itself. To interrogate the act of watching and the contours of spectatorship means understanding how our performative relation to the screen co-constitutes our experience. It means attempting to fathom how audiences are engaged as participants in what Vivian Sobchack identifies as the “dynamically and directionally reversible acts that reflexively and reflectively constitute the *perception of expression* and the *expression of perception*.”⁶

While Sobchack writes exclusively on the cinematic spectator, Sontag's *On Photography* posits similar epistemological interventions surrounding photography as a medium. She explains that photography's democratization came with a new sense of looking, or what she terms “photographic seeing”:

‘Cameras did not simply make it possible to apprehend more by seeing... they changed seeing itself, by fostering the idea of seeing for its own sake’... The very idea of what constituted vision was transformed in important ways at the turn of the nineteenth

⁶ Vivian Carol Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 5.

century, not least by the democratization of picture-making into an amateur-oriented, popular pastime.⁷

For Sontag and Sobchack, photography and cinema produced “a new way for people to see and a new activity for people to perform.”⁸ But these perceptions of expression and expressions of perception are not relegated to the darkened confines of a movie theater: these performative acts are democratized as they invade our intimate, television-filled living rooms and permeate our relationship to our smart phones, our computers in public spaces. In the acts of looking at cell phones while in cafés or waiting for subway trains, this public performative relationship to our mobile screens often denotes un-interruptability and non-disturbance that deters socialization with others. The performative acts then are not just individual but stem from media technologies’ collective and habituated social practice. As new forms of media engender new ways of seeing, the repercussions morph the ways that people feel and perform sympathy. These new relationships alter the ways people are galvanized to social action. And it reshapes the methods by which people share their experiences. These are merely some of the constitutive performative qualities inherent in looking. In making these relationships visible, Sontag and Sobchack’s concepts also unveil that the discourse of “newness” in new media is not solely the dynamics of the machinic and technological specificity of the medium. It is also composed of the contextual and subjective expectations of the audience/users/spectators themselves and the social practices of watching.

Defining the “New” in New Media

⁷ Jacqueline Goldsby, *A Spectacular Secret: Lynching in American Life and Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 220.

⁸ Goldsby, *A Spectacular Secret*, 229.

The question of the “newness” in new media has been at the heart of many seminal texts in digital studies. In Lev Manovich’s influential *The Language of New Media*, he refutes the widespread claims that digital media, or what he refers to as new media, represents something entirely novel. Drawing upon the histories of arts, photography, video, telecommunication, design and especially cinema, Manovich identifies that “newness” is not solely technological specificity but in large part, exists in relation to other, older media forms. Similarly, Richard Grusin and Jay David Bolter’s concept of remediation identifies that new media relies pivotally on old media’s visual vocabularies and technocultural specificities for legibility.⁹ This is not to say that all technologies are comprised from older forms, but identifying areas of continuity and rupture disabuses us of the popular mythologies that equate new media as inherently revolutionary. As Lisa Gitelman writes, “media are unique and complicated historical subjects. Their histories must be social and cultural, not the satire of how one technology leads to another, or of isolated geniuses working their magic on the world.”¹⁰ Indeed, writing the history of new media is an act of knowledge production, tied to numerous epistemological questions and considerations.

A central concern binding these texts, and any historical study on media, is the question of newness. Take the history of television for example: while most traditional histories of television like William Boddy’s *New Media and Popular Imagination*¹¹ place its proliferation and its designation as a “new medium” squarely in the 1940s and 50s, a thorough look at TV’s penetration into American homes tells a different story. Despite the presence of TV in some

⁹ Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Boston: MIT Press, 2000).

¹⁰ Lisa Gitelman, *Always Already New: Media, History and the Data of Culture* (Boston: MIT Press, 2006), 7.

¹¹ William Boddy, *New Media and Popular Imagination: Launching Radio, Television, and Digital Media in the United States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

homes, the ability to transmit to a national audience came a later point. During the 1950s, proliferation of television in American homes rose rapidly, rising from .02 percent in 1946 to 9 percent in 1950, and to 65 percent by 1955.¹² Broadcast historian Michelle Hilmes notes in *Hollywood and Broadcasting* that TV's origin starts earlier than generally supposed, reaching as far back as 1927 with the transmission of a few feet of film. However, it was not until film industry studios took a vested interest in the medium that large gains in popularizing it would start. Therefore, while the technology was available, the inchoate medium first made a successful appearance in the form of theater television, broadcasting boxing matches in public spaces, political conventions and inaugurations.¹³ These statistics and Hilmes' historiographic intervention call into question when a medium—with such early origins, subsequent popularity, and startling penetration into American homes—becomes and ceases to be “new” media. Technological capacity, initial debut, burgeoning proliferation, widespread ubiquity, or cultural legitimacy: all of these factors could be used as evidence to support an argument over the “newness” of a new medium. In contrast, *Sights of Racial Violence* contends that the spectacular newness of new media becomes most legible when combined with the visual vocabularies of racial violence.

From theory-based to industrial history, from Manovich to Hilmes, what binds these monographs and scholars together is the implicit yet careful consideration over how the “new” in new media technologies become legible. I offer these multiple and often contested origin stories of television in order to highlight the political and contested nature of writing history in the palimpsest of the “new,” highlighting how newness is a discourse that can effectively collapse

¹² Lynn Spigel, *Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 32.

¹³ Michelle Hilmes, *Hollywood and Broadcasting: From Radio to Cable* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 121.

nuanced analyses into a homogenized history. My dissertation hopes to contribute to these scholars' work of historicizing and contextualizing the newness in new media by revealing how racial violence becomes one of the conditions of possibility for media technologies like television in the 1960s, camcorder TV in the 1990s, and social media today, to demonstrate their value and novelty. I do so to highlight that the stakes of these contestations and debates over the designation of the "new" consist of legibility, power, and knowledge production. Through their diverse methodology and disciplinary differences, these scholars identify multiple origin points for different mediums and remind us that newness in and of itself does not correspond to historical legibility, let alone cultural status. As *Sights of Racial Violence* will demonstrate in more overt ways, legitimacy¹⁴ and social worth make up a far more complex discourse—one that I argue has been innately tied to racial violence and its function within US media cultures and the technological imaginary.

Indeed, this project asserts that racial violence constitutes a type of beta-testing for new technologies. As Gina Neff and David Stark identify, "programmed products, including software and Internet sites are never stable products. The software development process leads to a continual cycle of revision and testing."¹⁵ What Neff and Stark term permanently beta, or a state

¹⁴ For more on other methods of legitimation, see Michael Z. Newman and Elena Levine's *Legitimizing Television: Media Convergence and Cultural Status* (New York: Routledge, 2012). Using television as an example Levin and Newman provide an intellectual overview surrounding the legitimacy of television studies and scholarship. Dana Polan's articulation of the "concretization of a discipline," which lists the "regularization of practices of credentialization (the granting of degrees and diplomas..., the crystallization of networks of dialogue and interchange among credentialed practitioners through such venues as conferences, [and] the perfection of channels for the dissemination of disciplinary research in the form of scholarly journals," structures their optics as Levine and Newman look to primarily the institutionalization of television studies through conference networks, department establishing, and major leaders in the field (Newman, 155–56).

¹⁵ Gina Neff and David Stark, "Permanently Beta," *Society Online* (2003): 175.

of responsiveness and process of continual change,¹⁶ is also the premise for Manovich's book *Software Takes Command*. He argues that our software is always already in beta: without the ever-present software update, our technologies become obsolete. Though centered on a different medium, this concept can also be found in Max Dawson's "TV Repair: New Media 'Solutions' to Old Media Problems," wherein television's inadequacies necessitate technological renewal through innovative improvements. For Dawson, technological innovations such as remote control devices, home video systems, digital video recorders (DVRs), and mobile media devices (cell phones) all served to represent solutions to the "old media problems" of television.¹⁷

Although Dawson and Manovich focus on television and software in perpetual formation, respectively, their arguments gain resonance when considering the work that these instances of anti-Black racial violence do as spectacular test cases for the technologies themselves. These instances of iconic state-sanctioned violence constitute a type of beta-testing and technological renewal, operating to test the capacity of the medium itself. Images of civil rights violence and the Rodney King beating videotape were both examples that testified to new capacities of media technologies to capture evidentiary proof of racial violence, as well as images that supposedly shifted or revealed the nation's state of race relations. Too, the mainstream journalistic discourse surrounding Twitter and the Arab Spring makes it evident that spectacles of racial violence implicitly display the newness of the medium while at the same time demonstrating its visual and technology capacity to be captured and circulated virally. What is more, *Sights of Racial Violence* traces how the urgency of racial violence functions as the implicit legitimizing force behind specific media forms within periods of "newness" or crisis, such as the questioning of television's social worth in the 1960s and its massive industrial change in the 1990s.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Max Dawson, "TV Repair: New Media 'Solutions' to Old Media Problems" (PhD diss., Northwestern University, 2008).

While *Sights of Racial Violence* excavates this history from television to the present, this melding of racial violence to new media is not a *new* phenomenon but a reiterative racial performance. Work by historians, digital media, feminist, cultural, and ethnic studies scholars such as Diana Taylor, Saidiya Hartman, Mimi Nguyen, and Lisa Nakamura have produced crucial insights and a rich body of literature that attends to racial violence's historical and technological particularities. Their work has fundamentally shaped my perspective. To write about racial violence and media technology within the US is to immediately invoke the history of lynching and photography. Indeed, as the most immediately legible act of racial violence in the American imagination, lynching's spectacle is often used as the most horrific example of the atrocities of white supremacy. In Jonathan Markowitz's book *Legacies of Lynching*, he explores the way that lynching continues to haunt our collective memory, "evolving from concrete and literal spectacles of white supremacist violence to one of the most vivid symbols of race oppression and a continuing metaphor for racial relations in the United States."¹⁸ This metaphor would be called upon to describe many instances: Councilwoman Patricia Moore called the Rodney King beating a "modern day lynching,"¹⁹ Mike Brown's death would inspire *The Guardian* to write a story comparing the current state of the US to Jim Crow lynchings;²⁰ and Oprah would call Trayvon Martin's death the "same thing" as Emmett Till's lynching.²¹ As more recent incidents of police killings of African Americans have accumulated, the near-ritualized use of lynching as a metaphor speaks to its profoundly resonant power.

¹⁸ Jonathan Markowitz, *Legacies of Lynching: Racial Violence and Memory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004); also see Anne Rice, "How We Remember Lynching" *Nka Journal of Contemporary African Art* 2006, no. 20 (2006): 32–43.

¹⁹ Newsweek Staff, "The Siege of L.A.," *Newsweek*, May 10, 1992.

²⁰ Isabel Wilson, "Mike Brown's Shooting and Jim Crow Lynchings Have Too Much in Common. It's Time for America to Own Up," *The Guardian*, August 25, 2014.

²¹ Jessica Chasmar, "Oprah Winfrey: Trayvon Martin 'Same Thing' as Emmett Till Lynching," *The Washington Times*, August 5, 2013.

Indeed, in Jacqueline Goldsby's *A Spectacular Secret: Lynching in American Life and Literature*, she journeys through literature and the visual and aesthetic forms of mob violence to detail how lynching has constituted a cultural logic of modern American society. What is more, she demonstrates the integral place of lynching photography in the making of American modernity. The twinned phenomena of photography and the rise of white mob violence and lynching dovetailed in particular ways, as traffic in lynching photography runs parallel to photography's democratization.²² Drawing a relationship between the public disaster spectacles that were so popular during the turn of the nineteenth century and lynching as a spectacular violence, the author argues that the leisure activities of white audiences critically framed lynching as a commodity: lynching photographers etched their names as a signature into their photographs to be openly traded. Racial violence thus became a symbol of modernity and transformed representations of deadly violence and murder into a market commodity.²³ Goldsby's attention to the powerful technology of photography alongside the legacy of lynching is a crucial site of investigation, to be sure. But what nuance is lost when we collapse the oft-utilized legibilities of lynching and their mediations together?

A cursory look at the enduring legacy of cinematic techniques from D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) makes it clear that cinema, too, has its own narrative and visual codes indebted to (spectacularized and nostalgic) racial violence. But importantly Griffith's depiction relied on (and instantiated for filmic, Hollywood language) racist tropes of the racial imaginary rather than images of real-life violence. The willfully misremembered past that Griffith articulated through film drew upon the fears of Black political agency to exalt white supremacy as hero through the Klu Klux Klan. It is undeniable that his fictive imagining of the past is a

²² Goldsby, *Spectacular Secret*, 219.

²³ *Ibid.*, 232.

crucial part of filmic language, and it simultaneously inaugurated filmic anti-Black racism as the specter that haunts us today. However, while both photography and film are critical and substantial contours of this legacy, the dissertation begins with TV because its utilization of racial violence differed in significant and profound ways. First, in distinction to film, television importantly laid a “privileged claim to immediacy and transparency” through the shocking veracity of liveness.²⁴ In this, the moral authority of television positioned the medium in a different realm of the cultural imaginary, in part, through claims to and associations with veracity. While Jane Feuer has argued liveness is television’s central myth, a disguise to hide the deliberate construction of programming and commercial interests,²⁵ it was television, with the mobility of television cameras capturing moving images to broadcast to an unprecedented national audience, that nonetheless earned the status of a social watchdog. Some argue that photography has also been exalted in this capacity, however, I contend that the spatial logics of TV’s intimate space within the living room enabled the most pressing and moving of images to instantiate different relationships between viewers and images of racial suffering, appealing to the inner worlds of white Americans in ways previously unseen. The cartographies of these relationships and their consequences comprise my first chapter.

Chapter Summaries

My first chapter, “The Racial Intimacies of White Sympathy: *Mad Men*, Esalen, and Watching Civil Rights Television,” explores how the alchemy of TV’s novel visual, spatial, and social dynamics collided with civil rights racial violence, creating new political, cultural, and affective registers within the nation. I contend that television’s unprecedented capacity for

²⁴ Torres, *Black, White, and In Color*, 14.

²⁵ Jane Feuer, “The Concept of Live Television: Ontology as Ideology,” *Regarding Television* (1983): 12–22.

bringing racial violence into the intimate and private space of the living room in an era of white flight fostered a turn in the subjectivity of white viewers— what I term, *new mediated racial intimacies*—deeply attuned to racial violence through white sympathy.

Scholars Martin Berger, Aniko Bodroghkozy, Sasha Torres, and Herman Gray have all examined different facets of civil rights images and television and their effects on audiences. Torres' *Black, White, and In Color* is pivotal in providing insight into how media industry and Black civil rights activists worked in tandem to create civil rights subjects that acted as a moral compass for national unity. Torres demonstrates how organizers used cameras as a method of ensuring a degree of safety while at the same time revealing the necessary provocation of violence for, to recontextualize a digital media term, a type of media “stickiness,” or ability to sustain publicity and attention. Illuminating the under-examined political and media savvy of civil rights organizers in using television as both a publicity tool and a medium that could show racial violence for political gain, Torres intervenes in the dominant cultural memory of the civil rights script of Black protestors as victims with little agency.

The political necessities as well as the unintended consequences of these visual narratives comprise the subject of both Berger and Bodroghkozy's works, which focus on photography and television, respectively. Berger's *Seeing Through Race* is an examination of civil rights images and demonstrates the ways in which images crafted by well-intentioned journalists contained non-threatening narratives that unwittingly reinforced a political imagination circumscribed to black victims and white superiority and control.²⁶ Similarly, Bodroghkozy's *Equal Time* explores the nuances of how the fight for civil rights was also a battle staked on the grounds of televisual

²⁶ Martin A. Berger, *Seeing through Race: A Reinterpretation of Civil Rights Photography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).

representation in both news stories as well as fictional shows watched by unprecedented national audiences at the time.²⁷

While both of these authors chart the ways that visual narratives of civil rights television recentered whiteness, my chapter delves into the effects of this privileging and parses the representations of white audiences' emotional responses. Focusing on the figure of the white liberal and tracing the historical antecedents of this racial sympathy to a period of liberalism in the 1940s through the Cold War and ideas of American exceptionalism, I examine 1960s newspaper editorials that depict watching racial violence on TV, and the history of Esalen—a learning institute established during the countercultural movement. I also look at the contemporary television show, *Mad Men*, which focuses on 1960s advertising, media, and the ability to monetize emotional response. *Mad Men*'s representations of audiences watching TV enable me to identify the contours of these new mediated intimacies as well as how television itself, as a reflexive medium, imagines the relationship between spectators and racial violence. As mentioned previously, I choose *Mad Men* in particular because of its deeply critical self-reflexivity, which distinguishes it from other shows focused on the 1960s and media. As a text centered on the strategic uses of image and emotion in advertising, *Mad Men* offers a type of metacommentary on the very process of media and its production of emotion and feeling and constitutes an industry self-analysis and self-representation. Thus, more than other television shows focused on the 1960s period, *Mad Men*'s critical and highly self-reflexive nature makes it a deeply rich text that allows us to mine the imaginative and historical depths of spectatorship, television, and racial violence.

²⁷ Aniko Bodroghkozy, *Equal Time: Television and the Civil Rights Movement* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2013).

Examining scenes of the watching of and reacting to civil rights violence like the assassinations of Medgar Evers and Martin Luther King Jr., I contend that *Mad Men* captures how televised racial violence served as a purveyor for white intimacy and connection. By constructing an intimate public through which citizenship, race, and nation could be privatized for easy consumption with the home, television fostered notions of white sentimentality, sympathy, and emotion. Lastly, by analyzing online viewer responses to *Mad Men* from the fan site, *Television without Pity*, it is clear that the projected afterlife of this structure of feeling²⁸ ultimately delimited solutions to structural racism by re-centering and reprioritizing whiteness in a time of radical racial change and possibility. Moreover, this affective engagement, though altruistic in intent, would logically push the countercultural movement from an initial focus on social collective justice towards a privatized and individualized conception of societal progress. As a result, this focus on individuals' feelings rather than dismantling larger systems of oppression circumscribed the political and cultural legibility of racial progress to the emotional worlds of white Americans for decades to come.

The second and third chapters center on Rodney King and demonstrate how racial violence has been commoditized to legitimate new media. Legitimacy is often an implicit concept within media studies. However, it is a notion that actually crucially suffuses many discussions of new technologies, media, their perceived value, and worthiness of academic study. Although TV scholars like Herman Gray and Jason Mittell have addressed legitimacy through dynamics such as ratings, genre, and the discourse of "quality television," it is rarely addressed explicitly. This has to do, in part, with the wide-ranging complexities of legitimacy. To be sure, investigating cultural and social value requires indexing a wide array of discourses from liveness

²⁸ Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature, Vol. 1* (Oxford: Oxford Paperbacks, 1977).

and veracity to aesthetic tastes, and from auteur theory to audience demographics. In *Legitimizing Television: Media Convergence and Cultural Status*, media scholars Michael Z. Newman and Elana Levine tackle some of these discourses through television's changing cultural value in an era of convergence. First, the authors link television's historically low cultural status to its association with advertising and its status as a mass medium. In doing so, they engage with theories of taste, positing that "analyzing patterns of taste judgment and classification is thus to unmask misrecognition of authentic and autonomous value, bringing to light their political and social functions."²⁹ Examining the transformative impact of digital media, Levine and Newman argue that television's denigrated status has been mitigated within an era of convergence. The authors scrutinize the historical narratives of TV's golden age, show runners as auteurs, the genres of the sitcom and primetime drama, the changing quality of televisual images, and finally television studies scholarship as primary sites of contemporary discourses of media legitimation. While the book uses the prism of television specifically (though digital media has challenged the particularity of such a distinction), I add to these discourses by urging a consideration of how the spectacular nature of racial violence constitutes a powerful force that creates its own discourse of legitimacy through its visual and sensory rendering. The Rodney King beating videotape is a primary example of this relationship and the central text of my second chapter.

The Rodney King beating videotape was a seminal moment in the ways that race and media functioned. In terms of television and media, the beating video and the camcorder technology used to record it effectively questioned the basic presumptions of news journalism and served as a precursor to a new paradigm of viral video, citizen journalism, and home videos. It essentially changed the conceptions of access and surveillance, shifting the ability to capture

²⁹ Newman and Levine, *Legitimizing Television*, 7.

images from cultural gatekeepers to a limited model of participation, thus redrawing the cartographies of what constituted television content. Moreover, as Min Song points out, the videotape would eventually become “an icon, a shorthand and simplified visual representation that conveys a singular meaning with powerful immediate recognition.”³⁰ The King beating became more than merely one incident of local police brutality, it became a national concern, one that very directly engaged the history and memory of racial violence, media, and changing media landscapes within the US. With a complicated nexus of associated media texts such as the Soon-Ja Du³¹ and Reginald Denny³² footage, issues of remediation, and the competing meanings and discourses circulating, it is unsurprising that the 1992 riots and the beating videotape have been of particular interest to media studies scholars, most notably Caldwell’s *Televisuality and* John Fiske’s *Media Matters*.

Weaving together TV industry discourses with cinema theory and historical context, Caldwell’s *Televisuality* sought to identify the excess of style in television aesthetics that arose in the 1980s by examining texts ranging from a television miniseries to the 1992 riots. As Caldwell astutely points out, the riots themselves were a mediated conflict both ignited and sustained by

³⁰ Min Hyong Song, *Strange Future: Pessimism and the 1992 Los Angeles Riots* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 69.

³¹ Soon-Ja Du was a Korean shop owner who fatally shot fifteen-year-old Black teenager Latasha Harlins in South Central Los Angeles in March of 1991. Du, who mistakenly accused Harlins of shoplifting an orange juice, used a modified handgun to shoot and kill Harlins in her store. The footage was captured by security cameras and became a focal point for the local African American community, who saw this as an example of Korean-Black relations in the area. Du’s extremely lenient punishment of no jail time drew outcry and exacerbated racial tensions within South Central leading up to the 1992 riots.

³² Footage of Reginald Denny’s beating was captured by news helicopters covering the uprising. Denny, a white truck driver who accidentally drove into the locus of the riots, was pulled from his vehicle and beaten by Black rioters. Neighborhood residents came to Denny’s rescue and halted the beating by when they viewed the footage broadcast live on their television screens. The instance would become another flashpoint of racial tension within the national imaginary and between Black and white Americans. The footage would also attest to the hyper mediated nature of the conflict.

media coverage. Caldwell explains that television's highly stylized portrayal of Rodney King ultimately posited him as an icon, complete with stigmata wounds and religious allusions. Calling out this highly stylized strategy as "rote moral guises—the stigmata and the *vanitas*, symbols that neatly fit the long tradition of tragic victimization,"³³ Caldwell surmises that the videotape was like a "grainy video slate [to be] scraped and erased, encrusted and reused in a seemingly infinite number of ways.... The low resolution and amorphous source slate became, in many manifestations, highly stylized and visually complicated program openings, mural-size screens in newsrooms, and graphically constructed and flying visual artifacts."³⁴

Similarly, for Fiske, the formalistic elements of the tape—what he terms "videohigh" and "videolow" qualities—were hugely influential. He argues that all videotapes involved with riots (King, Soon Ja Du-Latasha Harlins, and Reginald Denny) demonstrate technology's capacity for reproduction and exertion of social power. In the case of the King videotape, Fiske points out that there were, in fact, multiple beating videotapes: each television airing of the tape added visual enhancements such as editing, slow motion, and stabilization, in every instance altering the videotape from its original. He distinguishes these different iterations as videolow and videohigh, wherein visual qualities of the videos were imbued with ideological precepts that produced very different readings. As Fiske puts it, "the transformation from videolow to videohigh was not just technological, but also social and semiotic: its technological effectiveness depended entirely upon the social conditions...."³⁵ The bulk of Fiske's analysis is dedicated to the trial's version of the videotape, detailing how King became the "animalized threat to white civilization," a "current instance of a long history of similar white constructions of the Black

³³ John Caldwell, *Televisuality: Style, Crisis, and Authority in American Television* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1995), 308.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ John Fiske, *Media Matters: Race and Gender in US Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 129.

male.”³⁶ The graininess of the image, the shaky handheld camera, the blurry focus, the speed at which the batons struck King—all these visual elements were changed for the trial through image stabilization, slow motion, and a series of stills. Thus, Caldwell and Fiske’s reading uses the King beating video and the riots as the primary text to demonstrate how the machinations of medium specificity and the stakes of semiotics inadvertently created a single story around media and the riots focused on image, form, and style.

This emphasis on form and exhibition can also be located in Marita Sturken’s reading of the King video. Focusing on the trial, she asserts that as the defense effectively changed the videotape’s formalistic qualities by exhibiting the tape in a series of stills rather than live action, they changed the scene of the incident, evacuating it of its malicious nature and greatly altering its meaning. As the video’s imagery shifted from animated dynamic violence to frozen stills, so too was the violence done to King evacuated.³⁷ Sturken’s analysis differs from Caldwell and Fiske through her emphasis on cultural memory and the way that reenactment can provide opportunities for revision, renewal, and change.

These crucial interworkings of memory are likewise at the heart of race and literary scholar Elizabeth Alexander’s article. Alexander’s “‘Can You Be BLACK and Look at This?’: Reading the Rodney King Video(s)”³⁸ centers specifically on Black spectators and the memory practices that inform readings of anti-Black racial violence. Traversing the slave narratives of Frederick Douglass to the photographic spectacle of Emmett Till’s mutilated and waterlogged body, Alexander seeks to account for the accumulation of traumatic memories that inform the

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Marita Sturken, *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 39–40.

³⁸ Elizabeth Alexander, “‘Can You Be BLACK and Look at This?’: Reading the Rodney King Video(s),” in *The Black Public Sphere: A Public Culture Book*, ed. Black Public Sphere Collective (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

King video for Black spectators, and identify the persistent history of the Black body in pain as a national discourse. Her article journeys through these widening gaps of time, bound by Black trauma as a constituent of Black subjectivity. If Alexander charts out the terms of Black spectatorship and its collective memory through previous mediated instances of racial violence, in my second chapter I illuminate the critical role of technology and how it fundamentally is shaped by and shapes this type of Black spectatorship. In other words, if Alexander is focused on the “why” of Black spectatorship, I am concerned with the “how:” How can a nuanced understanding of media technology help us understand certain ways of witnessing?

My second chapter, “Instrumentalizing the Sights of Racial Violence: Multi-directional Memory and Industry Crisis” excavates a genealogy between televised footage of the 1965 march on Selma, the Rodney King beating videotape, camcorder technology, and participatory media. In doing so, it traces a startling trans-media pattern of commodification. The March on Selma and the King beating came at a time when challenges and changes to TV’s industry and public image were substantial: in the 1960s, Newton Minnow famously decried the medium as a “vast wasteland” and the quiz show scandals created a crisis in public image for the medium’s burgeoning status. In the early 1990s, television transitioned from a three-channel network to a cable-dominated landscape with niche marketing, and a fractured audience; the experience of TV shifted dramatically, from a national audience towards an individuated experience, and remapped the cartographies of what was considered television. I contend that, in these periods of exigency and rapid change, the televised racial violence of the civil rights movement and the citizen journalism and participatory potential of the King videotape served, respectively, to redeem and renew their corresponding new media forms. This dynamic would continue as the King tape

would also be retroactively inserted into to a new history of digital citizen journalism, punctuating the importance of the tape and the memory of racial violence yet again.

The images of King's beating contained such instantaneous legibility and power in large part because of the visual legacy of Selma. But the videotape signified both a break and a continuity in mediated raced representation and imagery in very particular ways. A continuity because of the reiterative legibility of racialized violence from civil rights footage emblazoned in America's cultural landscape. But also a break because it essentially ruptured the dominant public discourse of multiculturalism, racial harmony, and the self-satisfied idea of diversity through representational means. In this way, not only was the King beating videotape a direct contradiction of both critiques of multiculturalism *and* the over-valorization of the representations it produced, but in its legibility of Black-white relations and police brutality, it also refuted the racial logic and rhetoric of multiculturalism itself. By investigating the many afterlives of the videotape, we are able to see how the remediation of racial violence and the multidirectional nature of memory work in concert to establish discourses of legitimacy, renewal, and change within specific media forms. Ultimately, the use of racial violence served the television industry in a way that was beneficial and established the medium as a worthy source; as such, racial violence is both a hidden history and a constitutive force behind the very idea of technological, media, and racial progress.

In my third chapter, "The Exigencies of Witnessing: Rodney King on *Celebrity Rehab*," I examine a different method of value extraction and legitimacy from racial violence by looking at affective labor within reality television. Using Rodney King's appearance on *Celebrity Rehab with Dr. Drew*, this chapter demonstrates how the televisual use of form and the reality television genre can help us understand racial violence's impact beyond the factual and corporeal. Afforded

the voice of personal testimony and by sifting through his painful memories, King not only informs a serious revision of his beating, the 1992 riots, and cultural memory; he also makes visible the nexus of state-sponsored brutality, marginalized communities, and the psychic violence of addiction.

As scholars such as Laurie Ouellette, James Hay, and Brenda Weber have argued,³⁹ as a genre, reality television acts pedagogically— instructing citizens on self-governing principles, and enacting neoliberal ideologies, and advancing the privatization of the social service network. Whether the targets for rehabilitation are dilapidated houses, haplessly unstylish straight men, or unruly pups in need of a human pack leader, these reality television shows implicitly uphold an ethic of self-care through an edict of privatization— emphasizing the individual rather than the structural, the private over the public. I examine *Celebrity Rehab with Dr. Drew* precisely because Rodney King’s presence on the show refutes this logic. His presence punctured and dismantled the present public rhetorics of “care” ostensibly provided by the state and privatized actors because he embodies the very physical and psychic ways that the state-sanctioned violence continues to effect racialized citizen bodies. In this way, King’s notoriety served as both an inescapable reminder and a cultural and historical touchstone of state-sanctioned racial violence.

Conducting a close textual analysis of King’s reaccount, including (and thus emphasizing) rather than omitting King’s pauses and moments of unintelligibility or incoherence, I want to reframe his testimony as an act of translation—one in which his account is less significantly a display of factual knowledge but more importantly a process of discovery and

³⁹ See Laurie Ouellette and James Hay’s *Better Living Through Reality TV: Television and Post-Welfare Citizenship* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008) and Brenda Weber’s *Makeover TV: Selfhood, Citizenship, and Celebrity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009).

disclosure that must undergo a series of linguistic and conceptual translations. Taken this way, his silences or incoherencies are not absences or syntactic hiccups within a retelling but rather critical spaces pregnant with meaning. The violence done to King is bodily marked through speech, in the gaps, the hesitations, the silences, the ums, the unintelligible, and should not be discounted as inarticulateness but as a profoundly fitting expression of the unknowability of twinned psychic and physical violences and how they endure. To account for, unpack, and parse King's testimony in detail is to bear witness to the memory work that has been done. Sturken argues that memory takes on the form of cultural reenactment, a retelling of the past as way to create narrative closures, to promote processes of healing.⁴⁰ Although this is true, I argue that this scene, this retelling of the past, a type of cultural reenactment via reality television testimonial, can simultaneously create new possibilities for narrative openings, ones that engage with the perpetual present of the past. If the violence done to King was "undone" by the mode of exhibition of the beating video in court, as many scholars like Sturken and John Fiske have argued, then King's recounting of the events, filtered through his struggle with addiction, serves to reinscribe that violence—but from a new perspective. With all of its heart-wrenching detail, King's retelling acts as a testimonial that reopens the historical narrative for revision. If King's public story, his public narrative ended when he naively stuttered, "Can we—can we all just get along?," then in *Celebrity Rehab* he is afforded the rare chance to revise this statement, an exceptionally uncommon opportunity for those victimized by the state and those marginalized by King's specific race and class. In essence, his account challenges the discursive regimes of racial violence in the American imagination and perhaps the epistemology of racial violence itself. What King's appearance on *Celebrity Rehab* has done is enable audiences to be "stuck in time"

⁴⁰ Sturken, *Tangled Memories*, 24.

with King, to evaluate how history was made, to bear witness to how it was remade on our television screens, and realize that the obligation of that witnessing is an exigency of present.

In my final chapter, “Tweeting the Situated Imagination: Sandra Bland, Visual Evidence, and Acts of Refusal,” I engage the ideas of technological progress, documentation, and visual evidence, questioning the belief that seeing brings us closer to the ontological truth of racial violence. Breaking the ocularcentrism of previous iconic instances of mediated racial violence, I posit that the Social Networking Service (SNS) Twitter provides a platform that enables us to “see” differently, to experience racial violence outside the boundaries of purely the photographic or the cinematic.

I focus on Twitter in particular for multiple reasons. First, from 2010 to 2011, the revolutionary protests across the Middle East, dubbed by mainstream news outlets as the Arab Spring, were often characterized as the direct result of social media technology and usage, leading critics, journalists, and many Western news outlets to extol these protests as “Twitter revolutions.” The public imaginary of the Arab Spring in the US became a story of social media, one that touted Twitter as the new revolutionary tool for implementing Western-style democracy.⁴¹ In essence, Twitter became the enduring meta-story that eclipsed the many narratives of the protesters on the ground, and became the social media synonymous with freedom and revolutionary potential.⁴² Additionally, the platform has been instrumental for

⁴¹ For more on the Arab Spring, see Gilad Lotan, et al., “The Revolutions Were Tweeted: Information Flows During the 2011 Tunisian and Egyptian Revolutions,” *International journal of communication* 5 (2011): 31. And Nadia Idle and Alex Nunns’ *Tweets from Tahriri: Egypt’s Revolution as it Unfolded, in the Words of the People Who Made It* (New York: OR Books, 2011).

⁴² The idea that Twitter’s role was the prominent factor behind the surge of protests during the Iranian election protests in 2010 reached such ubiquity that even the Obama administration weighed in. As *The New York Times* reported, State Department official Jared Cohen sent Twitter an email, requesting they “delay scheduled maintenance of its global network, which would have cut off service while Iranians were using Twitter to swap

#BlackLivesMatter activists and protestors, who utilize the site for organizing, publicity, and establishing an online presence to protest incidents of state-sanctioned violence. With such strongly associated discourses of social worth, Twitter is the premiere site for investigating the constellation of issues surrounding racial violence, technology, and progress.

Within social media at large, the circulation of racist or violent images has produced much discussion as virality and modes of distribution and connectivity have all but revolutionized the way that images circulate. In early 2004, the pictures taken by soldiers within Abu Ghraib detailed horrific abuse and torture of their wards. In contrast to other images like the Rodney King beating and footage of Eric Garner that police sought to suppress, for example, these images were meant to be circulated, as soldiers tortured and poised detainees in various positions meant to humiliate and degrade. In Sarita See's *The Decolonized Eye*, she writes of the doubled disavowal of forgetting that characterizes US imperialism: the US forgets that it forgets that it is an empire.⁴³ This doubled disavowal is precisely why the pictures of Abu Ghraib were so shocking to average Americans, despite the persistent history of racial violence within the US and its symmetry to an earlier period of racial violence and photographic history. Like lynching

information and inform the outside world about the mushrooming protests around Tehran" (Mark Lander and Brian Stelter, "Washington Taps Into A Potent New Force in Diplomacy," *The New York Times*, June 16, 2009.)

⁴³ Sarita See, *The Decolonized Eye: Filipino American Art and Performance* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2009). While this dissertation is focused on domestic issues of anti-Black state-sanctioned violence in particular, the impact of war as racial violence is indisputable, as is the seminal place that media technologies play in rendering it visible. Vietnam news coverage, America's "first living room war" overlapped with civil rights struggles, engendering difficult questions for white America: the dilemma of promoting freedom abroad while denying it to African Americans at home risked jeopardizing the image of American moral global leadership. Moreover, the Rodney King beating videotape and the subsequent 1992 riots coverage were informed by the logics of visibility recently established by the Persian Gulf War and CNN's groundbreaking 24-hour coverage. Moreover, the rise of drone surveillance and wartime technologies has reformulated ways of seeing racial violence. These instances need to be analyzed in tandem with domestic racial formations in order to fully account for the complex racial formations that are constituted. Though such necessary scholarship is needed, this comparative analytic is beyond the scope of this particular project.

photographs of the previous century, images from Abu Ghraib too were meant to be prizes that attested to a dominance and innate supremacy of whiteness and US military might and empire, respectively.⁴⁴ Importantly, where “once photographing was the province of photojournalists, now the soldiers themselves are all photographers— recording their war, their fun, their observations of what they find picturesque, their atrocities— and swapping images among themselves and e-mailing them around the globe,” all through the democratized technology of the digital camera.⁴⁵ With the advent of social media, this relationship has only spread, as images of racial violence can be shared and disseminated widely at a moment’s notice.

As Lisa Nakamura demonstrates in her article, “I Will Do Everything That Am Asked’: Scambaiting, Digital Show-Space, and the Racial Violence of Social Media,” this has allowed for a type of decontextualization of images that can reproduce racial violence through spreadability and virality. Nakamura investigates memetic culture and specifically the “trophy” photographs of scam baiting, the practice of tricking African men and women would-be scammers, to perform humiliating tasks in exchange for monetary funds that never materialize. These widely-circulated, decontextualized photos are remediations of previous visual tropes of the primitive and enact another form of colonial, racial violence through memetic culture and social media.⁴⁶ This is an important facet of digital media studies’ theorization of how racial violence is reconstituted within digital media outside overt representations of violent spectacles. It demonstrates how the machinations of new media forms and circulation can change the

⁴⁴ I acknowledge those two things are not mutually exclusive and, in fact, are inextricably linked. However, this relationship is beyond the scope of the dissertation.

⁴⁵ Susan Sontag, “Regarding the Pain of Others,” *The New York Times Magazine*, May 23, 2004.

⁴⁶ Lisa Nakamura, “I WILL DO EVERYthing That Am Asked’: Scambaiting, Digital Show-Space, and the Racial Violence of Social Media.” *Journal of Visual Culture* 13, no. 3 (2014): 257–74.

ontologies of racial violence altogether.⁴⁷ This way of seeing and understanding racial violence, outside solely the visual, has deeply informed my final chapter.

In this final chapter, I examine two prominent hashtags, #SayHerName and #IfIDieInPoliceCustody, that emerged from the Sandra Bland case to investigate new dynamics of spectatorship of Twitter's experiential stream. Problematizing the faith or belief that visibility, exposure, and the unveiling of racial violence are liberatory acts, I contend that Twitter acts as a new type of medium, where the photographic is part of a data mixture that remediates and reconstitutes images, videos, text, and interactive messaging and retweeting. This wild heterogeneity constitutes a new formulation of witnessing that interacts differently with racial violence by breaking the ocularcentrism, or the dominance of the visual as a master sense and a "synecdoche for human perception,"⁴⁸ of previous instances of racial violence.

In particular, I chart the epistemological interventions of Black feminist theory focused on the experiential provides us with a way to read #SayHerName and #IfIDieInPoliceCustody as both a response to the failures of the photographic/visual evidence in providing safety, accountability, and justice and as acts of a collective situated imagination. By examining the collective sonic and imaginative worlds of Twitter users, these hashtags index the disenfranchisement with visual ontologies and refutes their primacy.

In its place, #SayHerName's urgency for vocalization is a resistant act against the spaces of silence surrounding the gendered memory of state-sanctioned racial violence's narratives. Thus, the hashtag is a declaration, a dissent, and a witnessing— it articulates how the twinned

⁴⁷ Other forms like the racial violence of digital labor are crucial in understanding the mechanics of digital media beyond mimetic representation, though beyond the scope of the project. See Nakamura's "Don't Hate the Player, Hate the Game" as an example of this.

⁴⁸ James W. Cook, "Seeing the Visual in US History," *The Journal of American History* 95, no. 2 (2008): 432–41.

oppressions of race and gender have rendered Black women invisible in dominant narratives of police violence and refuses to let Bland and other Black women remain un-mourned and fade into obscurity. Under the banner of #IfIDieInPoliceCustody, Twitter users imagine their own prescient death and craft living wills that are an anticipatory disruption of one's future obituary as a form of racist, sexist profiling. What is more, these tweets allude to a space of non-spectatorship that augments the notion of visual documentation as sole evidentiary proof, becoming performances, testimonies, anticipatory living wills.

Within #SayHerName and #IfIDieInPoliceCustody are users' interactions with sensory and imaginative acts that speak to the ubiquity and fatigue with consumptive visual practices of racial violence. These hashtags and the users that utilize them illuminate the alternative spaces that can be uncovered by critiquing the photographic regime and direct it towards a multi-sensorial mode of subjectivity that incorporates reading practices, looking, listening, and world-making through the technocultural specificities of Twitter.

In sum, this project illuminates the impossibility of disaggregation of race from any concept of innovation, progress, and the US's investment in media technology. It reveals how racial violence becomes an emblem for new media's value— a conduit for the accumulation of social worth— and explicates how technological innovation becomes wedded to racial violence's urgent historicity. In such highly mediated times where online spaces are touted as democratic and post-racial zones of liberation, *Sights of Racial Violence* renders the primacy of racial violence crucial to the history of US media and maps the cartographies of how this relationship has shaped how we understand the significance of new media and what we understand the discourse of racial progress to be. Moreover, this dissertation reveals how the implications of such a relationship instantiates new racial formations and produces unexpected dynamics of

witnessing and memory that are integral to the evolving concepts of freedom, technological advancement, and racial progress in the US. By examining these spectacular moments of mediated violence, *Sights of Racial Violence* unveils how technological innovation becomes wedded to racial violence's urgent historicity and attempts to unmoor this trans-media history and relationship from the forgotten, stamp it into history, and lay claim to it. Doing so allows us to expose the reiterativeness of this utilitarian cycle of racial violence, to demonstrate how integral its memory is to the very conception we have of media technology, and finally, to imagine witnessing and watching in other ways.

CHAPTER TWO

THE RACIAL INTIMACIES OF WHITE SYMPATHY: *Mad Men, Esalen, and Watching Civil Rights Television*

A shrill cry of terror, unlike any sound that had passed through a TV set, rose up as the troopers lumbered forward, stumbling sometimes on the fallen bodies.... [My] wife, sobbing, turned and walked away, saying, "I can't look any more." We were in our living room in San Francisco watching the 6 P.M. news. I was not aware that at the same moment people all up and down the West Coast were feeling what my wife and I felt, that at various times all over the country that day and up past 11 P.M. Pacific Time that night hundreds of these people would drop whatever they were doing; that some of them would leave home without changing clothes, borrow money, overdraw their checking accounts, board planes, buses, trains, cars... that these people, mostly unknown to each other, would move for a single purpose, to place themselves alongside the Negroes they had watched on television.

GEORGE B. LEONARD
"Midnight Plane to Alabama"
The Nation, May 10, 1965

I was only 4 but I remember all the footage on tv, I remember playing in the room in front of the tv while my mom was doing something and I just remember my mom stopped, I think she was ironing or something, she stopped, she said oh my no, no, no so I looked at the tv. I recall a neighbor coming out, I think there was laundry on her clothesline, I think my mom yelled something outside of the window. It was all women talking, on the street holding their hearts, crying, holding their heads, then running into their respective homes and I could hear the tv's going on the street.

"FIRST AVENUE"
Television without Pity
September 16, 2008¹

You are the product— you feeling something. That's what sells.

DON DRAPER
Mad Men
2008

¹ This comment was posted on *Television Without Pity's Mad Men* forums under "1960s." Many users used the space to reflect back on their memories of the period. A screenshot of "first avenue"'s comment appears later in this chapter.

In George Leonard's intensely personal article for *The Nation*, "Midnight Plane to Alabama," he diverged from traditional journalistic objectivity and abandoned all emotional distance to give an articulate yet arrestingly subjective account of watching the televised 1965 violent Bloody Sunday footage. While many could read his account as the simple and inspiring story of how violent images galvanized him to leave the safety of his living room and, ultimately, catch that eponymous midnight plane to Alabama, Leonard's account does so much more. By describing his own experience of watching civil rights racial violence, Leonard demonstrates how the social architecture of television played a crucial mediating and affective role within the intimate space of the home in post-WWII American culture. For Leonard, the televisual images from Selma, Alabama, provided a window into an experience not his own, spurring him into action. For his wife, the images of state-sanctioned racial violence threatened to emotionally overwhelm her, literally compelling her to flee the living room, away from the television itself. Over forty years later, a user named "first avenue" used the site *Television Without Pity* to discuss the medium's central role in their own memories and emotional world. A forum for audience members to share and discuss reactions to television programming, the site facilitated user interaction and community and allowed users to start their own online forums based on episode, theme, or even a question they may have had about a television show.² Inspired by the depiction of President John F. Kennedy's assassination on the AMC show, *Mad Men*, "first avenue" recounted their own experience as mediated through the reactions of their mother and other women in the neighborhood. In this vivid memory, "first avenue" simultaneously detailed the affective contours of television within domestic space and positions the cultural medium as a pivotal point of connection, collectivity, and historical memory. Though context and industry

² While the site was fully operational for six seasons of *Mad Men* and during my initial research, *Television without Pity* ceased operations on April 4, 2014 and the forums were permanently deleted on May 31, 2014.

transitions would change TV dramatically through these intervening years, within both of these narratives, television is an agent and a visceral force that constitutes a powerful, new presence within the intimate space of the home—a force, furthermore, that I argue is most affecting when combined with the visual vocabularies of racial violence.

This chapter explores how the alchemy of TV's novel visual, spatial, and social dynamics have historically collided with civil rights racial violence, creating certain political, cultural, and affective registers within the national viewing audience. I begin by tracing the historical juncture of white suburban development and television's proliferation, detailing TV's unprecedented capacity for bringing racial violence into the intimate and private space of the living room. I contend that in a post-war era of white flight, this coincidence of TV's newness, its position within the intimate space of home, and the visual vocabularies of civil rights violence fostered a turn in the subjectivity of white viewers deeply attuned to racial violence through white sympathy. George Leonard's account stands as an emblematic example of how these relationships created a new intimacy with racial violence, what I term "new mediated racial intimacies," which would come to form a specific variant of liberalism in the post-war period. Tracing the historical antecedents of this racial sympathy to a period of liberalism in the 1940s through the Cold War and ideas of American exceptionalism, I argue that this racial liberalism came to its fullest expression when combined with the cultural technology of television—a medium able to fully capitalize on the emotive power of moving images to inscribe and evoke a particular and persistent varietal of white sympathy in the American consciousness.

But how does one trace the rise of a particular structure of feeling, formation, or sensibility within television audiences? I begin by examining George Leonard's editorial alongside his personal biography, which includes his role in the founding of Esalen, a learning

institute established during the countercultural movement. Tracing the formation and rise of a particular white liberal consciousness and identity, I argue that watching civil rights television was integral to this process, and that it was through these new mediated intimacies that white sympathy was positioned as a political solution to racism and violence. Moreover, I demonstrate how this affective engagement, though altruistic in intent, would logically push the countercultural movement from a focus on social collective justice towards an individualistic and privatized conception of societal progress, impacting the contemporary notion of racial change in unexpected ways.

Next, I examine the contemporary television show, *Mad Men*, which focuses on 1960s advertising, media, and the ability to monetize emotional response. Inspired by Jacqueline Najuma Stewart's notion of a reconstructive spectatorship,³ which turns to literary representations of Black movie-going audiences to fill in archival gaps, I turn to a seemingly anachronistic text to similarly expand the kinds of evidence we mobilize to understand the inner subjectivities of audiences. By destabilizing the conceptual idea of understanding spectatorship through more traditional methods like archival research, ethnographic research, and textually-based readings, I seek to unmoor spectatorship from the strict confines of certain disciplinary formations. While retaining skepticism that we can ever truly get at the veracity of audiences' subjectivities, I invoke a theoretically imaginative practice and contend that we are able to mine the visual representations of spectatorship as a new avenue of investigation.

As *Mad Men*'s main protagonist, Don Draper, explains, the central product within advertising is not the product one is trying to sell, but the viewing audience itself and their affective responses: "You are the product—you feeling something. That's what sells." With this

³ Jacqueline Najuma Stewart, *Migrating to the Movies: Cinema and Black Urban Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

self-reflexivity as one of the show's recurring themes, I assert that *Mad Men* is centered on parsing the affective registers and emotional responses to media and television in particular. I analyze two key scenes that depict white viewers watching civil rights violence on television and identify the emergence of a particular kind of relationship between television and a particular kind of sensibility—one that framed racial violence and whiteness in very specific ways and, ultimately, circumscribed the political and cultural legibility of progress for decades to come. In addition, I mine fans' online responses to the show's meta-narrative of television watching on the website *Television Without Pity*. The site's collection of audience reactions and memories constitute not only information used by some show runners, but also an archive of oral histories that include civil rights movement memories. By integrating online responses into a reconstructive spectatorship that seeks to tease out the contours of racial intimacies, I attempt to break down the betwixt spaces between ethnography and representation, between the veracity of audience accounts and the imaginative worlds of cultural producers, to understand not only how these new racial intimacies came to be, but how they function as part of a larger racial project of whiteness, feeling, and media, and illuminate what types of racial violences are allowed to be seen and remembered.

In parsing the show's representations of audiences watching the civil rights television, I demonstrate how television *itself*, as a reflexive medium, imagines the relationship between television spectators and racial violence. By analyzing these representations of audiences watching we are better able to understand not only the “subtextual drama of the medium's struggle to depict itself,” but also how “new media can be a potent, embodied version of unsettling” even at a time when the media in question is no longer new.⁴ What this

⁴ Lisa Gitelman, *Always, Already New: Media, History, and the Data of Culture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006), 94.

demonstrates is that these imaginative realms of spectatorship holds truths and logics that can shed light on the shadowy palimpsests of racial violence and the profound implications of its watchability. It is these representations and responses that can serve as points of collision between the past and present, an overlapping of different times and formats that enables us to understand the historical formations of feeling, the implications and ramifications of new media, and the history of racial violence's utility.

In considering audiences and spectatorship more generally, the field of television studies has often relied on either the psychoanalytic ruminations of film studies⁵ or the empirical and ethnographic methods of audience reception.⁶ More recent studies have concentrated on the ways in which fans make meaning and “textually poach” meanings from original programming or how those involved within productions—who are also audiences themselves—contribute to the larger textual constructions.⁷ However, in trying to understand the somatic and psychic worlds of

⁵ See Laura Mulvey's seminal essay, “Visual Pleasure in Narrative Cinema” in *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader* ed. Amelia Jones (New York: Routledge, 2003): 44-53; responses to Mulvey's argumentation from Linda Williams's “Something Else Besides a Mother: *Stella Dallas* and the Maternal Melodrama” *Cinema Journal* (1984): 2-27; and Miriam Hansen's “Pleasure, Ambivalence, Identification: Valentino and Female Spectatorship,” *Cinema Journal* (1986): 6-32. For a response that incorporates race and sexuality within psychoanalytic lens, see Jane Gaines' “White Privilege and Looking Relations: Race and Gender in Feminist Film Theory.” *Cultural Critique* 4 (1986): 59-79.

⁶ See Ellen Seiter's “Qualitative Audience Research” in *The Television Studies Reader* eds. Robert Clyde Allen and Annette Hill (New York: Routledge, 2004); and Jacqueline Bobo's *Black Women as Cultural Readers* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995) as some representative examples.

⁷ Resisting the dominance of subject positioning and ideological manipulation in Mulvey and the cadre of scholars who took up her claims, Henry Jenkins identifies that a particular textual poaching occurs when fans, in his eyes, a select subculture of avid consumers, create their own cultural productions. Using television shows like *Star Trek*, these fans used their interpretative strategies to write fan fiction and repurpose spectatorship into a creative, active process. While I agree with Jenkins' premise that audiences are not merely passive receptacles for text to merely

audiences, one must also examine the spaces in which they watch and the memories invoked by the social architectures of watching. For television is an innately social practice; it is informed by not only the televisual texts themselves, but also their contexts of reception, the spatial logics of the homes in which they are viewed. A circuit of exchange and interaction constitutes the various and varied processes of the medium. Like subjectivity itself, the dialectical, the cross-permutations, and the accumulation of histories—like television’s interaction with social space and technology—must be considered. Thus, while the main emphasis of the chapter remains focused on the televisual representations of TV spectatorship in the contemporary age, I return to the Leonard’s epigraph that opens this chapter and a historical period in which television transitioned from an emerging medium to a new media through the spectacle of civil rights coverage. I do so in order to tease out the two central contexts that frame this chapter and which are so vividly described in Leonard’s account: the context of television reception during the medium’s ascension in American life—that is, the social and spatial factors that influenced white audiences, and the larger historical trajectory of racial liberalism.

Published originally in *The Nation* as a response to the televised footage of racial violence in Selma, Alabama, in 1965, George Leonard’s account encapsulates the constituent contours of the newfound racial intimacies that, I argue, emerged from the combination of

inject with meaning, I caution against the implicit acceptance that this meaning making is inherently liberatory, free, and ultimately, utopian. To be fair, in his description of the shift in the discourse from “spectator culture to participatory culture” (*Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers*, 60), Jenkins does acknowledge that social location plays a part in meaning making. For example, in the case of *Star Trek* and other media fandom, Jenkins explains that women suffer under patriarchal oppression and seek other venues of resistance through the imaginative acts of fan fiction. But for me, Jenkins’ work teeters dangerously towards celebrating the “free” reader, unhindered by the complexities realities of constructed economic, political, cultural, social and psychological identities of gender, sexuality, class, ethnicity, race, region. Despite gestures towards identity categories, Jenkins’ celebration of fandom leaves uninterrogated examining the structures that have shaped differential subjectivity in the first place and fails to engage with historical contexts of reception.

television's visual, spatial, and social architectures with images, specifically, of racial violence. While the term intimacy has been used primarily in race and ethnic studies either as a characterization of a sexual relationship, to detail the intimate nature of sexual violence, miscegenation, or to a lesser extent, acts of affinity and collaboration, I use the term in two related ways. One common usage of intimacy focuses specifically on its spatial dimensions, referring to intimacy as a marker of intimate space. For example, the phrase "an intimate setting" is often used colloquially to establish a sensibility of closeness through the logic of proximity. Using this functionality of the word intimate, I seek to make visible the way that television's place in the home is central to fostering certain intimacies at the same time that racial violence engenders a particular relationship for certain audiences. This logic of proximity as a key constituent of intimacy complements, in turn, the second usage of intimacy that I utilize. Defining intimacy as "close in acquaintance or association; closely connected by friendship or personal knowledge; characterized by familiarity,"⁸ this explanation is keenly related and attuned to knowledge but, importantly, not concretely derived from the experiential, cast instead as a close association. While the definition itself does not make a distinction, collapsing the terms "close association" and "personal knowledge" despite a gulf of familiarity that separates the two, it is a productive tension and disjuncture. I choose to dwell in the betwixt and interstitial space between them. Rather than a mere semantic dissection of the term, I see this difficulty as productive in that it marks the difficulty of understanding the terrain of emotion that characterizes intimacy itself. These two definitions, which function doubly as questions surrounding the conditions, utility, and implications of intimacy, index the ideas and concerns at the heart of this chapter. Thus my term "racial intimacies" relies on the multi-variegated

⁸ *Oxford English Dictionary*. "Intimacy." 2nd ed. 20 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989)

functions of the word “intimate,” as both a spatial relation and form of indeterminate closeness and understanding.

It is the various intimate spaces that television occupies, subjectivity, emotionally, and geographically, that I argue come to the fore in George Leonard’s account. Setting the scene of a disturbing new experience, he describes the sonic representation of the Selma footage as “[a] shrill cry of terror, unlike any sound that had passed through a TV set.”⁹ He describes the violence at Selma as extraordinary, “unlike any sound” previously broadcast, and in so doing, he highlights the stirring urgency that comes from images and sounds of racial violence as well as the spatial elements that play into this urgency. As horrifying white, state-sanctioned violence made its way onto the nation’s television screens, so too did it enter into the inner sanctum of the American home, or as Leonard states, “into their living room” and thus, into the emotional worlds of white Americans. Of course, racial violence’s entrance into the home did not start with television, as violence has made its circuitous way into white American homes through various mediums such as paintings of Native American genocide and lynching photographs as keepsakes, to name a few.¹⁰ But I argue that television’s qualities and capacity for engendering an unprecedented visceral affect from its audiences, as exemplified by Leonard’s account, are unique and necessitate further exploration. In fact, I posit that television’s capacity for depicting racial violence marked a new turn in the subjectivity of viewers, a turn innately tied to the shifting epistemological parameters of racial violence as it encountered new media and the spatial logics of the home.

⁹ George Leonard, “Midnight Plane to Alabama,” *The Nation*, May 10, 1965.

¹⁰ See Jacqueline Goldsby’s *A Spectacular Secret* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006) for more on lynching photographs as keepsakes.

Time magazine wrote of Bloody Sunday: “Rarely in human history has public opinion reacted so spontaneously and with such fury.”¹¹ Reflecting on the extensive footage, historian Taylor Branch wrote that the event “struck with the force of instant historical icon.”¹² President Johnson’s statement on the brutality and violence of Selma and the subsequent speedy passing of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 underlined the significance of the footage. But importantly, I argue that the home, as a social construction and a geographic reality, played an important role in how these instances of racial violence were received during civil rights television coverage. Both Leonard and his wife—who “sobbing, turned and walked away, saying, ‘I can’t look any more’”—were sitting in their living rooms, a pertinent fact that should not be overlooked. Channeling exhibition studies’ central tenet that the spatial logics of watching indelibly influence how one watches, I posit that the specific combination of the home, as a space of intimate connection, and the new medium of television, which acts as a “window of the public into the private worlds,”¹³ was crucial in crafting these newfound racial intimacies. If new technologies often manifest idealistic hopes of change and progress, then anxieties around the loss of community, intimacy, and connection also abound. While this loss of connectivity to the outside world might have happened during television’s emergence, and might have more to do with white flight and the rise of suburban space, I argue that whatever community is lost is supplanted by a new type of intimacy with racial violence that pervades the medium today. Indeed, it was precisely this amalgamation of effects that spurred Leonard and countless others to leave their living rooms and homes “without changing clothes, borrow money, overdraw their checking accounts, board planes, buses, trains, cars... that these people, mostly unknown to each other,

¹¹ “The Central Points,” *Time Magazine*, March 19, 1965

¹² Ari Berman, “John Lewis’s Long Fight for Voting Rights,” *The Nation*, June 5, 2013.

¹³ Lynn Spigel, *Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

would move for a single purpose, to place themselves alongside the Negroes they had watched on television.”

Leonard’s account makes visible television’s immense capacity for depicting racial violence in intimate terms and marked a new turn in the subjectivity of viewers. And it is the clear-cut expression of white sympathy that marks Leonard’s account as distinct from traditional journalistic coverage of the Selma incident. While major reputable presses presented facts and figures without overt editorializing, Leonard’s distinctly subjective account appeared in *The Nation* and stood out for its deeply personal nature, painting a scene of watching that makes his and his wife’s emotional worlds very clearly inseparable from the narrative of the incident. In this way, it is not necessarily a journalistic account of Selma itself or even Selma TV coverage, but rather a story of the visceral and emotional responses of white audiences. Importantly, it is a story in which television plays a central role. As his 2010 *New York Times* obituary points out, Leonard was one of the first journalists to predict the “tumult and idealism” of the youth generation, and one of a new breed of journalists who shed the conventions of objectivity in reporting.¹⁴ Through this new participant-observation mode of journalism, Leonard’s descriptions of television, its placement, and the sympathy it produced serve as autoethnography at the same time as journalistic source. His story acts, itself, as a piece of evidence that sketches out the contours and historical formation of these new racial intimacies and a form of racial liberalism, a political framework and sentiment that privileged white Americans and their emotional worlds as paramount. Indeed, this figure, “the white liberal,” whose recentering of the self in a period of mass social upheaval reflected more than just mere narcissism but a larger social shift and phenomenon that continues to persist, albeit in different forms. Leonard attempts

¹⁴ Douglas Martin, “George Leonard, Voice of ‘60s Counterculture, Dies at 86,” *The New York Times*, Jan. 18, 2010.

to take readers into his living room, the site where mediated and representative racial violence unfolds, and to reconstruct the scene of watching. It is also a site that, looking backwards, we can begin to understand as a location of massive change as the post-war migratory patterns of white suburban housing altered the way that private and public spaces operated.

However, as a solitary yet powerfully illustrative anecdote from the civil rights period about spectatorship and racial intimacies, Leonard's account could be easily dismissed as a fleeting sensibility or merely a sole individual's reaction. But I contend that given Leonard's place in the public discourse of the 1960s and 70s counterculture, his prominent account is a highly indicative and emblematic response of white liberals to the racial upheaval of the period. Leonard was the senior editor of *Look*, an illustrious bi-weekly magazine with a circulation high of 7.75 million readers in 1969, which contributed to the careers of Stanley Kubrick and Norman Rockwell, to name but a few. He would go on to play a prominent role in the national conversation around youth culture, civil rights, and the 1960s. As *The New York Times* writes, Leonard would come to embody an "emerging consciousness," one that brought attention to countercultural ideas and attitudes and emphasized a consciousness of the self.¹⁵ This consciousness was reflected in both his unorthodox style of reporting, as seen in the epigraph, and his history and association with the New Age learning institution Esalen throughout the 1960s and until his death in 2010.

Leonard is best remembered for coining the term "human potential movement," a movement that was formed around the belief in each person's untapped potential and the importance of self-actualization. He was also an outspoken critic of racial inequality, a political leaning informed by an incident from his youth. Raised in Macon, Georgia, as the son of a state senator who owned black tenant housing, the journalist/activist witnessed a mob's attempts to

¹⁵ Ibid.

lynch a black man accused of rape. This pivotal incident, another instance of racial violence, would awaken Leonard's lifelong inquiry into racial equality, starting with a condemnation of his family's complicity in the Jim Crow South, to his reporting of the civil rights movement. As a journalist, Leonard met with Martin Luther King Jr. and joined the Selma March demonstration.¹⁶ In fact, Leonard's coining of the "human potential movement" in 1965 was inspired by the civil rights movement as well as the free speech movement. This tenet of Leonard's personal philosophy would extend later in life when he would go on to lead Esalen's first interracial "encounter" groups, "emotionally bruising sessions in which blacks and whites challenged one another's racial beliefs to foster better relations."¹⁷ Archival footage of these sessions appears in the BBC documentary, *The Century of the Self*. According to the documentary footage, participants were encouraged to "liberate themselves" from racism by shouting out their deepest and most intimate thoughts about stereotypes and racial difference in an effort to expel them. Though conceived to produce racial harmony through individuated, therapeutic transformation, the cross-racial experiments were characterized as "disastrous."¹⁸ Nonetheless, with their effort to advance racial equality by engaging with the inner worlds of participants, the sessions can be viewed as ill-conceived attempts to engineer the very racial intimacies that Leonard himself experienced through the proxy of civil rights televised violence.

George Leonard was often seen as an unofficial third founding member of Esalen and did eventually serve as the organization's President Emeritus. The learning center was conceptualized as a "laboratory for new thought" and dedicated to exploring subjectivity, self-

¹⁶ Jeffrey Kripal, *Esalen: America and the Religion of No Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 206.

¹⁷ Elaine Woo, "George B. Leonard dies at 86; Journalist a Seminal Figure in the Human Potential Movement," *The Los Angeles Times*, Jan. 17, 2010.

¹⁸ Adam Curtis, *The Century of the Self*, Documentary, directed by Adam Curtis (2002, London: BBC Two), Television.

awareness, and unlocking individual human potential. Leonard's history is both important and striking precisely because it demonstrates his interest and investment in the interiority of self, as reflected through his engagement with participant-observation and his connections with Esalen. His personal occupation with the individual points to a larger cultural shift happening during the late 1960s. With influences from existentialism and humanism, the center was described by Todd Gitlin as a "Cape Canaveral of inner space."¹⁹ Indeed, in his *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage*, he characterized Esalen as part of the professionalization of the counterculture that emphasized the internal journey of self-discovery.²⁰ In Jeffrey Kripal's *Esalen: America and the Religion of No Religion*, he described Leonard's place in the institution's history as central and demonstrated how the learning center continued exploring issues central to Leonard's preoccupations. But despite Esalen's altruistic claims and quasi-social justice orientations, the high prices for classes, its location in Big Sur, and its institutional history all but assured its demographic to skew heavily white and upper-middle class, despite the stated desire to reach others. From its initial founding to the present, the center serviced and continues to service a primarily white and upper-middle class clientele on the search for self-discovery in order to unlock their "human potential." As a manifestation of Leonard's ideological views, the learning center is an indexical place where the rhetoric and ideals of white liberals involved in social and collective justice movements morphed into a focus on individual potential and personal transformation. Describing the late Sixties as a period ruled by "the human potential movement," Gitlin would go on to characterize it as a "mélange of encounter groups, therapies, and mystical disciplines promised to uncover authentic selves... promises of relief for besieged individuals

¹⁹ Douglas Martin, "George Leonard, Voice of '60s Counterculture, Dies at 86," *The Los Angeles Times*, Jan. 18, 2010.

²⁰ Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (New York City: Bantam, 1993), 424.

burdened by obligations; promises of intimate personal relations for those who had lost the hope in God or full community.”²¹ Esalen would serve as a crucial hub for the likes of Timothy Leary, Jack Kerouac, and others of the Beat Generation for their journeys of self-discovery and actualization. And by the early Seventies, “erstwhile politicians suddenly swung over to the ‘internal trip,’” marking a simultaneous disjuncture and adherence to the trajectory of racial liberalism.²²

I emphasize Esalen as a context for Leonard’s anecdote because it reflects not only his ideological views, but also the tenets of racial liberalism more broadly and that of the white liberal. Esalen is emblematic of the rise of a form of white liberalism that would come to dominate political liberal discourse, one responsive to the suffering of people of color’s oppression but was nevertheless more focused on changing one’s own consciousness through acid, music, art, and encounter groups than the dismantling of larger racist structures. According to Fred Turner, this movement grew out of “a wide variety of cold war-era cultural springs, including Beat poetry and fiction, Zen Buddhism, action painting, and, by the mid-1960s, encounters with psychedelic drugs.”²³ This inward exploration turned towards questions of “consciousness and interpersonal intimacy, and toward small-scale tools such as LSD or rock music as ways to enhance both.”²⁴ Importantly, Turner identifies that this movement, commonly called the counterculture, overlapped but was “ultimately distinct” to what he terms the New Left, which revolved around struggles around civil rights, free speech, and anti-war protests. While Turner’s nuanced analysis demonstrates how the New Left and the organization, Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) diverged from the countercultural movement, I intervene to posit

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid., 425.

²³ Fred Turner, *From Counterculture to Cyberculture: Stewart Brand, the Whole Earth Network, and the Rise of Digital Utopianism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 31.

²⁴ Ibid.

that the technology of television had much to do with a transition that saw an emphasis on social justice morph towards individual exploration exemplified through Leonard's history.

Indeed, Leonard and Esalen's emphasis on the individual, particularly the ideas manifest in the human potential movement, share strong currents with the ideas within racial liberalism, which concentrated on galvanizing of white sympathy for social change rather than examining political, social, and economic structures. In this way, Leonard's article is a significant and meaningful piece of evidence in outlining the particulars of not only racial intimacy but also provides an important and legible example of the racial liberalism manifest in television watching. In fact, his deeply personal account relied heavily on familiar and recognizable notions of white altruism and sympathy for legibility—a legibility that neatly aligns with the moral dilemma of Gunnar Myrdal's social scientific study and the tenets of racial liberalism as a whole.

Defining Racial Liberalism

As Carol A. Horton explains in *Race and the Making of American Liberalism*, the definition of American liberalism can be most simply summarized as a “framework for the fundamentals of political life that prioritizes the value of individual rights and liberties, limited and representative government, private property and free markets, and constitutionalism and the rule of the law.”²⁵ However, as Horton is careful to stress, liberalism's multiple variants range from upholding racial hierarchies while stressing equal rights under the law to placing nondiscrimination and social equity at its political center. Being attentive to the fact that liberalism is a “variegated, flexible, and politically contested discourse” is thus key in tracing and understanding its genealogies. I examine a particular periodization of liberalism confined to

²⁵ Carol A. Horton, *Race and the Making of American Liberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 5.

the post-war period and with particular regard to race. As Leonard's epigraph indexed and my analysis of *Mad Men* will further explain, this specific liberalism prioritizes a structure of feeling as its main constituent, a sensibility of white sympathy just hitting its full expression during the 1960s. I refer to this particular form of liberalism as racial liberalism in order to emphasize the centrality of race to this particular ideology's tenets and expression. But despite the variances of nomenclature, a range of disciplines from political science, critical ethnic studies, and media studies orient around this particular political formation and its continued effect on contemporary US political thought. Though scholars in these fields use different objects (McCarthy and Melamed examine television and literature, respectively) to fully explain how this historical variant of liberalism manifests, they still reach a consensus surrounding the rise of a particular racial discourse and order during this period. A preoccupation with the individual's rights and a diagnosis of a new global order, including a reconceptualization of national citizenship and a new stance on race and racism, unify all these studies, despite the different political terms used.

A central text that both Horton and Melamed use to anchor their definitions is Gunnar Myrdal's *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*, a social scientific study that exemplified the reconceptualization of race relations in period just prior to the civil rights movement. Commissioned by the Carnegie Corporation in 1937 and published in 1944, Myrdal's study was an epic text of US mid-century racial relations. Rearticulating the rhetoric of mainstream assimilation through the language of morality, Myrdal's treatise expounded the barriers to America's greatness, claiming that the moral dilemma of the nation was the equality of the "Negro." The book was popularized by a myriad of elites and endorsed by a number of public intellectuals, including Arthur Schlesinger Jr., who echoed Myrdal's moral imperative by stating, the "sin of racial pride [is a] challenge [we cannot dodge] without

renouncing our highest moral principles.”²⁶ Myrdal’s *Dilemma* became a national bestseller, a reference and guide for congress members and foreign affairs, and a seminal text for disciplines such as anthropology, sociology and psychology. Its impact would last for nearly two decades after its initial publication.²⁷

Significantly, the implications of the study emphasized a remedy to the problem of racism, which was constructed as a purely moral and psychological behavior, through an imperative appeal to the moral center and emotional worlds of white Americans rather than an economic or political restructuring. An important factor for the popularity and influence of Myrdal’s work in mainstream national culture was the Cold War and the global climate in which America found itself. The disconnect between the US’s positioning of itself as a moral leader and superpower in the face of the clear-cut racism and the blatant discrimination of the Jim Crow South was clear. But what *An American Dilemma* did was to craft a narrative in which the surmounting of racism through white sympathy became both the challenge and the moral justification for the US’s ascension in the new post-war global order. In Myrdal’s formulation, the emphasis on morality and personal relationships was the key to overcoming the national challenge of racism and realizing American exceptionalism. And by reading the success of the Negro as a testament to racial progress and the transformative potential to reclaim national excellence, *An American Dilemma* posited a new American nationalism synonymous with anti-racism.²⁸ In this way, racism was constructed as affective and emotional, rather than a system of political, ideological, and economic structures upheld by white supremacy. Embracing Myrdal’s urgings to become anti-racist simultaneously promised to enable America to become the “ Savior

²⁶ Ibid., 125.

²⁷ Jodi Melamed, *Represent and Destroy: Rationalizing Violence in the New Racial Capitalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 19-20.

²⁸ Ibid., 20-21.

of the world.”²⁹ Therefore, racial liberalism was born out of a historical moment that sought to “manage the exposure of domestic racial inequality as a major threat to US global preeminence after World War II.”³⁰

By constructing American nationalism and American identity in this way, white liberals who embraced a particular type of anti-racism were constructed as moral heroes, buttressing claims of American exceptionalism. As race scholar Jodi Melamed astutely points out, “liberal white Americans became the felicitous national citizens and privileged racial subjects, which preserved a form of white privilege beyond the permanent crisis in white supremacy, whereas other whites were racially stigmatized as prejudiced or intolerant and scapegoated as the cause of continuing structural inequality.”³¹ This also reinforced white privilege by recentering white people as the beneficiaries of education and reaffirmed white subjecthood by positing them as heroic and benevolent agents of their transformation.

Whereas Melamed identifies literature as a primary cultural technology for the teaching of this new doctrine whereby new racial knowledges provided by African American writers and novelists stoked white sympathy, a look at television’s pedagogical and ideological structures during civil rights news stories exhibits similar goals and effects of procuring white sympathy. It should be noted that recentering television as a primary purveyor for this racial ideology does not conflict with, but rather extends Melamed’s claims that race novels and literature also produced these sentiments. I argue that civil rights television similarly aligned with the tenets of racial liberalism, despite the medium’s appearance later in national life. And while civil rights as a political movement represented a challenge to racial liberalism’s emphasis on the individual, instead advocating structural, legislative and economic change, civil rights activists recognized

²⁹ Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma* (New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 1996), 1022.

³⁰ Melamed, *Represent and Destroy*, 52.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 21.

the need to implore to the moral conscious of the nation, and in particular white audiences,³² via television to accomplish this goal.

In centering my analysis on televisual depictions of white audiences, I explore the measures dictated by the sociopolitical necessity of the time, the very real tactics of the civil rights movement, and the conditions of possibility in which people of color are allowed to be visible. As King himself put it in *Where Do We Go From Here*, “While the Negro initiative, courage, and imagination precipitated the Birmingham and Selma confrontations and revealed the harrowing injustice of segregated life, the organized strength of Negroes alone would have been insufficient to move Congress and the administration without the weight of the aroused conscience of white America.”³³ These stakes are also made clear in Steven Classen’s *Watching Jim Crow*, which focuses on Mississippi’s socio-legal history and the fight to bring civil rights coverage to television screens. Examining the period in which Mississippi viewers were *not allowed* to be audiences for civil rights television, *Watching Jim Crow* makes it clear that Black audiences did not necessarily need television coverage of the civil rights movement to achieve a sense of intimacy with the movement’s political and ideological worlds. The Black mobilization and protest detailed in Classen’s work that ultimately led to the repeal of radio licenses demonstrated that even in the absence of images, there remained Black activism intent on bringing images to the screen for *white* audiences.³⁴ Black audiences already knew firsthand the violence and brutality that existed under white supremacy, and as for the political mobilization and protest news, African Americans had a robust Black press that effectively distributed to

³² See Sasha Torres’ *Black, White, and In Color: Television and Black Civil Rights* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003).

³³ Martin Luther King Jr., *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), 51.

³⁴ Steven D. Classen, *Watching Jim Crow: The Struggles over Mississippi TV, 1955–1969* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

Black communities. In the deep South, Black train porters often acted as an informal distribution system to get news weeklies like *The Pittsburgh Courier* and *The Chicago Defender* out to the people.³⁵

In stark contrast, it was white audiences who could, without focused coverage, go about their daily lives (willfully or blissfully) unaware of the realities of racism in America. And thus it was reaching white audiences that was integral (imaginatively and literally) for successful legislative and mass social change. As media scholar Aniko Bodgroghkozy neatly sums up:

The movement needed to reach and impact whites outside the South in order to make the case that segregation in Birmingham, Alabama or Albany, Georgia or voter disenfranchisement in Selma, Alabama weren't regional issues to be solved at the state level, but rather national problems of concern to all Americans to be dealt with in Washington. And Washington politicians would only care if they were hearing from constituents en masse.

And so, the primary targets for civil rights television and their intimate worlds of racial violence were white audiences. To be sure, in broadcast coverage and photography, the civil rights movement was constructed in deliberate ways for specific audiences. In Martin Berger's *Seeing Through Race: A Reinterpretation of Civil Rights Photography*, he found that white presses "stuck to a restricted menu of narratives that performed reassuring symbolic work."³⁶ According to Berger, the efforts of white presses to frame the movement as non-threatening was a deliberate choice by well-intentioned, progressive white journalists and editors who believed that such palatable images were needed to advance the causes of the movement. This often meant choosing images that showed "white actors exercising power over blacks— dignified black schoolchildren silently suffering the jeers of unruly mobs, well-mannered black students at lunch

³⁵ The Official Blog of Henry Jenkins, "Interview with Aniko Bodgroghkozy," September 12, 2012. <http://henryjenkins.org/2012/09/television-and-the-civil-rights-movement-an-interview-with-aniko-bodgroghkozy-part-one.html>

³⁶ Martin A. Berger, *Seeing Through Race: A Reinterpretation of Civil Rights Photography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 6.

counters weathering the abuse of mirthful white crowds, and stock protestors buckling under the assaults of water jets and police dogs.”³⁷ However, these symbolic images had unintended consequences: for the same reasons that the images were non-threatening to whites, they also “impeded efforts to enact— or even imagine— reforms that threatened white racial power.”³⁸ This powerful re-centering of whiteness was mirrored in the televisual narratives that were also meant to appeal to the white audiences sitting by their television screens.

Surveying network news television’s coverage of civil rights protest, this emphasis on white audiences is evident. Bodrokozy’s *Equal Time* asserts that the moral appeal to white Americans was accomplished through a very specific narrative strategy, one distinctly focused on Black and white collaboration. Indeed, she demonstrates how the repetitive privileging of white moderates and white anti-racists throughout civil rights news coverage simultaneously crafted a constrictive representation for Black activists³⁹ while asserting the importance of white Americans. This was accomplished through a television narrative strategy wherein the presence of white supremacists, as the “low Other,” as Bodgroghkozy calls it, is triangulated against the white moderate and the civil rights subject.⁴⁰ Echoing Mydral’s formulation of new anti-racist nationalism, the privileged racial formation that arises out of this coverage is not the worthy and innocent Black victim but the burgeoning white anti-racist or moderate whose waning intolerance leads to a new racial order of understanding and reciprocity.

³⁷ Ibid., 7.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ See Herman Gray’s concept of the civil rights subject in Herman Gray, “Remembering Civil Rights: Television, Memory, and the 1960s,” in *The Revolution Wasn't Televised: Sixties television and Social Conflict*, eds. Lynn Spigel and Michael Curtin (New York: Routledge, 1995).

⁴⁰ Aniko Bodgroghkozy, *Equal Time: Television and the Civil Rights Movement* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2013).

Though I make claims specifically about network news coverage of the civil rights movement, this was not the first time that television content acted as a pedagogical force. Making television's capacity for this type of advocacy clear, Anna McCarthy's *The Citizen Machine: Governing through Television* centers on the medium's early history of governance. By examining a period of tremendous change and illustrating how a group of elites used the new platform to shape and disseminate certain conceptions of Cold War citizenship, McCarthy's analysis unpacks the complex linkages between governmentality, television, and an emerging neoliberal paradigm.⁴¹ Although McCarthy mainly focuses on the period directly prior to the height of the civil rights movement and thus deals less with race than the other works mentioned here, her monograph demonstrates just how deliberately television's elite producers conceptualized and utilized television's potential as a pedagogical tool.

Watching *Mad Men* Watch Racial Violence

⁴¹ Anna McCarthy, *The Citizen Machine: Governing by Television in 1950s America* (New York: The New Press, 2010), 3.



Figure 1: Still of *Mad Men* characters fixated to a television set.
Source: *Mad Men*, “The Grownups.” Season 3, Episode 12. Directed by Barbet Schroeder.
Written by Matthew Weiner, Brett Johnson, Kater Gordon. AMC, November 1, 2009.

Much like Leonard’s account of watching Bloody Sunday footage, I contend that the AMC network’s critically lauded show *Mad Men* offers us evidentiary and fictionalized representations of racial intimacies. These representations can help us to better understand the contours, consequences, and implications of white sympathy, racial violence, and new mediated racial intimacies. Although *Mad Men* is a text from the contemporary moment, the show is still instructive in understanding audiences’ reactions from the 1960s. While the inner worlds of spectators can never be fully understood, by interrogating representational work and examining the representations of spectatorship, we can begin to understand the way that the social architectures of watching function, discursively. In fact, mobilizing such a contemporary text

makes us question what kinds of evidence can be and should be employed for this type of speculative work.

When trying to analyze the subjectivities of audiences, what constitutes an “accurate” text? Are historical sources closer to the “truth,” however evasive that concept might be? How can we decipher and understand such an intimate and personal process of the experiential? *Mad Men*’s representations of white audiences’ reactions offers an imaginative reconstruction of spectatorship and audiences, one that demonstrates how these mediated intimacies are crafted, remembered, and remediated. The scenes of watching I analyze are more than just representations of how central TV was to daily life in mid-century America. They offer more than TV’s diegetic historicizing function. These are scenes of instruction, telling us about how television *itself*, as a reflexive medium, imagines the relationship between television spectators and racial violence. In the end, television *watching* functions as a meta-narrative for the series—a watching that makes the emotional labor of media and racial violence visible to present day audiences.

Mad Men examines the lives of ad men and women at Sterling Cooper, a fictional advertising agency on Madison Avenue during the “golden age” of advertising in mid and late 1960s America.⁴² Exploring the identities, ambitions, and inner worlds of the advertising creatives, account men, and secretaries who run the agency, as well as their families, the drama premiered in 2007 and has been lauded by critics and generated substantial academic interest. As AMC’s first venture into original programming, the show has inspired nothing short of a

⁴² Due to numerous reformulations of the agency and its partners, the name of the agency changes multiple times throughout the series. Acronyms SCDP and SCD all refer to the same advertising agency in question.

“cultural phenomenon” in the words of one *New York Times* reviewer.⁴³ It holds a critical and highly praised place in the televisual landscape and its depiction of media and its role during the 1960s, as well as the racial and gender politics of the period, make it a particularly compelling and insightful text to examine.

Culling conventions and sensibilities from soap opera, the show concentrates on workplace politics, especially in light of the burgeoning workforce of women and the societal upheaval happening in the 1960s. With such ripe material, there are multiple readings one could offer of the series: as an allegorical representation of American white masculinity in crisis in the present; how the show operates from the snide scaffolds of the present to ridicule the faulty presumptions of the era that embraced cigarette smoking as a harmless habit; what the misogynistic workplace politics “then” say about our current state of postfeminist awareness “now,” and so on.⁴⁴ But in my estimation, the designation of “mad” in *Mad Men* might come not only from play on Madison Ave and the ad men who comprise it, but also from the maddening world of the 1960s. As Dana Polan writes, “it’s a pretty nifty title... it puns on Madison Avenue and on that location’s key role in the development of postwar advertising culture (“ad men”). And it taps perhaps into a general if intangible anomie, frustration and even anger that these men in gray flannel suits sometimes feel toward the way of life they’re caught up in (and caught in), and that we, the spectators, are typically supposed to feel that men in the popular culture, devoted to life in Madison Avenue corporations are supposed to be feeling.”⁴⁵ But while Polan goes on to critique the “partiality” of the title, especially in light of the primary presence of

⁴³ Alessandra Stanley, “Back to Work with ‘Mad Men,’” *The New York Times*, July 16, 2010.

⁴⁴ See Kent Ono’s “Mad Men’s Postracial Figuration of a Racial Past” in *Mad Men, Mad World: Sex, Politics, Style and the 1960s*, ed. Lauren Goodlad et. al (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013).

⁴⁵ Dana Polan, “Maddening Times: *Mad Men* in its History” in *Mad Men, Mad World: Sex, Politics, Style and the 1960s* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 35.

women in the series' continued appeal, and to identify its incompleteness as a strength of the series, I am fascinated by the madness of the historical period and the way it is mediated through television and representations of characters as television viewers.

In so much as the series is focused on central characters in a historical period remembered for social upheaval, advertising and media in particular play an overwhelming yet overlooked role in the series' critique and public discourse. The show centers primarily around Don Draper, the advertising creative director for Sterling Cooper. Audiences soon learn that Draper is actually Korean War deserter, Dick Whitman, who claimed the identity of a dead army sergeant in order to escape service. Haunted by his abusive childhood and now false identity, Draper's tremendous creative talent and professional success is inversely mirrored by his personal challenges and torment. While Don is the show's ostensible emotional center and fulcrum, I contend that the show offers a broader commentary on the entanglement of media, emotion, and the world of 1960s advertising.

As Dana Polan notes, central to the series' historicism is the "presence of the electronic medium of television, which brings seemingly far away events into the proximity of the fictional characters."⁴⁶ Indeed, it is in this proximity and, more specifically, in the show's representations of intimacy with television images, that I wish to linger. Generally, television has played a major albeit subtle role within the series: over the course of six seasons, audiences have witnessed the transition of preferred mediums, monetary and creative, from print advertising to television within the represented advertising world. In the first and second seasons, Salvatore Romano, the head of the art department, bemoans his increasing obsolescence in the not-so-subtle shift from hand drawn work to photography and eventually tries his hand as a TV commercial director. The show frames this transition to television as an assurance of Sal's continued relevance in an

⁴⁶ Polan, "Maddening Times," 42-43.

increasingly televisual dominated world. What is more, television's increasing ubiquity in this period of transition is similarly but protractedly reflected in its growing role from a burgeoning, secondary market into a large portion of advertising revenue—a move registered by the increasing billings and prominence of Harry Crane, the head of the media department (i.e., television) at the agency.

But beyond *Mad Men*'s overt depiction of TV's place within America's consumer worlds, the medium has been central to recreating the show's own historicity and temporal continuity. Much of the praise surrounding the show has focused on its historical realism in everything from fashion, interior design, advertising decorum, trends, and decorum to major historical events—all have been cited as evidence of the *Mad Men*'s (intellectual) brilliance. The show's meticulously researched and reconstructed timelines of historical and cultural events are nitpicked by the show's avid fans,⁴⁷ and the creator and show runner, Matthew Weiner, has even apologized for small historical inaccuracies—revealing just how much *Mad Men*'s status as a “quality” television show rests on its claim to historical accuracy.⁴⁸ Thus, viewers are keenly aware of how historical events are mediated in *Mad Men*'s world as early seasons have concluded, respectively, with the election of JFK, the Cuban Missile Crisis, and JFK's assassination, all narrativized more or less through the forum of television. These instances have utilized the medium not only as a narrative device, relaying important historical events, but have also established television as a signal and signifier of the show's progression through temporality.

⁴⁷ Meredith Blake, “Making Sure ‘Mad Men’ is ‘60s Authentic,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 21, 2013.

⁴⁸ Erin Carlson, “Mad Men' Le Cirque Mistake: Creator Matt Weiner Calls It 'A Terrible Error’”, *The Hollywood Reporter*, April 25, 2013.

In terms of race and racial representation, there has been much dissatisfaction with the way *Mad Men* does or does not portray the racial tensions of the 1960s, given the decade's metonymic representation for radical racial change.⁴⁹ When people of color do appear in *Mad Men*'s world, they are often cast as peripheral characters, without the humanizing and nuanced portrayals of their white counterparts. In the inaugural episode of the series, the strange appearance of a rural Chinese family, equipped with peasant garb and live chickens, in Pete Campbell's office acts as a disruptively jarring joke. Other appearances include Carla, the Draper's African American nanny and maid, and Hollis, the African American elevator operator whose television consumption choices Pete Campbell attempts to understand in order to market his ideas to a potential client. As Clarence Lang identifies in "Representing the Mad Margins," this latter instance is particularly interesting for its recognition of the rising influence of black consumers—something the civil rights movement recognized and relied upon through the call to withhold black dollars, melding citizenship with consumption practices (examples include the Montgomery bus boycotts), and access consumer rights as equal rights (lunch counter sit-ins). But black interiority and subjectivity are ignored, as Lang notes that Shelia White is the only black character even bestowed a surname within the series' run of six seasons.⁵⁰

Television audiences and online commenters have also registered dissatisfaction with Weiner's treatment of race. Indeed, *Television without Pity* (TWoP) commenter "EEM65" critiqued the lack of black perspective and humanization in one of the episodes saying, "It's like Weiner's back to his old crap again, when it comes to race." The online television discussion site

⁴⁹ For how *Mad Men* embodies a post-racial moment, see Kent Ono's "Mad Men's Postracial Figuration of a Racial Past," *Mad Men, Mad World: Sex, Politics, Style and the 1960s*, ed. Lauren Goodlad et. al (Duke University Press, 2011), 300-319.

⁵⁰ Clarence Lang, "Representing the Mad Margins of the early 1960s: Northern Civil Rights and the Blues Idiom," in *Mad Men, Mad World: Sex, Politics, Style and the 1960s*, ed. Lauren Goodlad et. al (Duke University Press, 2013), 73-91.

consisted of thousands of online forums categorized by TV show, with viewers discussing, recounting, and debating various aspects of the programs in question. As its title suggests, TWoP was known for its snarky, sarcastic, and sometimes brutal commentary and criticism of television. In particular, the site was noteworthy because it serves as a virtually “real time” space that cultural producers used as a type of impromptu focus group. A *New York Times* article on the site summarized its cultural caché: “It is now standard Hollywood practice for executive producers (known in trade argot as ‘show runners’) to scurry into Web groups moments after an episode is shown on the East Coast. Sure, a good review in the print media is important, but boards, by definition, are populated by a program’s core audience— many thousands of viewers who care deeply about what direction their show takes.”⁵¹ And while some of *Television Without Pity*’s users were regarded as highly participatory fans who represented only a rarefied type of television watcher, there is much to be learned from their responses. Jonathan Gray’s work on antifandom has identified that although fan discussion has often been “coded as predominantly female, the discussion (and recapping) clearly comes from a mixed lot, with no readily identifiable gender ‘enclaves’ . . . [Most users are] North American posters.”⁵² Importantly, this online space creates “ample room for networking textual disappointment, dislike, disapproval, distrust and disgust.”⁵³ Critiques on TWoP may have influence show runners, demonstrating that television watching itself is an innately active process at the same time that it also allowed for crucial insights into the way that memory functions within and through media forms, both with television and digital media. For *Mad Men*, the show is already an imagining of the past that is deeply tied to acts of watching. Thus, users who commented within *Mad Men*’s online forums

⁵¹ Marshall Sella, “The Remote Controllers,” *The New York Times Magazine*, October 20, 2002.

⁵² Jonathan Gray, “Antifandom and the Moral Text: Television Without Pity and Textual Dislike,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 48, no. 7 (2005): 846.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 841.

might have been more deeply attuned to the way that race, history, and television have operated in tandem, as I will further investigate later.

User “EEM65”’s comment on Weiner’s treatment of race is something that the latter has explicitly acknowledged and attempted to address. Regarding the absence of black characters, let alone black character development, in a series set at the height of the civil rights era, Weiner stated, “I do feel like I’m proud of the fact that I am not telling a wish fulfillment story of the real interaction of white America and black America.” He elaborated, “How is [integration] coming into their lives? [Black people] in the service industry, they’re in entertainment, and this is how people are experiencing civil rights, on television.” An important distinction for Weiner is that he is not “portraying the black experience.”⁵⁴ Rather, his critical and creative gaze is turned towards the white upper middle class and their ennui in the context of widespread social upheaval. Television, as Weiner points out, was central to bringing the struggles of civil rights into the worlds of the white upper middle class whose daily lives encountered no such exposure to black people, other than those in service jobs. For whites, it was TV that provided a public, experiential forum to think about race within the privatized space of their living rooms. This is what seminal television studies scholar Raymond Williams has called privatized mobilization, wherein televisual worlds constitute a type of shuttling between public and private spaces, functioning as a traveling window into public space and participation within the comfort of the private home.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Jessica Wakeman, “Where are the Black Folks on ‘Mad Men?’ Matt Weiner Explains,” *The Frisky*, March 23, 2012. <http://www.thefrisky.com/2012-03-23/where-are-the-black-folks-on-mad-men-matt-weiner-explains/>

⁵⁵ In 1974’s *Television: Technology and Cultural Form*, Williams argues that the fantasies around electronic communication have long centered on bringing the outside world into the private home. Tracing the historical origins of this desire, Williams identifies that modernity’s public technological projects of railroads and city lighting gave way to “a kind of technology for which no satisfactory name has yet been found: that which served an at-once mobile and home-centred way of living: a form of mobile privatization.” For him, at the heart of this concept is the deeply paradoxical yet connected tendencies of modern living, namely the desire for mobility

Williams' theoretical observation is reinforced by the technological imaginary as well as how the television industry has historically imagined itself. Women's home magazines in the late 1940s and early 1950s often displayed television sets "in decorative settings that created the illusion of spatial conquests," next to colorful maps and globes. In its advertisements for televisions, the company DuMont even paired its first console model with the slogan, "Your new window on the world."⁵⁶ Pointing out that the technological utopias of travel and conquering space conjoined with the housing utopias of the architectural modernism, Lynn Spigel's *Make Room for TV* demonstrates how the ideologies of mobile privatization informed television's positioning within the home, in particular.⁵⁷ Television technology reflected this mobility and movement emphasis: names like GE's "Adventurer," the Zenith's "Jetliner," and RCA's "Globe Trotter" spoke to the new emphasis on active leisure and imaginary travel away from home (without leaving the home),⁵⁸ a sanitized version of the experiential. These types of advertisements were formative in the way that audiences thought about TV viewing and experienced it within the spatial logics of their homes.

More than a textually inscribed subject, TV viewers interact with what Miriam Hansen has called the "social horizon of experience."⁵⁹ In particular, Hansen notes the various psychoanalytic factors that exist in the watcher's mind, which is "doubly contextualized both within a particular sphere— constituted by an ad hoc social audience, a particular site, phase, and

caused by industrialized capitalism in an increasingly privatized, home-centered world. As he states, "broadcasting in its applied form was a social product of this distinctive tendency." Raymond Williams, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* (New York: Routledge 2003), 19.

⁵⁶ Lynn Spigel, *Welcome to the Dreamhouse: Popular Media and Postwar Suburbs* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 104-105.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 120.

⁵⁹ Miriam Hansen, *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991).

mode of exhibition— and by the public horizon which is produced and reproduced, appropriated and contested, in the cinema as one among a number of cultural institutions and practices.”⁶⁰

While Hansen focuses on cinema exclusively, her intervention into spectatorship practices informs my effort here to account more fully for the various processes and social architectures of viewing that constitute the experiential. Part of this endeavor requires a historical account of the transformations of public and private space and how media operates as a betwixt and interstitial space.

Far more just the manifestation of a desire to travel, television also precipitated a newfound relationship to public space that served to ameliorate the tendency for suburban social distillation. As previously discussed, the spatial and social architectures of the living room instantiated through TV viewing were tantamount in shaping how white audiences saw and experienced racial intimacies. But crucially as important was the spatial restructuring of urban life as the rise of white suburbia fundamentally shifted notions of public and private space, race, and power in the US. Indeed, one of the most profound changes in recent US history was the massive migration of white residents from cities to suburban space, facilitated by a tripartite effort of federally funded freeways, the discriminatory lending practices of the Federal Housing Authority, and the “urban renewal” initiatives of the 1950s and 1960s.⁶¹

Central to this massive restructuring was the passing of the GI Bill, the largest welfare program in US history, wherein veterans in a post-war American were enabled, both, to attend college and take out low-interest business loans and low-cost mortgages. While the bill was drafted so its benefits were to be distributed equally among all service persons, the implementation was drastically uneven. Essentially, since the private loaning system was based

⁶⁰ Ibid., 14.

⁶¹ George Lipstiz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: Racialized Social Democracy and the ‘White’ Problem in American Studies* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998), 374.

on an old model of racial preference that marked segregated neighborhoods in which people of color sought to buy homes as “bad investments,” those young non-white veterans who did serve often found themselves unable to take advantage of the GI Bill, sidelined by racist practices that took no notice of their military service. Federal mortgage guarantee agencies like the Federal Housing Administration (FHA), the Home Owner’s Loan Corporation (HOLC), and Veteran Affairs (VA) “adopted and elaborated the discriminatory practices of private lenders by considering the presence of racial groups other than whites the greatest obstacle to assigning neighborhoods a favorable rating.”⁶² In the end, the largest welfare program in the nation’s history favored only certain veterans, continually disenfranchising not only veterans of color but a large number of women veterans as well. Meanwhile, primarily young, white adult couples were able to take advantage of the GI Bill and move and settle in suburban spaces. This enabled them to become private landowners, ensconcing homeowners with capital and differentially enabling white prosperity and disproportionate wealth to persist for generations to come. As Lizbeth Cohen’s states, “suburbia was home to affluence, and to inequity.”⁶³ In other words, the move to suburban space worked to preserve an informal segregation, simultaneously becoming a story of mobility and immobility, affluence and inequity, and the installation of new hierarchies of race in American life.

Lynn Spigel points out that the post-WWII move to suburban space was one that produced major anxieties in American life as conceptions of space, gender, media and class were all being reformulated:

The centripetal forces that turned American toward their homes were always accompanied by the opposite values of social participation in the public sphere.

⁶² Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumers’ Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Vintage Books, 2003).

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 200.

Television was caught in a contradictory movement between public and private worlds, and it often became a rhetorical figure for that contradiction.⁶⁴

As Spigel identifies, “popular writers, intellectuals, and corporate executives spoke of television as both a ‘home theater’ that brought spectator amusements into the living room and a ‘window on the world’ that would imaginatively transport viewers across the globe.”⁶⁵ This type of imaginative traveling was particularly resonant in a post-war America, where a generalized sense of isolationism born of Cold War xenophobia was mirrored in white citizens bunkering into their suburban enclaves and homes. Indeed, Elaine May Tyler points out that the dominant social style of the middle and upper classes during the postwar years could be described as “containment.” As the interpersonal corollary to the closed-world visions of military and government planners, containment referred to a way of being in which men and women sought to constrain their emotions, maintain their marriages, and build safe, secure, and independent homes.⁶⁶ In this parlance, the home functioned as a type of shelter from the anxieties and uncertainties of public life. Too, this logic animated the nostalgic return to a Victorian cult of domesticity, for which a strict separation of public and private spheres was paramount. In Spigel’s estimation, the postwar housing boom created new formulations of private space, community, and identity, with civic participation reconfigured and partly foreclosed as suburbanization and conspicuous consumption in post-WWII America began to replace public engagement. Television served to assuage these tensions and acted as a public window from the private confines of suburban space.

To be sure, these shifting conceptions of media and public and private space impacted and were also impacted by race and racial formation. As Michael Omi and Howard Winant have

⁶⁴ Spigel, *Make Room for TV*, 109.

⁶⁵ Lynn Spigel, *Welcome to the Dreamhouse*, 114.

⁶⁶ Turner, *From Counterculture to Cyberculture*, 30.

argued, the processes by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed are located within a matrix of race's relationality.⁶⁷ Conceptions of whiteness and Blackness changed with civil rights television and the spatial restructuring of urban centers and suburban space. While race seems an obvious element to investigate in television's emergence, especially given the latter's coincidence with white flight to suburban space, media historiography has largely privileged analyses looking at the anxieties surrounding gender and private and public spheres. But it was, I argue, in this synchronized movement from public to private and the appearance of civil rights' racial violence that television, as a public window in the private sphere, facilitated newfound racial intimacies. It was through television's transmission of civil rights coverage that the private space of the living room became an even greater site of complexity and historical accumulation.

Here, one needs to understand the specific dynamics of the home as an imagined respite from public space and the masses. Television, I argue, reconstituted the home as a site where sentimentalities and affects were allowed to fully appear, particularly since television ruled over what Spigel calls, the purification of social space. What this idea expressed was the hope that telecommunication technology, at least in the pre-and post-war period, would serve to make the suburban neighborhood the center of the universe and to keep "the masses away."⁶⁸ This type of antiseptic model of housing created a "safe" space for those young, upwardly mobile middle class white families, away from the "undesirables," which included people of color, gay and lesbian people, unmarried, homeless people and senior citizens. Zoning practices endorsed by the FHA essentially excluded them from suburban spaces.⁶⁹ In this way, new media functioned as a

⁶⁷ Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 55.

⁶⁸ Spigel, *Make Room for TV*, 111.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 110.

form of social sanitation, similar to the way that the rise of the white suburb coincided with the demand for civil rights. But as archival material of intimate audience reactions to the scenes of civil rights racial violence are not easily found, how does one gain access to the intimacies of television watching, methodologically speaking? Here, I turn to *Mad Men* as a textual example that can help unpack and make visible the historical media events in the 1960s and the discourses around racial violence and television audiences.

I focus on two specific episodes that make television, the historical past, and racial violence central to their narrative: one brings racial violence quite literally into the subjectivity of Don's wife, Betty Draper, while the other instance invades the lives and living rooms of all the characters in *Mad Men's* world. The show's examination of the social space of white suburbia and its malcontents lies largely in the figure of Betty Draper, wife to the show's protagonist and anti-hero, Don Draper. Betty, played by actress January Jones, is the archetypal embodiment of the white suburban housewife: an icy blonde, blue-eyed, Grace Kelly look-alike, the physical epitome of white femininity and beauty ideal. Viewers of the show discover fairly quickly that the suburban fantasy is merely that—the first episode of the series follows Don Draper from his office to his beatnik mistress' Village apartment and it is only at the end of the episode that it is revealed that Don also has a wife and two children in the suburbs. Burnishing the image of the 1950s American Dream at the same time it asserts its fraudulence, this first episode is a harbinger that the series actively engages in memory work, making audiences question historical constructs, nostalgia, and the process of media memory as it is shaped, remade, and remembered.

Central to this process is understanding the cultural memory of the 1950s, representations of and from the period, and the discourse surrounding the figure of Betty, the seemingly archetypal classic housewife figure of the 1950s. Television representations of the historical

period often emphasized the nuclear family ideal: *Father Knows Best*, *Leave It to Beaver*, and *Ozzie and Harriet* were all wildly popular shows that established and exemplified the idyllic image of the white nuclear family and the manicured white suburban landscape for a post-war America— a cultural fantasy in which the white suburban wife played a central role. Beyond the diegetic world of the television texts, the white suburban housewife was an important figure in television's early technological imaginary, precisely because of her central place within the private sphere and the television industry's desire to make television, as a cultural object and a medium, a modern day hearth of the home.

The television industry's emphasis on white suburban housewives as intended audiences can be seen specifically in television advertisements and popular presses who debated television's place within the home. Configured as a largely passive audience, women and housewives in particular were imagined as watching television at the same time that they attended to their daily chores. Indeed, popular articles debating whether television might distract women from these domestic duties were often circulated and indexed anxieties around the new medium and its integral place within the home.⁷⁰ At the same time, women were imagined as active viable consumers for the new medium. Soap operas, which derived their name from early television programming sponsored and created by soap companies, can be seen as the most obvious indication of this imagined female audience. While the recognition of women as a desirable market niche is realized (and valorized) most obviously through Peggy Olson's rise in the creative ranks from newbie secretary to formidable copywriter, Betty's position as a housewife also underscores this fact. In season six of the series, Megan, Don's second wife, becomes a soap star herself, leading to a serious discussion of the intended audiences of daytime television and

⁷⁰ Lynn Spigel, "The Domestic Economy of Television Viewing in Postwar America," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 6, no. 4 (1989): 337-354.

the limitations, standards, and expectations of the genre.⁷¹ As a show that focuses on the creative and business processes of advertising as one of its main conceits, *Mad Men* is surely cognizant of how television is sold and being sold to women in particular during this period.

But unlike Peggy who rejects her status as a mother in order to assert her identity as a copywriter among coworkers often slow to see as her such,⁷² Betty is consistently defined by the labels placed upon her— model, wife, mother, divorcee, and, most interestingly for this study, television viewer. This last label is concretized by the show's tendency to show Betty's emotional responses to historical events on her television screen. Importantly, it is through Betty and her shocked screams in her living room that Don and audiences discover that Lee Harvey Oswald, JFK's assumed assassin, was shot and killed in front of television cameras at the end of season two. And in season six, it is Betty that is so distraught over the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. that she leaves the television set on in the living room and retreats to the bedroom, explaining, "I don't feel right turning it off. But I didn't want to watch it." Here, her comment buttresses Williams and Spigel's respective arguments that television functions as a window into the public within the suburban home, but also underscores the powerful immediacy and intimacy of television when conjoined with racial violence. Indeed, television's electronic presence and the specter of racial violence loom so large it occupies and overpowers the space of living room entirely. Much like George Leonard's sobbing wife who left the room, unable to stand anymore images of racial violence, Betty's emotional and bodily response threatens to overwhelm her. I thus focus on Betty Draper's relationship with television as an instructive representation of the subjectivities of white audiences during the civil rights era, an era

⁷¹ *Mad Men*, "To Have and to Hold." Season 6, Episode 4. Directed by Michael Uppendahl. Written by Matthew Weiner, Erin Levy, and Jonathan Igla. April 21, 2013.

⁷² These two identities are obviously linked. Peggy's employment chances and possibilities would have been certainly circumscribed by her role as a mother.

characterized by the overwhelming visual representation of violence on black bodies. Too, by looking at online audiences' memories of the historical time period and television's central place within it, it is clear that the responses of Betty, George Leonard, and his wife are not exceptional, but expressive of a larger structure of feeling engendered by the new medium. One way to trace the implications and afterlife of this strain of political, social, and cultural sentiment is a nuanced look at how viewers themselves articulate their own reconstructive scenes of spectatorship and acts of watching television and, in particular, *Mad Men*.

In fact, many Television Without Pity online users have detailed their memories of watching television in relation to many significant moments of the 1960s, particularly JFK's assassination. Returning to the epigraph, under the forum of the "1960s," user "first avenue" labels the JFK assassination their "first memory of the 1960s," one that importantly occurred in front of the television set:

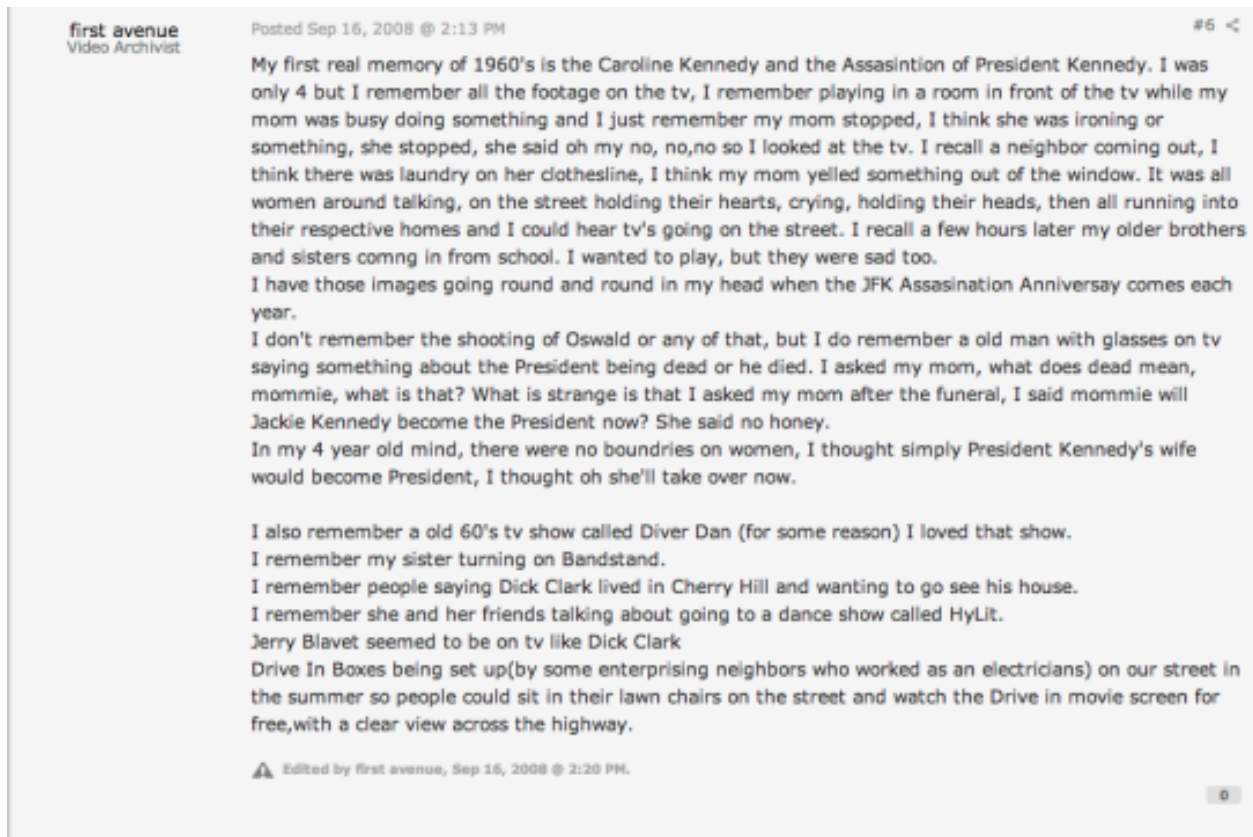


Figure 2: Screenshot of a *Mad Men* forum comment on the website, Television Without Pity detailing reactions to the Kennedy Assassination, posted September 16, 2008.

Source: Television Without Pity Mad Men Forums {dead link}

<http://forums.televisionwithoutpity.com/topic/3218345-6-5-the-flood-20130428/?p=15693412>

Like Betty, the women and mothers of “first avenue”’s account experienced the JFK assassination through television’s intimate spatial logics and visual forum: as the televisions switched on along the street, so too did their viewers’ private worlds journey into a national and a public experience of grief and emotion. While the commenter’s story ends there, *Mad Men*’s representation of Betty offers us a fictional yet instructive account of what happens after the television clicks on.

Much of Betty’s storylines within the first few seasons deal with her intense unhappiness and dissatisfaction. Configured as the embodiment of both the white suburban ideal as well as its discontent, Betty is one of the characters most touched by the political events unfolding during

the series' historical period of the 1960s. This is particularly striking considering Betty's usual seeming emotional stunted-ness and cold reserve (evinced most memorably through her austere and punishing interactions with her children), yet these qualities falter when confronted with key moments mediated through television. For example, in the penultimate episode of season three, Don's inability to connect with Betty's grief over JFK's assassination is the breaking point that pushes her to seek a divorce once and for all. Television is central to the Draper home, often depicted as a hearth and a point of connection for Betty, who resides in the isolated and isolating suburb of Ossining, NY. Throughout the series, the dark and claustrophobic aesthetics of the Draper's colonial home exist in contrast to Sterling Cooper's open modernist design,⁷³ punctuating the oppressive nature of isolation, patriarchy and suburbia through set design. But tellingly, in a number of scenes, the glowing screen of the television serves as the primary diegetic source light, not only illuminating Betty and the Draper children enraptured by the screen, but also acting as a visual break from the dark scenes of Don's deceit and emotional trauma and Don and Betty's confined emotionally stifled interactions.

This sense of Betty's intimacy with television is nowhere more apparent than in season three's episode "The Fog," which focuses on the birth of Don and Betty's third child and Betty's surreal hallucinations during childbirth. In the conclusion of the previous episode, "The Arrangements," Betty's father Gene passes away unexpectedly. Grieving over her grandfather and the loss of their close relationship, Don and Betty's eldest child, Sally, is enraged at the laughter she overhears in the other room and makes the accusation that "nobody cares that he's really, really gone." In lieu of dealing with her daughter's confused grief, Betty, already distraught, angrily orders Sally go watch TV, revealing not only her distant relationship with

⁷³ Dianne Harris, "Mad Space" in *Mad Men, Mad World: Sex, Politics, Style, and the 1960s*, ed. Lauren Goodlad et al. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013).

Sally but also her overreliance on and intimacy with television⁷⁴. Sally, obediently, fixates on the television, awash with the grief of losing her grandfather. The episode ends with Sally's fixed gaze on the television and its corresponding news footage, foreshadowing the central place that TV images would play in the next episode, when television and racial violence invade Betty's very subjectivity.

When "The Fog" begins, we learn that Sally has been fighting with another student. Don and Betty are called into a parent teacher meeting and learn that, in light of Betty's father's passing, Sally has been asking questions about Medgar Evers' murder, presumably on a quest to understand death. At the mention of the civil rights leader's murder Betty becomes intensely uncomfortable and disturbed and immediately excuses herself to go restroom, presumably to collect herself. The television is inferred as the unacknowledged source for Sally's inquiry. While we never see Sally or Betty watching news coverage of Evers' assassination specifically, the place of television as a hearth in the Draper household is clear, especially in light of the previous episode's ending. In this way, racial violence appears off-screen through inference, dislocated from any actual body and translated through the emotional grief of losing a loved one. Evers, for Sally, symbolizes a public death and a public inquiry into the aftermath of death. She draws a parallel to her grandfather and concludes that Evers and her grandfather will end up in the "same place"—possibly the show's way of hinting at the relative receptiveness of the emerging generation to desegregation in this period. While the scene also foreshadows a future romantic storyline between Don and Sally's teacher, this Evers reference and Betty's strong

⁷⁴ The show's representation of Betty and the children's viewing practices regularly implies that they are *overly* enthralled by the new medium; in contrast, Don is rarely shown watching television—a possible nod to the contentious status of "passive television watching" vis-a-vis American masculinity in television ads. This notion is buttressed by *Mad Men's* advertising pitches and methods on the show, which craft a narrative loosely based on a hypothermic needle mode of reception

reaction is crucial to understanding what happens later in the episode during Betty's delivery of her son, Gene.

Shortly after being admitted to the hospital, Betty is given an epidural to assist with her pain. But given her emotional instability following her father's passing, the epidural induces surreal dreams in which her dissatisfaction with the cult of domesticity comes to the fore of her subconscious state. Initially idyllic, these dreams begin with a surreal stroll on the bucolic sidewalk of a suburban neighborhood. Immaculately dressed in the early 1960s fashion, Betty appears Rockwell-esque, content, and happy as she walks in white suburbia. A vividly green caterpillar suddenly interrupts her walk, dropping from the sky from a silken thread and landing in Betty's open, expectant hand. As the caterpillar wiggles in her palm, Betty gazes and smiles. Riddled with trite allegorical significance, the caterpillar represents Betty's expectant hope and aspirations tied to white suburban life. As Betty closes her hand around the caterpillar, the rote expectation is the emergence of a butterfly, signaling a life fulfilled, or the supposed idyllic dream of the nuclear family, comprised of a doting, handsome husband and happy children. But instead, Betty wakes to find herself in the hospital once again, in the throes of labor. As she resists the nurses' instructions, insists that she's "not ready," and screams for Don, she finally articulates her suspicions of his adultery. She tells the nurse that he's "never is where he says he is," and then, before slipping back into unconsciousness, asks, "Have you been with him?"

The next epidural-induced hallucination finds Betty dressed in her hospital gown, still heavily pregnant but not in labor, traveling down the halls of the hospital. Walking through a corridor, Betty suddenly emerges in the foyer to her home and enters the kitchen. Now dressed in a floral maternity dress and immaculately put together, she encounters her deceased father, mopping the kitchen floor in the guise of a janitor. When she greets him with a tentative

“Daddy?,” her father initially pretends not to recognize her. Eventually conceding his identity, her father explains that “nobody knows I’m here” as he starts begin to mop a puddle of blood. As she asks him if she is dead, he tells her to ask her mother, who died years earlier. The scene cuts to the kitchen nook, where Betty’s mother is present, her hand on the shoulder of a Black man in a bloodied suit and tie. Like Betty, Betty’s mother is dressed and coiffed in the post-WWII New Look style. Breaking with the wartime menswear-inspired dress which women adopted when they entered the workforce when the men were overseas, the New Look style symbolized a resumption of the unpaid roles of wives and mothers, and a return to normative gender roles and separate spheres.⁷⁵ Using dress to highlight the female form, the sartorial style emphasized garments that constructed an “artificial, manufactured woman whose anatomical differences were exaggerated to conform to the sexual dimorphism of the 40s and 50s.”⁷⁶ Embodying the propriety of the sartorial style, Betty’s mother chastises her to close her mouth “or else you’ll catch flies,” an idiom and a reprimand that indicates not only her propriety and decorum but what she represents to Betty: a model of femininity based in the conventions and “values” of the period.⁷⁷

In Sarah Nielsen’s “‘Some People Just Hide in Plain Sight’: Historicizing Racism in *Mad Men*,” the author identifies that the show exposes audiences to and provides a sympathetic identification with the white characters, that largely functions to “reinscribe positions of

⁷⁵ Mabel Rosenheck, “Swing Skirts and Swinging Singles: *Mad Men*, Fashion, and Cultural Memory” in *Mad Men, Mad World: Sex, Politics, Style and the 1960s*, ed. Lauren Goodlad et. al (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 167.

⁷⁶ Karal Ann Marling, *As Seen on TV: The Visual Culture of Everyday Life in the 1950s* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 12.

⁷⁷ For more on Betty’s gender performance through sartorial codes, see Rosenheck’s “Swing Skirts and Swinging Singles: *Mad Men*, Fashion, and Cultural Memory” in *Mad Men, Mad World* ed. Lauren Goodlad et al. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013).

dominance that depend on not seeing racialized others as subjects of identification.”⁷⁸ In this particular episode, the author identifies the primary narrative drive of the episode as Betty’s subconscious guilt over her father’s death. For Nielsen, “the historical rendering of martyr Evers becomes the means through which we as an audience create sympathetic identification with Betty as she is forced to confront her stress and anxiety over her parents’ death. Evers remains a phantom of her unconscious that we are never asked to identify with or understand, thus denying the audience the opportunity to engage both intellectually and emotionally with another who is radically different from oneself.”⁷⁹

Indeed, sitting at the kitchen table, the man with a striking resemblance to the real-life Mississippi activist Evers remains still, silent, eyes downcast, dressed in a navy suit and tie—a sartorial indication of his burial and the politics of respectability used by the civil rights movement as part of their moralizing and public strategy. Betty’s mother, standing next to Evers, shows Betty a bloody rag from his neck and chastises her, “See what happens to people who speak up?” The scene cuts to Betty’s face—scared, resigned, and melancholy. Her expression suggests that she understands the reference to “speaking up” as referring to Evers’ activity as a prominent civil rights activist and leader. Assassinated in his own driveway, Evers was gunned down by white supremacist Byron De La Beckwith, who was incensed by Evers’ civil rights activities, which included attempts to overturn segregation, organizing boycotts, starting local chapters of the NAACP, and being the first Mississippian African American civil rights advocate to appear on television in the state.⁸⁰ Although *Mad Men* does not show Betty watching the Evers

⁷⁸ Sarah Nielsen, “Some People Just Hide in Plain Sight’: Historicizing Racism in *Mad Men*,” in *The Colorblind Screen: Television in Post-Racial America*, ed. Sarah E. Turner (New York: New York University, 2014), 209.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Adam Nossiter, *Of Long Memory: Mississippi and the Murder of Medgar Evers*, (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 2009).

murder coverage as it does with the deaths of Oswald and King, Evers' death was mourned nationally and his funeral broadcast widely. And while Evers' activities were specifically geared towards the civil rights struggle, it is clear that in Betty's subconscious Evers' death symbolizes the punishment for transgressions of societal norms—for “stepping out of place” and out of the normative constraints of gender and race, respectively.



Figure 3: Still from Mad Men's "The Fog," where civil rights activist Medgar Evers appears in Betty's epidural-induced hallucination.

Source: *Mad Men*, "The Fog." Season 3, Episode 5. Directed by Phil Abraham. Written by Matthew Weiner, Kater Gordon. AMC, September 13, 2009.

In this way, Betty's own oppression gets rewritten upon the body of the civil rights activist. Her unwanted pregnancy serves as a manifestation of cult of domesticity gone horribly awry. Indeed, when Betty learns of her pregnancy at her doctor's office at a time when her marriage is

on the verge of collapse, she explains, “it isn’t a good time.” Inferring but stopping short of asking for an abortion, Betty struggles to articulate her desires openly, and is ultimately shamed by her doctor’s insistence that abortion is not for “a married woman of means.”⁸¹ Her pregnancy thus represents the restricting of mobility manifested literally through her growing body.⁸² Drawing an analogous relationship between the patriarchal oppression that shapes and restricts Betty’s desires and mobility, one could argue that the episode enacts a sort of allegory. Betty is in a position to be sympathetic to the struggle for civil rights because, as a white, suburban housewife, she too occupies a position of dissatisfaction and oppression⁸³—“the problem that has no name” famously made legible by Betty Friedan’s *The Feminist Mystique*. Regardless of what one might think of the validity of such an analogy, Evers’ appearance in Betty’s subconscious reveals the powerful affects and effects of television watching within the home. Given how the television has been constructed as a private window into the public world, both within the discourse of how television imagines itself as well as spatial logics of suburbia, Betty’s powerful connection with television’s mediated images is hardly surprising. As Weiner makes a point of reminding us, historical events and, in particular, the civil rights struggle were experienced through the medium of television for white audiences, a medium that was able to influence the intersubjectivities and emotional worlds of audiences. Television’s specificity and the space of the intimate home created a racial intimacy that was more powerful than that evoked by, for example, newspapers or magazines. Just as George Leonard’s wife sobbed and turned away from

⁸¹ *Mad Men*, “Meditations in an Emergency.” Season 2, Episode 13. Directed by Matthew Weiner. Written by Matthew Weiner. AMC, October 26, 2008.

⁸² The character of Betty Draper is clearly a work of historical distance and a representation and embodiment of Betty Friedan’s *The Feminist Mystique*. Not merely an allusion to Betty’s namesake, her psychological troubles with domesticity and aligning with the archetypal figure of housewife are a central theme throughout the series.

⁸³ See Lauren Berlant’s *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008) for how these feelings of affinity manifest for white women reading publics and slavery narratives.

the six o'clock news in their living room, unable to "look anymore," Betty and Sally were both affected by Evers and their respective father and grandfather's death. Present in her subconscious, racial violence is so integral to Betty's inner world that it becomes embodied through Evers on an equal status as her mother and father, becoming one of three main figures in her subconscious.

It should be noted, however, that as much as Betty's emotional world created a sense of intimacy and perhaps even identification with the racial violence she witnessed on TV, her political and economic positions did not shift with this affective change. Betty's conservatism is evident in her adherence to traditional gender roles in the face of extreme unhappiness and is underscored by her second marriage to a Republican political advisor. This is also critiqued within the show as part of her inability to act outside the paradigm of convention for women, in contrast to Peggy's overt feminism. Betty's political leanings make it that much more interesting that she, of all the show's characters, reacts the most strongly to civil rights racial violence yet retains her political conservatism. For example, in the episode "Wee Small Hours," the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing that kills four African American girls in Birmingham, Alabama causes Betty to wonder aloud to Carla, the Draper's longtime African American maid and nanny, whether civil rights "maybe... shouldn't happen right now."⁸⁴ Through her musing on the costs of the civil rights movement, Betty places the onus of the four little girls' deaths upon the civil rights activists rather than the systems of white supremacy.⁸⁵ Betty's reaction here represents the ways that racial liberalism took hold: with the ideology that the realm of sensibility, and in particular white sympathy, was of the utmost importance. But the positive gains of this

⁸⁴ *Mad Men*, "Wee Small Hours." Season 3, Episode 9. Directed by Scott Hornbacher. Written by Matthew Weiner, Dahvi Waller, and Kater Gordon. AMC. October 11, 2009.

⁸⁵ For a more detailed reading of the episode, refer to Sarah Nilsen's "'Some People Just Hide in Plain Sight': Historicizing Racism in *Mad Men*" in *The Colorblind Screen* ed. Sarah Nielsen and Sarah E. Turner (New York: New York University Press, 2014).

sensibility were circumscribed by its ultimately normative conceptions of racial change, wherein whiteness once again became the crucial focal point for transformation rather than systems of inequity. Leonard's response to the Bloody Sunday footage was merely one reaction to these newfound racial intimacies while Betty's political conservatism in the face of her highly attuned televisual sympathy constitutes another.

Indeed, while Betty is the character most consistently represented as being affected by these televised historic events, hers are not the only responses to televisual racial violence depicted and explored on the show. Season six's episode "The Flood" addresses the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr.—one of the most remembered and mourned instances of racial violence in the recent national consciousness. The assassination causes practically all of the characters in *Mad Men* to reassess their emotional states, and demonstrates perhaps more clearly than ever before the show's own preoccupation with emotion and media. While one could claim that the show's focus on the emotional worlds of its characters is no different than that of any story where audiences care about the characters, I contend that the show's intense reverence and romanticized focus on the affective registers of, and emotional responses to, media is unique. When Don tells Peggy, "You are the product. You feeling something. That's what sells," he is not just telling Peggy about how to succeed as a copywriter, he is also hinting at *Mad Men*'s own reflexivity and metanarrative. One of the most consistently fascinating things about the show is its ability to journey through the subjective and emotional worlds of its characters via advertising pitches. It is through these pitches that Don connects with his usually repressed emotional center—and even though he does so precisely in order to monetize those emotions, the scenes make it clear just how much his past influences his present. For instance, in the show's premiere, Don displays his creative genius to *Mad Men* audiences for the first time in a seemingly doomed

meeting with cigarette brand, Lucky Strike. Reeling from the public disclosures of medical research that make cigarette smoking's health hazards clear, the company looks to Sterling Cooper for solutions. Don, as head of the creative team, enters the meeting with no idea of how to combat this disastrous and seemingly industry-ending revelation. But as the camera lingers on his contemplative face, the scene takes on a type of sacred calm and focus. We see Don's intense gaze shift almost imperceptibly inward. And when he finally speaks, it is to present them with a pastoral campaign that willfully ignores the alarm concerning poisonous and toxic chemicals. "It's toasted," he proclaims, simply but effectively painting an evocative scene of fragrant tobacco toasting in the Southern sunshine. For the first time of many, audiences know that we will *feel* what he feels, as his words take us on an emotional and visceral journey of memories, experiences, and associations that ends, seemingly inevitably, at the product. While advertising specializes in the aspirational, the show demonstrates how personal and emotional experiences are extracted and manipulated into a formula.

This type of expert emotional facilitation is not just limited to Don. When Peggy begins her copywriter career, Don dispenses his advice—essentially telling her to affectively feel her way through an idea, capture her emotion, and in essence, utilize, monetize and capitalize on emotion itself. And Peggy does so, most notably, in an evocative and personal campaign for Heinz's Baked Beans. Despite pitching an idea that plays upon the nostalgia of youth, Peggy's idea is met with reticence and she passionately admonishes the unsatisfied Heinz representative, telling him that he does like her idea, because of the simple fact that "you *feel* something [when you see this]. Do you know how rare that is?" This ability to recall and install emotions, feelings, associations within the minds of audiences is the crux of advertising itself. As Anne McClintock puts it, "Advertising's chief contribution to the culture of modernity was the discovery that by

manipulating the semiotic space around the commodity, the unconscious as a public space could also be manipulated.”⁸⁶ By crafting a show that so blatantly focuses on the creative and emotional labor of advertising by so many emotionally detached and repressed people, the show asks us to question why and how we *feel* the way we do about products, media, and ourselves. Don’s encouragement and expert facilitation of emotion in relation to advertising is starkly contrasted to the detachment and intense repression of feeling in Don’s personal life—a compartmentalization he encourages in Peggy when she bears a child out of wedlock. At the end of season one, bedridden and emotionally reeling from the unexpected birth of her child, Peggy’s mental state is dire. When Don appears by her bedside in an effort to help, he tells her to bury “whatever it is” deep, and to carry on. This intense ambivalence in relation to feelings—capitalizing on them in one context and utterly disavowing and burying them in another—becomes even clearer in the episode, “The Flood.”⁸⁷ For it is in this episode that we see how racial violence serves as the ultimate facilitator of white disclosure and feeling, highlighting not only the show’s preoccupation with feeling and media but the logics of racial liberalism intrinsic to *Mad Men* as well.

Centered on various characters’ reactions to Martin Luther King Jr.’s assassination, the episode begins with an awards ceremony where the employees of SCD, including Don and his new wife, Megan, and other agencies have gathered to honor the best work in the advertising industry. With news of King’s murder interrupting the award ceremony as it has barely begun, the crux of the episode becomes examining the emotions and reactions to the assassination, which range from tepid confusion to outright abhorrence. Don’s wife, Megan, offers an

⁸⁶ Anne McClintock, “Soft-Soaping Empire: Commodity Racism and Imperial Advertising” in *The Gender and Consumer Reader* ed. Jennifer Scanlon (New York: NYU Press, 2000), 134.

⁸⁷ *Mad Men*, “The Flood.” Season 6, Episode 5. Directed by Chris Manly. Written by Tom Smuts and Matthew Weiner. AMC, April 28, 2013.

illuminating critique of her father's reaction to the riots in response to King's assassination: "He said he applauded the escalation of decay. So sick of that Marxist bullshit.... My father just hides behind his intellect. He doesn't want to feel any emotions." Megan's frustration and rejection of her father's intellectualism and valorization of feeling serves as the guiding thematic thread within the episode, which makes it quite clear that its focus is not Martin Luther King Jr.'s death per se, but rather the subsequent outpouring of white sympathy, emotion, feeling, and in some cases, self-interest in the wake of racial violence. Racial violence, then, presents itself within the show as a logic that re-centers whiteness and, at the same time, reveals with the work these racial intimacies actually do (or do not do)—emotional and affective work innately tied to the project of racial liberalism.

The most passionate condemnation in the episode comes from Pete Campbell, the show's resident liberal, who has an emotional outburst when Henry Crane laments the advertising revenue loss caused by the non-stop television news coverage of King's death and the subsequent rioting. Publicly chastising Crane, Campbell calls it a "shameful, shameful day," before reminding him that King also had a family, a fact punctuated by Peter's later unsuccessful attempt to reconcile with his own family to mourn King's passing. While King's death may be the cause for Pete's dismay, the story's emphasis on Campbell's efforts for familial reconciliation acts as another case of re-centering whiteness within the episode. As a slightly overwrought moralistic moment in a series more often known for its characters' inability or unwillingness to express their emotions, Campbell's outburst stands out against the more temperate, but never overtly racist responses that otherwise dominate the episode. Instead, the show easily portrays the apathy and motivated self-interest of Crane's response as the harshest and most deplorable in *Mad Men's* world.

While *Mad Men* does not shy away from showing how racial violence functions as somewhat expedient to its white characters, a flurry of online interest demonstrated that some audiences were much more critical of the tepid responses shown in the episode. Offering a personal anecdote of the King's assassination, "Lilybee" recounted a story of a teacher walking into a "preppy JC [junior college] in NYC, he walked into the classroom the day after and some jerk wrote on the blackboard, ding dong the n***** dead. It was the only time he ever lost his temper in the classroom."⁸⁸ Contradicting the at-worst apathetic and callous response of Crane with an anecdote about overt racism in response to King's death, some online users resisted the conventional narrative often associated with civil rights gains. In fact, as commenter "pasdetroit" notes, it was not only the overtly racist whites but in fact white liberals who did not necessarily mourn King. Noticing *Mad Men*'s seemingly complacent reactions to MLK's death, "pasdetroit" wrote after the episode aired that, "I remember much more hostile and racist reactions to MLK's assassination than was shown in the episode. There were predictably nasty, over-the-top racists, but there were also some supposed enlightened white people who weren't comfortable with the civil rights movement who quietly murmured, 'It's a tragedy, but...'" "Pasdetroit" comment is significant precisely because their memories contradict the sanitized and revisionist narrative of King's radicalism that has prevailed in recent memory. It unveils the social and political reality of King's increasingly hostile reception in white America at the time of his death due to his anti-war stance and his increasingly radical condemnation of inequity and racism.

The episode also takes us from riots in the city to the suburbs, where Betty and her new husband, Henry Francis, an advisor to a Republican senator, respond to the assassination

⁸⁸ Television Without Pity, "Mad Men Forums," Posted April 29, 2013 @ 1:11 AM {dead link}
<http://forums.televisionwithoutpity.com/topic/3218345-6-5-the-flood-20130428/?p=15693412>

differently. While Henry actually journeys into the city in order to assess the political and physical damage of King's death within New York districts, Betty isolates herself completely from this instance of racial violence. In contrast to many of the other historical events, Betty in fact, refuses to even be near the television screen, avoiding the constant news coverage in spite of her children's stated desires to watch. When Henry questions why Betty, Sally, and Bobby are not "in front of the set"—as would presumably be typical in light of such a historical event—Betty interjects firmly, "Because who knows what they are going to show?" Her trepidation towards this juncture of television and racial violence may seem uncharacteristic given her own intimate relationship with previously televised historical events. But considering her previous intimacy with Medgar Evers' murder, in which her very sense of self became conflated, Betty's reluctance and trepidation makes sense. Outfitted with a new understanding of racial violence, one borne of the historical junctures of television, white suburban space, and the intimate space of the living room, Betty refuses to add to her newly acquired knowledge. Indeed, her later remark, that she "didn't want to look. But it didn't feel right turning it off," registers a contradictory trepidation of racial violence as the same time it acknowledges its crucial importance and instills an innate sense of obligation and morality. Racial intimacy, it seems, has become too intimate for Betty, pushing her to censor her relationship with the TV, at least temporarily, though she seems reluctant to forgo it altogether. She now avoids the living room altogether, retreating to lie on the bed in the bedroom, as television's electronic presence and the specter of racial violence looms so large it occupies and overpowers the space of living room entirely. Much like George Leonard's wife, who sobbing, left the room, unable to stand anymore images of racial violence, for Betty, these previously installed racial intimacies forestall a further investigation, as the threat of emotional and bodily response threatens to overwhelm her. Instead,

Betty and Henry use the riots as an opportunity for political expediency— Henry decides that he will run for office, in light of what he deems an inept political response to King’s assassination and the riots that ensue. The decision ultimately elevates Henry to become a more visible political candidate, and the couple’s status rises accordingly.

Perhaps the most poignant moment, however, is reserved for Don, whose realization comes near the end of the episode. Megan, who has been trying to encourage Don throughout the episode to confide in her about his emotions, confronts him, telling him that she is disappointed that she cannot read his feelings about the assassination. In an uncharacteristic act of emotional disclosure, Don tells her of his inability to feel for his children, a historical precedent ruptured that very day because of his son, Bobby’s attempts to comfort a African American janitor at the movies. The expectation of feeling is what Don wrestles with, as he knows that he should feel love for his kids, but fails to do so, until now, until Martin Luther King’s Jr.’s death. Online commenter “CTMSW” offered his take on Don situation: “Thank god, MLK Jr. was murdered, otherwise Don would never experience a flood of emotion for his son.” The critique succinctly and correctly summarizes the meaning of the episode’s title. In the end, racial violence serves as a purveyor for white intimacy and connection, leading Don to open up to his wife about his lack of love for his children and the ability to overcome this deficit. The reconstitution of paternal love stems from interactions with blackness and racial violence, but only as a prime facilitator of white emotion.⁸⁹ Once again, the privileged racial formation out of this moment remains the humanity of whiteness and, conversely, the inhumanity of non-whiteness.

By unveiling the inner subjectivity of Betty, the representative and idealized white suburban housewife, through an epidural-induced hallucination, by displaying the characters’

⁸⁹ It also should not be overlooked that the movie of all movies that Don takes Bobby to see is *Planet of Apes*, a thinly-veiled allegorical film which registers deep hostility to black agency and power if there ever was one.

reactions of Martin Luther King Jr.'s death, and by pairing them with historical context, we are better able to envision the place of television within the home and national discourse, and to recognize the formation and deformation of public sentiment. Affects and emotions like those of George Leonard and the characters of *Mad Men* were cultivated as a deliberate structure of feeling in this historical period. In the end, though television advertised to provide viewers with a safe window onto the violences and perils of public life, it simultaneously opened those viewers up to unprecedented (albeit limited) emotional experiences. As we can tell from the civil rights movement, the sea change in sentiment once television entered the political fray was undeniable. While black suffering did acquaint white audiences with a sense of sympathy, it also constructed narratives of white liberalism, moral certitude, and even paternalism. By constructing an intimate public through which citizenship, race, and nation could be privatized for easy consumption within the home, television allowed the notions of sentimentality, sympathy and emotion to be subsumed into the national consciousness, all the while circumscribing the political and cultural legibility of progress for subsequent decades. The structure of feeling based in these racial intimacies would come to define a sense of racial discourse that privileged feeling as an intentionality and a political end in and of itself. This emphasis of the self would come to form a discourse that would persist in the stagnant and shifting contours of the new media to come.

CHAPTER THREE

INSTRUMENTALIZING THE SIGHTS OF RACIAL VIOLENCE: The Rodney King Videotape, Multidirectional Memory, and Industry Crisis

Just after midnight on March 3, 1991, George Holliday, an Argentinean-born plumbing supplies salesman, was awakened by police sirens and helicopters just outside of his Lakeview Terrace apartment. Taking out a newly purchased video camera to film the commotion, Holliday was unaware that he was about to capture stunning footage that would replay hundreds of times on local and national news and spark the nation's worst riot. The nine-minute video depicted Rodney King's brutal beating at the hands of numerous police officers, who tased King twice, fractured a facial bone, broke his right ankle, and inflicted multiple lacerations and bruises from fifty-six baton swings delivered at full strength. From its initial airing and the hundreds of times subsequent on both local and national news, the videotape generated public outcry and discussion, enabling a nation to witness an exhibition of police brutality and excessive force that was rarely captured on film.

In the months to come, the videotape would become a source of racial tension as people from all different positions came to the defense of the police officers or decried brutal and excessive force and entrenched racism in the LAPD. For the most part, the nation remained fixated by the tape and its unfolding drama, yet tentatively in consensus, with the majority of newspapers taking a sympathetic stance towards King: *The New York Times* called the two

minutes of tape something that “shamed the city,”¹ while the *LA Times* published numerous exposés that indicted the LAPD. Reaction from television coverage was no less damning: news director for KTLA Warren Cereghino said that the newsroom had “received nearly 300 calls from viewers [within a day of broadcast]. He said the callers responded to the tape with ‘total shock, anger and disgust.’”² Outside of direct condemnations, the bureaucratic response consisted of Los Angeles mayor Tom Bradley forming the Independent Commission to investigate the Los Angeles Police Department. Informally known as the Christopher Commission, it was in direct response to the King beating and demonstrates and widespread concern that the videotape engendered. Indeed, as Kimberle Crenshaw and Gary Peller assess,

there was a broad national outrage shared by African Americans and most whites and minorities, with the only fairly visible exception being the fringe (but becoming stronger) white protofascists of the Patrick Buchanan/David Duke [leader of the Klu-Klux-Klan] camps. This was an easy event for the entire mainstream of America culture to abhor; it didn’t present any of the ‘hard questions’ of the 1990s’ controversies over race— like the “dilemma” of affirmative action, say. And the videotape lent objectivity to the charge of police brutality— there was no question of interpretation and subjective bias clouding the issue.³

By the time the trial was concluded a year later, the not-guilty verdict handed down to all four officers charged outraged the nation, with even President George H.W. Bush expressing shock and posing a critique of the verdict. In his address to the nation, Bush stated that “Viewed from outside the trial, it was hard to understand how the verdict could possibly square with the video. Those civil rights leaders with whom I met were stunned. And so was I and so

¹ Seth Mydan, “Seven Minutes in Los Angeles, A Special Report; Videotaped Beating by Officers Puts Full Glare on Brutality Issue,” *The New York Times*, March 18, 1991. <http://www.nytimes.com/1991/03/18/us/seven-minutes-los-angeles-special-report-videotaped-beating-officers-puts-full.html>

² Berger Tobar, “Tape of LA Police Beating Suspect Stirs Public Furor,” *The Los Angeles Times*, March 6, 1991.

³ Kimberle Crenshaw and Gary Peller, “Reel Time/ Real Justice” in *Reading Rodney King/Reading Urban Uprising*, ed. Robert Gooding-Williams, (New York: Routledge, 2013), 57.

was Barbara and so were my kids.”⁴ Bush’s sentiments were mirrored by average citizens who expressed their grief and rage with the ensuing six days of rioting known as the Los Angeles riots. The riots began on April 29, 1992, and would go down in infamy as not only the nation’s worst riot culminating in fifty-three deaths, over 2,000 injuries, and estimated damages ranging up to 1 billion dollars, but the nation’s first multicultural riot as well. The images on that tape would not only be reproduced innumerable times on television, but would also go on to be exhibited in art museums, make appearances in movies, and referenced in music and popular culture in the 1990s and beyond. The scene would become, in the words of Min Song, “an icon, a shorthand and simplified visual representation that conveys a singular meaning with powerful immediate recognition.”⁵ Clearly, this beating became more than merely one incident of local police brutality, it became a national concern, one that very directly engaged the history and memory of racial violence, media, and changing media landscapes within the US.

Looking to the racial discourses of multiculturalism in the early 1990s, transitions in media industries, and how scholars have looked at the videotape previously, I argue that the King beating is a compelling media text precisely because of the videotape’s many textual afterlives: from its initial appearance in the public discourse as an emblem of citizen journalism and changing conceptions of participatory democracy, to its eventual iteration during the trial in the eyes of the jurors when it appeared in a series of stills, a found art object in the Whitney Biennial, and twenty years later when it re-emerged as part of the commemoration of the Los Angeles riots. To analyze the tape and its memory is to take seriously the idea that “though an image may fix an event temporally, the meaning of that image is constantly subject to contextual

⁴ John Fiske, *Media Matters: Everyday Culture and Political Change* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994) 180.

⁵ Min Hyoung Song, *Strange Future: Pessimism and the 1992 Los Angeles Riots* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 69.

shifts.”⁶ Indeed, while the videotape’s images may remain a constant (though the formalistic changes in exhibition during the trial stretch even this conceit), the contextual factors that influence the receptive modes of audiences are not. Thus, I first conduct a reading of the King beating videotape, its formalistic characteristics, and how different modes of exhibition changed viewers’ perceptions of the beating. What is more, I contend that past televised civil rights protest informs the videotape’s legibility and historicity, by recalling past visual vocabularies of racial violence. Importantly, since cultural memory does not work linearly but is constantly in formation, the King beating becomes a central text that then informs past images, illustrating a model of multidirectional memory.

Importantly, my definition of multidirectional memory differs slightly from that of Michael Rothberg, who uses the term to suggest that memory is “subject to ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing, and borrowing” in contexts where different collective memories of oppression are typically construed as competitive memories, set up for a “zero-sum struggle for preeminence.”⁷ To be sure, the competitive memory model can be applied to the 1992 riots; indeed, the event’s very name became an issue of contention—were they riots, a rebellion, an uprising, or what Korean Americans called, *sa-i-gu*? But while such debates over naming surrounded the videotape’s aftermath, the tape itself was never subject such sundry readings. Pointing to the ways that Holocaust and memories of slavery and colonization butt up against each other, Rothberg advocates not the competitive memory schema that has dominated most debates like that in 1992, but a multidirectional model. While agreeing with the constant revising and borrowing motions of Rothberg’s memory usage, I emphasize the concept of multidimensional

⁶ Marita Sturken, *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 21.

⁷ Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2009), 3.

memory in order to highlight *both* how the “past is made the present” and how the present re-informs the past. This allows the model to function as a truly multidirectional one that reveals the reciprocity of meaning-making between present and past.

But what exactly does the King videotape tell us both about the racio-historical moment in which it appeared and about the present? What does the King beating videotape say, and continue to say, about how the nation envisions race, racial violence, and the role of media in the post-Internet age? While many scholars have written on the King beating videotape within its historical moment, I investigate the tape and the subsequent riots for its continued relevance for the contemporary moment. I posit a multidirectional memory model of the King beating videotape and trace its genealogy to civil rights televised violence, and demonstrate how the tape’s afterlife comes to influence and change the contextual practices of reading images of the past. Moreover, I analyze how camcorder technology’s democratization of production would essentially change the conceptions of access and surveillance, revitalizing television in a time of post-network transition. In essence, it was a technology that expanded the parameters of what television as a cultural object and a social practice was, and radically shifted what television could be, initiating a dramatic instantiation of what we now refer to as citizen journalism. Indeed, the videotape’s iconicity is instantly recognizable to audiences as a shorthand for racist police brutality and less as a part of a longer legacy and deeper testament to the intertwined nature of media, new technologies, and racial violence. In the contemporary moment, the King videotape has been resurrected and retroactively anointed as the first viral video and the origin point of citizen journalism in more recent popular press and major newspapers, demonstrating how its iconicity and the urgency of racial violence have persisted well beyond the discrete incident.

Keeping in mind that new media that arises simultaneously makes visible our fears of new technology at the same time that it stirs our persistent hopes in an ever-expanding notion of participatory democracy, part of my endeavor is to show how the multidirectional memory of this video has crept beyond its temporal confines and the moral implications of such movement and regeneration. What do we gain when we critically reframe the King video as a user-generated text and insert it into a narrative of viral video and as a predecessor to digital video? By investigating these contexts, I assert that we are able to see how the remediation of racial violence and the multidirectional nature of memory work in concert to establish discourses of legitimacy, renewal, and change within specific media forms outside of paradigms typically thought, giving us an opportunity to query the moral implications of media and vision from their very instantiation.

Multiculturalism and Questions of Representation

The historical context of Rodney King's beating and the subsequent riots are paramount to understanding how the event was such a watershed moment in national culture and why it has continued to reemerge in national consciousness. The now infamous grainy, black and white video became a catalyst in demonstrating that the multicultural rhetoric of diversity, inclusion, and racial harmony in the 1990s obscured a very different image of racial interaction. King's beating and the 1992 Los Angeles riots erupted in a time when the debates around multiculturalism, colorblindness, the "politically correct" movement and its backlash, post-feminism, and gay visibility were highly present and contentious. Termed the "culture wars," these debates often targeted public institutions and spaces and were lead by religious moralists

and racial nationalists, who often spoke in the name of traditional values, national culture, and democratic principles.

Within these debates, race was an important and impassioned issue in the 1980s and early 1990s, particularly because so much of US national identity is bound up in its vision of itself as a racial and ethnic melting pot. Various historians and public intellectuals weighed in. Arthur Schlesinger, in his influential 1991 book, *The Disuniting of America*, lamented that the radical cultural politics of the 1960s had stratified America along racial and ethnic lines and dis-united an otherwise common national culture,⁸ while bestselling conservative pundit Dinesh D'Souza's 1991 *Illiberal Education* scripted a narrative of racial and sexual politics degrading the American tradition of individual achievement.⁹ While these two examples represent a more hostile stance to racial and ethnic difference, other ideologies like colorblindness and multiculturalism similarly established the period as reflecting a vastly changed attitude towards achieving racial equality. Outright hostility or a conviction that structural racism was imagined and a method of gaining capital for people of color replaced white sympathy and the accepted belief in the structural legislation and enforcements to promote racial equality of the 1960s. Indeed, the perspective that people of color benefitted unfairly and were, in fact, privileged by the attention accorded to their "perceived oppression" was common thinking among the political right.

The repeal of affirmative action and the rise of multicultural education were both part of the highly visible fight over what race, racism, and anti-racism were at the time. While a colorblind type of ideology could be found mostly in conservative political circles, particularly because it advocated a dismantling of social welfare systems in the name of equality,

⁸ Arthur Schlesinger, *The Disuniting of America: Reflections on a Multicultural Society*, (New York City: W.W. Norton & Company, 1991).

⁹ Dinesh D'Souza. *Illiberal Education: The Politics of Race and Sex on Campus* (New York City: Simon and Schuster, 1991).

multiculturalism was a more complicated set of beliefs precisely given its seeming embrace and celebration of racial and ethnic difference. Popular among the progressive left, multiculturalism was a type of anti-racism that emphasized equal representation visible in culture. Take, for example, the “Great Books” canon debate, which focused on expanding the literature canon in schools with multicultural literatures. Conservatives argued for an assimilationist model, whereby students would learn the well-known “greats” of literature, reinforcing a particular type of cultural and national imaginary that valorized “great, white dead men.” Multiculturalism, on the other hand, advocated the inclusion of marginalized populations within the canon— what Jodi Melamed terms a “positive pluralism,” which essentially strives for equal representation.¹⁰

As Melamed notes, however, multiculturalism’s sole concern was the politics of representation and not redistribution. Echoing racial liberalism’s emphasis on the personal worlds of white Americans as paramount in the fight for racial justice, racial equality in the multicultural phase similarly emphasized the personal, dividing the cultural, representative politics of equality from the economic. Indeed, as media scholar Sasha Torres has pointed out, one of “hegemony’s most delicate operations... is to render those whom society has most violently assaulted, both physically and culturally, alive within representation, where intractable social problems such as race relations can be more easily solved.”¹¹ Channeling Nancy Fraser, Lisa Duggan and others argue rather than addressing the structural systems that reproduce inequity, multiculturalism reduced the fight for racial equality to the representative and the

¹⁰ Jodi Melamed, *Represent and Destroy: Rationalizing Violence in the New Racial Capitalism* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota Press, 2011), 96.

¹¹ Sasha Torres, *Black, White, and In Color: Television and Black Civil Rights* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 49.

aesthetic. For Duggan, multiculturalism was “a stripped-down, nonredistributive form of ‘equality’ designed for global consumption during the twenty-first century.”¹²

Importantly, none of these critics of multiculturalism would argue that cultural representation is frivolous. After all, as Mitsuye Yamada reminds us, “when one is invisible in the public imaginary, one becomes invisible to oneself and less likely to claim visibility through political speech, thought, and action.”¹³ But representation’s work has always operated in tandem with structural, technological, and cultural shifts where representation and inclusion are hardly guaranteed as synonymous with purely altruistic goals. Duggan and Melamed’s skepticism and critique lies in the emphasis and the contradictory impulses that underpin the premise of cultural representation as the sole measure of progress. But for most of the progressive left, this type of representation and multiculturalism seemed like a plausible method of achieving equality in the 1990s, particularly upon seeing Reagan-Bush policies repeal many of the hard-fought legislative battles won during the 1960s.

While Duggan and Melamed’s analyses focus on political events and literature, respectively, drastic changes in media industries and popular culture have contributed greatly to the way that multiculturalism has been framed and examined. Herman Gray’s seminal 2004 book *Watching Race* takes up the question of multiculturalism in a different way. For Gray, the key task is not only to understand the ideological work performed by certain representations, but to understand the factors that lead to their influx: factors such as cable proliferation in the early 1990s, demographic changes in network television viewing, and changing conceptions of race, gender, sexuality within national discourse of visibility. All of these worked in concert to bring

¹² Lisa Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality?: Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2012), xxii.

¹³ Mitsuye Yamada, “Invisibility is an Unnatural Disaster,” in *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* ed. Cherrie Moraga et al. (New York: SUNY Press, 2015).

shows like “The Fresh Prince of Bel Air,” “A Different World,” “Sanford and Son,” and most notably, “The Cosby Show” to our television screens.

Unlike Duggan and Melamed’s critiques of multiculturalism, Gray’s book embraces the term, ultimately creating a taxonomy of television shows in which the complexity of Blackness is both acknowledged and displayed via “multicultural shows.” Given recent changes in the discourse surrounding the term, Gray might well choose a different term if he were to update the book today; but his effort to recuperate the term reflects the invested hope of the time as well as the sea change of sentiment surrounding multiculturalism. Particularly amongst those who engage in critical race studies, multiculturalism has largely shifted from being embraced to critiqued, in large part because of how pervasively convincing the power of representation was at the time, and just how little things changed from the 1990s. This pessimism can be seen very directly in summations like this one:

Pluralism restricts permissible antiracism to forms that assent to U.S. nationalism and normal politics and prioritize individualism and property rights over collective social goals. It reduces culture to aesthetics and then overvalorizes aesthetic culture by ascribing agency to it separable from and superior to social, political, and economic forces.¹⁴

Where Melamed’s narrative of multiculturalism falters and meets an interruptive moment is when representation quite clearly does not exclude the social, political, and economic forces at the heart of practically every representation— whether it is to deny and dismiss these larger societal structure from existence or to assert it. The corrective impulse shared by these scholars share can be understood in this historical moment—a period that has seen the rise of post-racial discourse, an intrinsically related, though novel political formation to that of multiculturalism.

It was within this cultural milieu that Rodney King’s beating occurred: in a country highly attuned to and embattled by varying and contested ideas around race, racial equality, and

¹⁴ Melamed, *Represent and Destroy*, 96.

nation. If Melamed and Duggan's critiques of multiculturalism center on the increase of representation inversely related to distribution of wealth and power, the King beating video is a direct contradiction of this relationship. In fact, what the Rodney King beating tape enables us to see is how the politics of representation quite clearly *did* rupture the public sphere of racial discourse as well as the imaginary of media landscapes. As television broadcasting transformed from a network model into the niche expanses of cable programming in the late 1980s, so too did the landscape of media images and race change.¹⁵ Herman Gray and Ed Guerrero demonstrate that the rise of Black images was a direct result of the political and social shifts in the cultural milieu as well as the structural and economic changes in television and movie industries. These concomitant shifts produced the sudden variety of Black representation on television with highly popular shows like *The Cosby Show*, *In Living Color*, and *Roc*, to name a few. At the same time, cinematic images like *Boyz in the Hood*, *Menace to Society*, *Do the Right Thing* and *Malcolm X* appeared on movie screens, bolstered by the flagging box office and the rise of a cadre of Black auteurs constituting what some would call the Black New Wave.¹⁶ In strikingly similar ways, this film movement was a direct response to failing box office receipts from expensive blockbusters and a deepening national recession. Television and movies both utilized mythic Black audiences as an exploitable niche market to rescue flailing industries from financial exigencies, only to discard those audiences once financial stability was restored. The videotape and the riots thus entered a field of relative, but still fraught visibility.

Immediately, responses to the tape and riots varied—from conservatives labeling rioters looting thugs, to radicals proclaiming revolution, to more nuanced critiques emphasizing the

¹⁵ Herman Gray, *Watching Race: Television and the Struggle for Blackness* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota, 1995), 62.

¹⁶ Ed Guerrero, *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2005).

importance of resources and unemployment as context. Above all, the images made it clear that Blacks' hard-won visibility on the cultural terrain did not equate to the dream of radical political change. Instead, I argue, the Holliday tape served as a rebuttal to the influx of Black images at the time documented by scholars such as Gray, Guerrero, and others.¹⁷ Visually testifying to the falsity of the multicultural image of a "post-racial" US nation state, the beating videotape and the riots depicted, rather, multiculturalism's nightmare as whites, Blacks, Asians, and Latinos collided on the streets of Los Angeles, and on the nation's television screens. After the riots, *Los Angeles Times* writer Richard Rodriguez wrote that the conflict had proved that "multiculturalism" contained "no diversity" and remained "hollow at the core." The very term "multiculturalism," he argued, had become "a feel-good term that has trivialized the reality it trumpets." Reassessing the city's national image as a multicultural haven, Rodriguez now saw the city as rooted in "separateness."¹⁸

In this way, the beating videotape came to have a strange relationship with the discourse of multiculturalism, attesting to its innate falsity, while at the same time, underlining the continued importance of representation in the face of analyses geared towards social movements and political economy. If Melamed and Duggan's arguments privilege the latter while critiquing multicultural representations like *The Cosby Show*, what the King beating videotape accomplished was, in fact, a reaffirmation of the importance of representation. Quite clearly, the image of Rodney King's body was a different depiction of Blackness, one that represented and

¹⁷ Other scholars such as Todd Boyd, Michael Eric Dyson, etc. analyzed Black representations during this time originating from a hip-hop generation that would in fact, buttress King's beating as a testament to racism's ubiquity.

¹⁸ Richard Rodriguez, "Hollow at the Core: Multiculturalism with No Diversity" *The Los Angeles Times*, May 10, 1992. http://articles.latimes.com/1992-05-10/opinion/op-2288_1_los-angeles

testified to the perpetual and continued violence done to particular racialized bodies by the state and it is for this reason, among others, that I argue the tape is such a generative text to examine.

The Many Afterlives of the Rodney King Beating Videotape

As the literature has demonstrated so vividly, the King beating videotape's many lives have fuelled a rich body of scholarship that has tackled the specificities of medium, image, and industrial context and displayed an engagement with critical analyses of structural racism within media and the US. While many of these scholars have concentrated on the changing narrative of the beating videotape within the trial, I first focus on the televised original version that circulated throughout the media landscape, as Turner summarized, "like wallpaper," and posit that civil rights protest footage informed the reaction to King's beating, contributing to a new multidirectionality of memory of racial violence within the televisual imaginary. While this statement is not necessarily new as the beating video has frequently been referenced in relation to civil rights violence, few scholars have deeply analyzed how readings of the Holliday tape relied upon and evoked previous legacies and visual vocabularies of racial violence instantiated by television's inception, or how the status of new media contributed to this narrative. Min Song's *Strange Future* quite rightly identifies the King beating videotape as an instance wherein, despite the presence of other cases of police brutality, none "resonated quite so powerfully with, nor dug quite so deeply into, a common store of national symbols to produce an icon that seemed economically crafted to circulate in American culture and beyond."¹⁹ Here, Song dwells on the aptness of the word "store" both as "a place where something is held in reserve, from which we can draw meaning, and at the same time a place of commercial exchange, where meaning is

¹⁹ Song, *Strange Future*, 69.

bought and sold.”²⁰ This dualism suggests not only how the visual images of the past operate, but also how tape itself became commodity, establishing a visual, economic, and discursive link to the 1960s civil rights protest, as I will demonstrate.

Edited down from a total of nine minutes, the televised videotape has a runtime of close to two minutes. In contrast to typical professional news footage where spatial proximity to the action is heralded and lauded, George Holliday’s first person camera perspective is from afar, from his apartment balcony on the side of the freeway. It is obvious that the camera’s zoom focus has been adjusted to compensate for the distance from its subjects. King and the police officers who surround him are grainy figures, whose gestures, importantly, are registered but not necessarily defined in detail. The helicopter light shines from above, illuminating the scene so that when it begins with King writhing on the ground, we are able to make out his actions. He is surrounded by five police officers visible to the camera, though from all news accounts, this number swelled to no less than twenty-five by the beating’s end. The speeding white Hyundai that began the freeway pursuit is illuminated by the helicopter light and possibly also the headlights or spotlight of one of the police cars close to the scene. The driver-side door of the Hyundai remains ajar, with one police officer between it and King, who is already on the ground, clearly writhing from pain. King’s memoir, *A Riot Within: My Journey From Rebellion to Redemption*, co-written with Lawrence J. Spagnola, describes this moment: “H[olliday] got me at the beginning of me trying to escape, and then got most of the beating and kicking by the cops... And he saw me, on the ground screaming, the cops circling me. If you watch the eighty-

²⁰ Ibid.

one second video, you'll see that the cops came at me with their batons and hit me more than fifty times."²¹

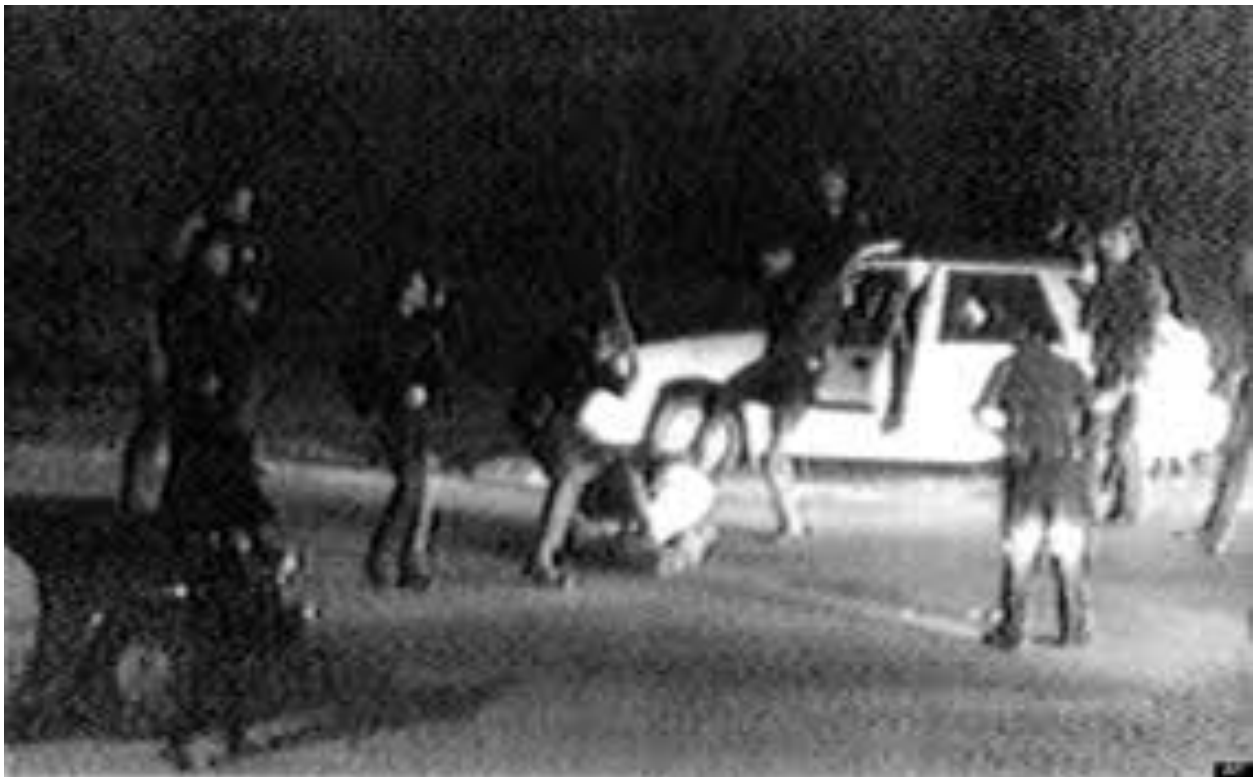


Figure 4: Still from the Rodney King beating videotape, captured by George Holliday, March 3, 1991.

Source: George Holliday from "25 Years Later: The Police Assault of Rodney King and Riots that Ensued," *New York Daily News*

Indeed, despite the low production values of the tape itself, the swings are legible as the police officer pulls his baton fully above his head time and time again to administer the blows. The police officer closest to the car also intermittently strikes King with a baton. All the while, King crawls slowly towards the left; the deliberateness of his movements is punctuated by the speed and the ferocity of the blows. Within the first twelve seconds of the videotape, officers later identified as Laurence Powell and Timothy Wind strike King at least eight times each. As the other police officers shuffle around King and the blows continue, King is seen rolling on his

²¹ Rodney King with Lawrence J. Spagnola, *The Riot Within: My Journey from Rebellion to Redemption* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2012) 46.

back from one side to another. The lights shine on his upraised hands, illuminating his palms and the position of his elbows, tightly held into his ribs. It is clear that King raises his palms in futile deference, a visual signal of capitulation.²² But the gesture does not halt the violence as the baton blows continue unabated, ultimately breaking King’s ankle, fracturing a facial bone, and damaging internal organs. Supervising officer Stacy Koon, despite believing that the officers had followed police protocol, testified, “I have seen uses of considerable violence, but I have not seen anything as violent as this in my fourteen and a half years [as a police officer].”

As King recounted, the blows to his legs, torso, and back were termed “power swings” by Singer, one of the police officers, during the trial.²³ Interestingly enough, King’s memoir describes the effect the demonstration of these power swings had in the courtroom: “They gasped in the courtroom when they saw how strong the blow was. It’s like swinging a baseball bat at full speed, trying to hit it with all your strength. There’s also some kind of diamond-shaped groove in the baton that leaves a horrible cut in the skin.”²⁴ King’s account makes clear the disjuncture between what the jurors saw in the videotape and the in-court demonstration.

The picture quality and sound throughout the video, the images fuzzy and shaky from Holliday’s handheld recording, contribute to the ways of seeing and receiving the videotape. For media scholar John Fiske, the formalistic elements of the tape—what he terms “videohigh” and “videolow” qualities—were hugely influential. Fiske argues that all videotapes involved with riots (King, Soon Ja Du-Latasha Harlins, and Reginald Denny) demonstrate technology’s capacity for reproduction and exertion of social power. In the case of the King videotape, Fiske

²² King’s gesture is evocative of the recent gestures of political protest around police brutality. Mike Brown, an unarmed college-bound Black teenager killed in Ferguson, Missouri was shot six times. His last gesture was a similar gesture that has been taken up by Black Lives Matter protesters along with the phrase, “Hands up, don’t shoot.”

²³ King, *The Riot Within*, 45.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

points out that there were, in fact, multiple beating videotapes: each television airing of the tape added visual enhancements such as editing, slow motion, and stabilization, in every instance altering the videotape from its original. He distinguishes these different iterations as videolow and videohigh, wherein visual qualities of the videos were imbued with ideological precepts that produced very different readings. Holliday's original video or "videolow" was imbued with the discourses normally associated with authenticity. Fiske's observation that multiple King videotapes exist resonates with my assertion that multiple contexts exist and produce varied readings. As Fiske puts it, "the transformation from videolow to videohigh was not just technological, but also social and semiotic: its technological effectiveness depended entirely upon the social conditions...."²⁵ Where our analyses diverge is around the larger historical contexts that rendered these images legible in the first place. The bulk of Fiske's analysis is dedicated to the trial's version of the videotape, detailing how King became the "animalized threat to white civilization," a "current instance of a long history of similar white constructions of the Black male."²⁶ The graininess of the image, the shaky handheld camera, the blurry focus, the speed at which the batons struck King—all these visual elements were changed for the trial through image stabilization, slow motion and a series of stills. As Marita Sturken points out, when the exhibit mode of the video changed from animated dynamic violence to a series of stills, so too did the violence done to King get evacuated.²⁷

Parsing the processes of this watching a bit further, the reception of the videotape sifts out the often conflated but distinct terms of sympathy and empathy. Channeling literary scholar Marianne Noble, Song points out that to identify with the person in pain is to "feel the heart-

²⁵ Fiske, *Media Matters*, 129.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Marita Sturken, *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 39.

wrenching terror” in empathy, as opposed to the shedding the “heart-wrenching tears” of pity in sympathy.²⁸ Such a description immediately recalls the one of the main anecdotes of the previous chapter, when George Leonard’s wife, overwhelmed by footage of the civil rights protest in Selma, sobbed and turned away from the television screen. The question remains, how did the primacy of the “heart-wrenching tears” of the white liberal, like George Leonard’s wife when seeing the Selma footage on television, turn into a different political moment where white sympathy was in deficit? I posit that these formalistic qualities of the tape that Fiske identifies and the obvious first-person camera perspective of the George Holliday videotape made audiences innately aware of the very act of looking and conscious about the changing conceptions of vision in a new era of camcorder technology. But unlike an era of civil rights violence, when this new vision was accompanied by a dramatic shift in the inner worlds of white spectators due to the spatial logics of television as a new medium, the King beating videotape would actually not produce similar affects.

Paradoxically, what both sympathetic and empathetic viewers could see in the King videotape was an image of clear-cut racial relations, where racism, police brutality, Black and white race relations was a familiar trope within national memory. Indeed, as Kimberle Crenshaw and Gary Peller argue in “Reel Time/Real Justice,” “unlike 1980s and 1990s racial controversies over affirmative action, ethnocentrism, and multiculturalism, the King beating bore the familiar markings of the 1950s and 1960s—rather than encased carefully in definitions of merit and neutrality, old-time white supremacy was boldly and crudely inscribed on the body of King.”²⁹ Crenshaw and Peller’s claim is similarly assessed within certain press circles: as Joe Domanick of *LA Weekly* put it, the tape would “brand hip, sophisticated Los Angeles as the Birmingham,

²⁸ Song, *Strange Future*, 87.

²⁹ Crenshaw and Peller, “Reel Time/Real Justice,” 57.

Alabama of the 1990s.”³⁰ Indeed, the visual idiom of civil rights protest footage was evoked once again with the King beating videotape, an idiom that King himself even recalled during his beating. As the baton blows rained down upon him, King writes that he “had the craziest thought at that moment, I began to think about all the Blacks down South who were slaves and had been beaten and lynched. I felt a strange power at that moment, as if their spirits were all coming together to help me through this.”³¹ King’s disclosure here is telling, marking the post-generational continuance of trauma and the doubled vision of looking down upon himself and seeing his place within the long, systemic legacy of racial and state violence.

But the racio-historical moment of multiculturalism, as previously discussed, evinced a far more complicated political and cultural sentiment, one mired in a multi-racial axis of representation that was invested in expanding the Black-white binary and consciousness, but primarily for consumption purposes only. In essence, the visual legacy that created the narrative in which King’s beating was instantaneously recognizable also reified a Black-white dichotomy that effectively overwrote racialized subjects outside of the racial binary. Thus, the videotape signified both a break and a continuity in mediated raced representation and imagery in very particular ways. A continuity because of the reiterative legibility of racialized violence from civil rights footage emblazoned in America’s cultural landscape. But also a break because it essentially ruptured the dominant public discourse of multiculturalism, racial harmony, and the self-satisfied idea of diversity through representational means. So, not only was the King beating videotape a direct contradiction of both critiques of multiculturalism *and* the over-valorization of the representations it produced, but in its legibility of Black-white relations and police brutality, it also refuted the racial logic and rhetoric of multiculturalism itself. If racial harmony and the

³⁰ Joe Domanick, “How the Cops Got Away with This,” *LA Weekly*, March 15-21.

³¹ Song, *Strange Future*, 47.

palatability of racial otherness was the price that multiculturalism asked in exchange for representation, then it was refused. The complexities and differences of racial formations within Asians and Latino categories strategically essentialized and vast differences in history, immigration, region, and class greatly overlooked, if not rhetorically erased completely. The inability of news coverage to make sense of the multiracial composition of the 1992 riots outside of a race war made this abundantly clear.

Though not directly within the diegetic world of the beating videotape itself, the 1992 riots responding to the exoneration of the police officers charged with King's beating, are a paratext for the tape for precisely this reason. Attempting to explain the mechanisms of style in mediating the violence of the 1992 riots specifically, John Caldwell's *Televisuality* starts with television's portrayal of Rodney King and critiques the highly stylized and iconic way of representing King, which ultimately posited him as an icon, complete with stigmata wounds and religious allusions. Calling out this strategy as "rote moral guises—the stigmata and the vanitas, symbols that neatly fit the long tradition of tragic victimization,"³² Caldwell surmises that the videotape was like a "grainy video slate [to be] scraped and erased, encrusted and reused in a seemingly infinite number of ways.... The low resolution and amorphous source slate became, in many manifestations, highly stylized and visually complicated program openings, mural-size screens in newsrooms, and graphically constructed and flying visual artifacts."³³ Caldwell's quote here is strangely prescient. The tape would indeed become a flying visual artifact, traveling across temporal distances on many occasions for many different purposes. The first of which would be towards the past, where the history of television and racial violence would be instantiated—a history that the King beating videotape would continue.

³² John Caldwell, *Televisuality: Style, Crisis, and Authority in American Television* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1995), 308.

³³ *Ibid.*, 305.

Television's Selma Moment and Remediating Racial Violence

By looking to how the Selma March of 1965 similarly galvanized a nation and marked a turning point for civil rights television coverage, I argue that both Selma and the King beating were moments of societal upheaval that were heavily influenced by the way that media functioned, structurally, spatially, and ideologically. As mentioned previously, though the images may remain static, the contextual factors that influence the receptive and subjective modes of audiences are not. Therefore, King's beating functioned as a citational text, illuminating the multidirectionality of memory, as spectators made sense of the beating through collective memories of previous televised racial violence, namely, 1960s civil rights protest. Crenshaw and Peller assert that the language of interpretation and knowledge around certain narratives are crucial to the reading and seeing of the videotape. While they do not necessarily utilize the specific language of intertextuality, Crenshaw and Peller rely on the notion's logic to unpack the images. Another instance of racial violence and ostensibly "bad footage" is the March on Selma, a violent incident that similarly shocked the nation and led to a massive protest and the passing of the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

Christened "Bloody Sunday" by news reports, the March 7, 1965, march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama, was a culmination of the media spectacle surrounding the civil rights struggles around voter rights. Organized as a political rally organized by the Dallas County Voters League (DCVL) and supported by Martin Luther King Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), the march and the state-sanctioned violence with which it was met constituted the apex of civil rights demonstrations in terms of rallying national outcry and

emotional impact.³⁴ The event and responses to it forced President Johnson to introduce the Voting Rights Act to a joint session in Congress eight days later, and fuelled its ultimate successful passage in 1965. More than just a coincidence of media presence and civil rights protest, Selma was a distinct choice in location on the part of civil rights activists: located in Dallas county, Selma had one the lowest percentages in Alabama of Black citizens registered to vote, fewer than three hundred out of fifteen thousand.³⁵ Selma was also home to Jim Crow tactics like “literacy” tests designed for failure, a local white community hostile to Black activists, and local judges that handed down jail sentences for nonwhite victims of police violence and unconstitutional injunctions against Black assembly. Civil right activists deliberately chose Selma because of these practices as well as the repressive and particularly violent tactics of Selma’s Sheriff, Jim Clark.

By televising what they anticipated would be a violent confrontation with Clark, civil rights leaders hoped to galvanize support for the movement by showing the staggering violence of injustice in Selma. As Sasha Torres’ *Black, White and in Color* importantly notes, these deliberate tactics of violent spectacle served as public relations moments for the civil rights campaign, utilizing a cycle of violence and publicity to advocate for social change. Television played an unprecedented role that civil rights leaders recognized and used to their advantage, but simultaneously downplayed, fearing charges of Black opportunism, an accusation that had already been leveled at the movement for its decision to include children protestors. Engaging with the political potentials of television was a controversial yet crucial decision that essentially

³⁴ Taeku Lee, *Mobilizing Public Opinion: Black Insurgency and Racial Attitudes in the Civil Rights Era* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2002).

³⁵ Martin A. Berger, *Seeing through Race: A Reinterpretation of Civil Rights Photography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 1.

saved the movement from media stagnancy.³⁶ But while scholars like Martin Berger, Sasha Torres, and others have expounded upon the media tactics of the civil rights movement, illustrating how leaders utilized the medium to appeal to the morality of the nation watching at home, less attention has been given to how the television industry, in turn, benefitted from the moral and social capital that such racialized and politicized images provided.

The reasons for the inordinate amount of television coverage accorded to the civil rights movement have been discussed in detail in a number of other studies. Traditional print journalism had, of course, covered the civil rights movement prior to television's penetration into American homes, but TV's visuality enabled a new sense of urgency and moral outrage as frozen images came to life, animated by dynamic violence. Too, print journalism in publications like *Time* and *Look* had high readership numbers, but television had the distinction of a truly national audience due to the monopolistic ubiquity of broadcast news and the high penetration of television into American homes.³⁷ As news stories, documentaries, and original programming tackled the issues of equality, racial justice, and a new post-WWII America, the medium became energized and, importantly, legitimized by televised civil rights struggles in a way that no other news story or event had achieved. It cannot be stated enough that the civil rights movement was also the networks' first, ongoing major news story, spanning a number of years and sparking continued interest and engagement, in large part due to the movement's leadership and tactics for publicity. The now-iconic moving images of the civil rights movement did not appear on television screens arbitrarily but through the concerted efforts of newsmakers, programmers, and

³⁶ Berger, *Seeing Through Race*, 88-89.

³⁷ For a general history of broadcasting, see Erik Barnouw's *Tube of Plenty: The Making of American Television* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982) and Michelle Hilmes' *Hollywood and Broadcast* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1999). For a more nuanced study of TV's proliferation as modernity, see Victoria Johnson's *Heartland TV: Primetime Television and the Struggle for US Identity* (New York: New York University Press, 2008).

Black activists who utilized the burgeoning medium for different means.³⁸ The industrial and discursive contexts that television found itself in at the time also precipitated an environment where images of civil rights violence contributed pivotally to battling negative public opinion of television's cultural status.

In May 1961, FCC chairman Newton Minnow infamously disparaged television as a “vast wasteland,” citing the constant barrage of game shows, westerns, and other equally vacuous and worthless genres (in Minnow's estimation) as proof of the medium's deficiency. To be fair, Minnow did acknowledge television's capacity (“when television is good... nothing is better”), nonetheless, his scathing review exemplified a particular sentiment of distrust that contributed to the denigrated status of television—a status that arguably continues to this day.³⁹ Minnow's remark was a culmination of several factors that included the television's public image as a passive and feminized medium, the dominance of hyper-commercialized interests and advertising, as well as specific incidents that further degraded public opinion. The quiz show scandals of the 1950s were particularly emblematic of a long-drawn battle between television's debates and influences.

Michael Curtin's *Redeeming the Wasteland* outlines a number of factors that contributed to television's early contentious and often conflicted status in American society. Summarizing William Boddy's work, Curtin describes television's early years as marked by experimentation: broadcasting a diverse range of television programming from “anthology dramas to entertainment spectaculars, from televised symphonies to vaudeville-inspired variety shows,” the

³⁸ Sasha Torres, *Black, White, and In Color: Television and Black Civil Rights* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003).

³⁹ Newton N. Minnow, “Television and the Public Interest” delivered May 9, 1961. National Association of Broadcasters, Washington, DC.

medium was initially heralded as a solution to radio's stagnant programming by critics.⁴⁰ This type of legitimacy, which elevated and equated the new medium to a form of cultural enrichment, was embraced by network executives. But as television's prominence grew, so too did the television industry's assuredness. The financial incentive to provide lower cost programming for a mass audience grew and the diversity of programming dwindled as a response, as did the critics' praise. Ascribing a large portion of the change of programming to "cold commercial logic" and the increasing influence of advertisers, critics started deploring television's lost public service mission by the end of the decade.⁴¹

It was within this milieu that Minnow's statement was issued. Not coincidentally, the civil rights movement, as well as Cold War documentaries, all began in this period, marking an opportunity to redeem television's tarnished image with seriousness and gravitas. The cry for quality programming was heard. Journalists and industry leaders sought to disprove Minnow's vapid and superfluous label in part by utilizing a narrative of civil rights for a bid at legitimacy. Positing itself as a public good, television's national coverage of civil rights provided a platform for Black activists to show national audiences white supremacist violence and Black suffering in startling liveness. This is not to say that television production crews and newsmakers were solely responsible for the images that were brought to television screens. As media scholar Sasha

⁴⁰ Michael Curtin, *Redeeming the Wasteland: Television Documentary and Cold War Politics* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1995), 20.

⁴¹ Furthering the delegitimizing of television, the quiz show scandals of the late 1950s was a highly publicized fallout of television's integrity. Hugely successful shows like *The \$64,000 Question*, *Twenty One*, and *Dotto* were all rocked by a series of revelations that exposed the show's propensity in providing coaching and answers to certain contestants in order to rig the outcome of shows. Pushed by the need for ratings, the quiz show scandals generated such public outrage, intense investigation, and ultimately, resulted in the networks canceling their entire lineup of quiz shows and implementing FCC oversight regulations. Thus, as both a culmination and a symbolic reckoning of television's changing association from trusted public servant to denigrated medium, the quiz show scandals exemplified the state of the public's outlook on TV at the beginning of the 1960s. See Kent Anderson, *Television Fraud: The History and Implications of the Quiz Show Scandals* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1978).

Torres has noted, this narrative was heavily dependent on a cycle of publicity and violence, a cycle that has been fundamental for African American civil rights organizing and visibility. By bringing racist brutality out of the shadows and “into the glaring light of television,” African American civil rights leaders capitalized on the presence of cameras to marshal sympathetic audiences as well as mitigate (yet utilize) violence.⁴² Conversely, newsmakers offered Black leaders a chance to reveal the violence of white supremacy, while furthering the television industry’s own goal of reclaiming visual and moral capital it wanted. In this way, the complex negotiations of visibility, racial violence, and legitimacy were institutionalized within the medium itself.

The case of Selma fulfilled and exceeded many of the expectations of civil rights organizers in terms of marshaling national outcry. As mentioned earlier, about Bloody Sunday, *Time* magazine declared: “Rarely in human history has public opinion reacted so spontaneously and with such fury.”⁴³ Noting the extensive footage, historian Taylor Branch wrote that the event, “struck with the force of instant historical icon.”⁴⁴ This fury and this historical iconicity were direct reactions not only to the type of footage viewers encountered within their living rooms but also the enormous size of the national audience watching. Sheriff Clark deputized a posse of men in front of the courthouse in anticipation of the march and, alongside Alabama state troopers, Clark’s men brutalized the peaceful crowd of demonstrators as they attempted to cross

⁴² For more on the deliberate strategies of the television industry and civil rights leaders, see Anna McCarthy’s *The Citizen Machine: Governing by Television in 1950s America* (New York: The New Press, 2010), Aniko Bodroghkozy’s *Equal Time: Television and the Civil Rights Movement* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2013), Michael Curtin’s *Redeeming the Wasteland: Television Documentary and Cold War Politics* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1995), Sasha Torres’ *Black, White, and In Color*, and Mary Dudziak’s *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2011).

⁴³ “The Central Points,” *Time Magazine*, March 19, 1965

⁴⁴ Ari Berman, “John Lewis’s Long Fight for Voting Rights,” *The Nation*. June 5, 2013.

the Edmund Pettus Bridge. The attention to this particular march had much to do with the inordinate amount of violence displayed by state and local police, who used billy clubs and tear gas upon 600 peaceful protesters. Led by John Lewis of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and Hosea Williams of the SCLC, the demonstrators were protesting both for voter rights and in response to the death of Jimmie Lee Jackson, a church deacon who was shot point-Black in the stomach when he tried to protect his mother and grandfather from the barrage of a trooper's baton. While this type of state-sanctioned violence and terror was, in itself, not atypical, the presence of cameras as well as the rawness of the footage contributed to an unprecedented response from the national audience.



Figure 5: Photograph of the March on Selma, Alabama, March 7, 1965.
Source: *Associated Press*

And the audience was considerable. Breaking news footage of the bloody conflict interrupted the Sunday evening primetime lineup, the most watched primetime night of the week. Shows like *The Ed Sullivan Show*, NBC's *Walt Disney's Wonderful World of Color*, and

Bonanza (which drew in a staggering third of the audience) were all airing on March 7, 1965, when the brutal images of Blood Sunday debuted into American living rooms. While primetime news programs were relatively prestigious at this time, viewership never compared to that of primetime entertainment. And with the exponential penetration of television into American homes in the early 1960s alongside monopolistic broadcast channels, television gave the civil rights movement an *unprecedented* national audience, one that was captivated by (despite different reactions to) the visual vocabularies of racial violence.⁴⁵ Thus, when these primetime shows were interrupted for breaking news coverage, Selma's Bloody Sunday unwittingly captured the largest national audience the civil rights movement had ever managed to capture.⁴⁶

Moreover, as Bodroghkozy notes, ABC's premiere airing of the Academy Award-winning film, *Judgment at Nuremberg*, coincided with the Selma broadcast. In a staggering symmetry of programming, the film's central moral question focused on the guilt of ordinary German citizens who did not participate in the atrocities but stood idly by in the face of injustice and the dehumanization of a particular people. Garnering 48 million television viewers, the film also included newsreel footage from concentration camps, adding a visual sense of authenticity and "realness." This type of unintentional "flow," in Raymond Williams' terms—whereby the "flowing" of content from one segment to another seeks to hold the audiences' attention within television programming⁴⁷—likely impacted the audiences' reactions to the Selma coverage by stoking a continuity of empathy and sympathy previously unexperienced with the civil rights struggle. *Judgment at Nuremberg* evoked a constellation of emotions connected to the memory

⁴⁵ While contentious, the civil rights campaign appealed to national moral outrage in a post-WWII, Cold War context, where American exceptionalism as a ideology was being put forth as justification of US empire and Cold War surveillance.

⁴⁶ Bodroghkozy, *Equal Time*, 115.

⁴⁷ Raymond Williams, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* (New York: Routledge, 1974).

of the “good war” that could then be transferred to the civil rights struggle. Though unplanned, the content flow tacitly encouraged audiences to draw parallels between Nazism and Jim Crow, and in essence, avoid Germany’s shame by supporting the civil rights movement in America.

At the same time, this content flow or continuity of moral imperative was interrupted by the formalistic qualities of the footage itself. As Torres and Bodgroghkozy have identified, like the King beating videotape, the Bloody Sunday footage was not necessarily “good footage.” In fact, much of its emotional power derived from the audiences’ inability to see all of the action as well as the footage’s departure from the cogent visual script depicting race that had dominated national broadcasts for the years prior to 1965. In distinction to the typical newsreels of civil rights movement coverage, the moving images of Bloody Sunday were disturbingly different. As discussed previously, the narrative visual scripts of Black-and-white people in harmony that typified civil rights coverage crafted a particular image of cooperation and white liberalism. But Bloody Sunday’s violence was unprecedented for a number of reasons. The obscured faces of the police officers, covered by gas masks, effectively dehumanized them and cast the Alabama state troopers in an ominous light. Conversely, the protesters became if not the main point of identification for national audiences, then at minimum a more sympathetic subject given their depiction as recipients of racial violence, even among those audiences likely to perceive Black protestors as disturbingly radical.

Though the images themselves and the size of the audience viewing them were unprecedented, the melding of racial violence to new media was not. More than a “historical coincidence” of the simultaneous rise of the movement and the medium as an “authoritative force in American life,” as Torres puts it, I contend that this new media-racial violence pairing

has a long, yet unexcavated history.⁴⁸ A cursory look at the enduring legacy of cinematic techniques from D.W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* (1915) makes it clear that cinema too has its own narrative and visual codes indebted to (spectacularized and nostalgic) racial violence. Similarly, Jacqueline Goldsby's *A Spectacular Secret: Lynching in American Life and Literature* demonstrates the integral place of lynching photography in the making of American modernity. Detailing how lynching has constituted a cultural logic of modern American society, Goldsby's endeavors take her on a journey through literature and visual and aesthetic forms of mob violence. Focusing on her discussion of photography reveals insights useful for understanding racial violence's place in television as an apparatus and a social practice. The twinned phenomena of photography and the rise of white mob violence and lynching dovetailed in particular ways as traffic in lynching photography ran parallel to photography's democratization at the turn of the nineteenth century.⁴⁹ Quoting Susan Sontag's seminal work, *On Photography*, Goldsby explains that this democratization came with a new sense of looking:

'Cameras did not simply make it possible to apprehend more by seeing... they changed seeing itself, by fostering the idea of seeing for its own sake'... The very idea of what constituted vision was transformed in important ways at the turn of the nineteenth century, not least by the democratization of picture-making into an amateur-oriented, popular pastime.⁵⁰

Indeed, drawing a relationship between the public disaster spectacles that were so popular during the turn of the nineteenth century and lynching as a spectacular violence, Goldsby argues that the leisure activities of white audiences critically framed lynching as a commodity, as lynching photographers etched their names as a signature into their photographs to be openly traded. Racial violence thus became an emblem of modernity that transformed representations of deadly

⁴⁸ Torres, *Black, White, and In Color*, 13.

⁴⁹ Goldsby, *A Spectacular Secret*, 219.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 220.

violence and murder into a market commodity.⁵¹ More than just a narrative strategy and beyond the informational, I assert that the racial violence displayed in the fight for civil rights initiated new imperatives of visual literacy, or what Jonathan Crary calls “techniques of observation.”⁵² Ultimately, racial violence cultivated new regimes of looking and the most affective and pressing experience of television itself.

As discussed earlier, the footage of the Selma incident and televised civil rights violence in general provided ubiquitous intertextual references for the subsequent legibility of the Rodney King videotape. What distinguished the Selma footage from previously televised civil rights marches was not just the ferocity of violence, but also, formalistically, how the imagery conveyed a type of chaotic “authenticity”—a visual trope evoked again over twenty years later in the King footage. Both instances of vicious police brutality and racial violence were captured via shaky handheld recordings captured using then-new technologies. Scenes of civil rights violence like that at Selma have been seared into public national memory and are now constitutive of how Americans’ now imagine the country’s history with race. In this way, the instantaneous legibility of the King beating is indebted to televised footage like Selma.

During the trial of the officers charged in the King beating, the training of specific officers was discussed, particularly as the defense in federal case emphasized the lack of proper training. For example, a relatively new officer, Powell had failed a baton exercise earlier that same night. Chastised for his swings, this did not prevent Powell and Wind from administering over fifty blows to King during a nine-minute period. Later, Powell recalled becoming exhausted

⁵¹ Goldsby, *A Spectacular Secret*, 232.

⁵² Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Boston: MIT Press, 1992).

from hitting King so many times with his metal baton.⁵³ But what is less discussed in mainstream discourses around the trial is the history of the LAPD and how the accusations of the force's racist policing were part of an institutional legacy that dated back to Police Chief William H. Parker's reign beginning in 1950. Parker's tenure, which lasted sixteen years, is unanimously credited as both professionalizing the LAPD as well as alienating the police force from its citizenry and particularly communities of color. Parker drew upon his previous experience in World War II, professionalizing the police department into a structured, paramilitary force, a tactic that catapulted the LAPD as a nationally renowned department. Though credited with cleaning up the rampant vice and corruption that had dominated in the previous tenure, Parker also canceled youth programs and, under his policing philosophy, the police force was accused by prominent civil rights leaders of terrorizing and physically abusing minority communities.⁵⁴ Parker's method of pro-active policing included patrolling heavily in Black and Latino neighborhoods, racial profiling and harassment, and refusing to publicly account for police misconduct.⁵⁵ Parker's conservatism and willingness to uphold Los Angeles' racist power structure is documented in Kramer's *William H. Parker and the Thin Blue Line*, which examines the police chief's rise to the most powerful man in Los Angeles, his public relations campaigning, and his relationship to the minority constituents in the city. Moreover, charges that Parker deliberately recruited white Southern men with racist world views into the LAPD have persisted, though they remain contested.⁵⁶ What we do know is that while he desegregated the

⁵³ Lou Cannon, *Official Negligence: How Rodney King and the Riots Changed Los Angeles and the LAPD* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1999), 20.

⁵⁴ Alisa Sarah Kramer, *William H. Parker and the Thin Blue Line: Politics, Public Relations and Policing in Postwar Los Angeles* (Phd Dissertation, 2007), 9.

⁵⁵ Kramer, *William H. Parker and the Thin Blue Line*, 219.

⁵⁶ Anthony Asadullah Samad, "The New William H. Parker Center Controversy: Revisionist History Cannot Override Long Racial Legacy," *LA Progressive*.
<https://www.laprogressive.com/the-racist-legacy-of-the-lapd/>

police force in June 1961,⁵⁷ Parker did not promote Black and Latino officers through higher ranks within the department and was known to uphold de jure segregation within police structures and the public sphere.

In the end, Parker's failure to respond to charges of racism are well-documented, and the style of policing he advocated contributed greatly to the Watts riots of 1965, an event precipitated by an incident of police misconduct. What Parker's reforms and legacy effectively established was a pattern of violence and policing that pitted police officers against communities of color and professionalized notions of de jure segregation. Not surprisingly, Parker has often been compared to Bull Connor, the infamously racist sheriff of Birmingham, Alabama, and credited with giving Los Angeles its own variation of unspoken Jim Crow South racism. Examining this facet of the LAPD's institutional history not only reveals the longer genealogies of the King beating and the visual languages that framed it, but also challenges popular memories of the civil rights struggle that would frame it as confined only to the South.

But the relation between the Selma footage and the King videotape is one of both resonance *and* refusal. For civil rights footage like that of Selma has often been used as a visual historical benchmark to claim that race relations have progressed since then—and in response to this interpretation, the King beating videotape stands as both a rebuttal and a revision of the Selma footage itself. As Bakhtin argues, no communicative act stands alone; instead, meaning arises from the intertextual relationships between it and other communicative acts.⁵⁸ Thus, we can no longer talk about televised civil rights violence without talking about what happened to Rodney King. If King's beating was informed by 1960s civil rights protest, so too has 1960s

⁵⁷ Kramer credits Parker's move as both a personal and political move: knowing that the newly elected LA mayor Sam Yorty was going to order him to desegregate, Parker did so first in order to avoid being told "what to do." (Kramer, *Parker and The Thin Blue Line*, 228).

⁵⁸ Mikhail M. Bakhtin, "The Bildungsroman and its Significance in the History of Realism," *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010), 21.

protest now been retrospectively reexamined in light of the King beating, defying any unidirectional understanding of influence. Rather than something fixed that remains static throughout time, a text is implicated and mutable through its relation to other texts. As Julia Kristeva argues, every text is “a dialogue among several writings: that of writer, the addressee..., and the contemporary or earlier contexts” wherein meaning is created from “an intersection of textual surfaces.”⁵⁹ Thus, just as Sturken contends that re-enactment can open an event for historical revision, so too can the dynamic interplay of intertextuality facilitate the reconstruction of meaning. In essence, memory and text are and never will be temporally accurate. It is in this temporal dislocation that the multi-directionality of memory haunts those previous images, cross-imblicating, and creating different contexts. The King beating videotape was thus, ripped from its temporal context and continuity and bound within a paradigm of racial violence, media, and legibility.

In this instance, the multidirectionality of memory tethered civil rights violence to the King beating videotape, providing an instantaneous legibility of racial violence. But the new media of camcorder technology and the King beating videotape also offered television a revival of importance as well. Media industries capitalized on 1960s civil rights struggles in order to re-legitimize the new medium of television, just as its social worth was being publicly questioned. In this way, television, as a symbol and as a catalyst of American modernity, wedded and made contingent, the urgency of racial violence to ideas of media legitimacy. The formative visual and industrial history of television as a new medium was fundamentally synchronized and indebted to images of racial violence, initiating a durable, yet often overlooked televisual legacy that we live with today. In fact, by examining the instance of the King beating videotape and the 1992

⁵⁹ Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980).

riots, we can see yet again how racial violence rendered into an object, becomes commodified, and how racial violence and social worth became interconnected in different ways in the 1990s.

But the question remains, if the King beating videotape shares such an intimate legacy with civil rights protest, images that quite clearly *did* communicate Black pain and injustice, then what changed? If the first chapter established that a new formation of racial intimacy occurred when the spatial logics met with the newness of television, then the logics of temporality and repetition of the King beating videotape also established a new formulation of this relationship. While intimacy often has a positive connotation, I argue that in the changed context of the early 1990s, the qualities of repetition, virality, and shaky footage this time instantiated a two-fold process: audiences initially were shocked by the violent nature of King's beating and overwhelmed by the "authenticity" of the images that lead to an identification with King; but the repeated broadcast and circulation of the videotape that followed established a form of intimacy that actually severed the ties between knowledge and sympathy. This time, knowledge of racial violence did not necessarily lead to a new reiterative white sympathy in a multicultural age precisely because there was a change to the formula. Whereas previously racial intimacy was effected through a triangulation of newness, racial violence, and the spatial logics of television, the intimacy of the King case must be understood in relation to camcorder technology and the new spatial logics it instantiated.

Camcorder Technology and the Rhetoric of the New

Any revolution puts power in the hands of the people, and the video revolution is no different. With camcorders in hand, we the people don't just watch TV, we create programming that we can all watch on television.

I Witness Video (1992)

Just as the civil rights coverage provided a partial solution to television's crisis of legitimacy in the early 1960s, the ability of citizens to record themselves marked a major transition in the way that news became news in the late 1980s and 1990s. That is, as Michael Z. Newman's *Video Revolutions* makes clear,

when video camcorders were released to the American market in the mid-1980s, they offered consumers a more compact and portable alternative to earlier video cameras, which required separate camera, microphone, and shoulder strap units. Camcorders were marketed as an 'all-in-one' technology, tapping into the rhetoric of democratization of media that has accompanied many new devices promoted as easier to use than their predecessors.⁶⁰

While in 1985, only approximately 500,000 Americans owned camcorders, by 1995, one in six households, an estimated sixteen million, would possess one, with over two-thirds of those sold after 1988.⁶¹ This democratization—what many journalists who have cast a backwards glance at the King beating videotape have called citizen journalism—promoted television as a newfound way to broadcast images that would not have normally been seen.

Indeed, a few years before the King beating made worldwide headlines, the potential of camcorders was the subject of television's scrutiny. In the 1989 ABC news special, *Revolution in a Box*, host Ted Koppel, highly esteemed anchor for the show *Nightline*, network insider, and news journalist, prophesied on the potentialities of television in wake of this new technology:

Television used to be the exclusive province of government and enormously wealthy corporations. They decided what you saw and when. Not anymore. Television has fallen into the hands of the people... A form of television democracy is sweeping the world, and like other forms of democracy that have preceded it, its consequences are likely to be beyond our imagination.⁶²

As camcorder technology grew more ubiquitous, shows like *I Witness Video*, *America's Funniest Home Video*, *COPS*, and other such camcorder image-driven programs began flooding the

⁶⁰ Michael Z Newman, *Video Revolutions: On the History of a Medium* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 65.

⁶¹ Laurie Ouellette, "Camcorder Dos and Don'ts: Popular Discourses on Amateur Video and Participatory Television," *The Velvet Light Trap* 36 (1995): 34.

⁶² Newman, *Video Revolutions*, 67; Ouellette, "Camcorder Dos and Don'ts," 38.

market, reconceptualizing the potentials of user content and access. As the *I Witness Video*'s opening voiceover for the title sequence, the quote that begins this section encapsulates how even television networks themselves were anticipating and crafting mythologies about how this technology would revitalize and revolutionize the medium into a "televisual democracy."⁶³ Almost simultaneously, television news organizations were in a distinct transition period with the prominent rise of CNN, whose 24-hour news cycle and Gulf War coverage served to establish the cable news channel as a new leader in the field of television news. According to Amanda Lotz, the transition from a network to a post-network television landscape happened slowly, beginning in the 1980s. Major industrial changes such as the Financial Interest and Syndication Rules,⁶⁴ the surge of independents, the rise of cable channels and intensified competition ushered in an era of what she calls "multi-channel transition," a phase between old network dominance and the new era of post-network television, characterized by on-demand watching on various screens enabled by a rash of new technologies, camcorder technology being one of them.⁶⁵ Facing this disruption in the network news oligopoly and thrust into a new hyper-competitive environment, "television news organizations were considering the limitations and advantages of using amateur tapes. At the same time, network entertainment divisions searched for more ways to exploit the profit potential for 'home video.'"⁶⁶ Though clearly this moment represents a different type of crisis than that signaled by the earlier "vast wasteland" discourse, the two are related. Television's place within the American cultural landscape was fully enmeshed by 1991 but its social worth was still contested and, indeed, remains so today as

⁶³ Ouellette, "Camcorder Dos and Don'ts," 33.

⁶⁴ For more on the changes between government regulation and television, see Jennifer Holt's *Empires of Entertainment: Media Industries and the Politics of Deregulation, 1980-1996* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2011).

⁶⁵ Amanda D. Lotz, *The Television Will Be Revolutionized* (New York: NYU Press, 2014).

⁶⁶ Torres, *Black, White, and In Color*, 51.

debates continue over which screens are good (computer, cinema) and which screens are bad (television). The popularized use of camcorder technology would serve to revitalize television in a time of industry transition, when television's very conception of self was undergoing a rapid makeover. Thus, while not necessarily legitimizing television in the same way that civil rights footage had in the 1960s, camcorder technology would provide newness within television industries—newness derived from the hope and aspirational idea of participatory potential.

In fact, though increasingly popular, the discourse around camcorder technology was not fully realized until the King beating videotape was broadcast. With the nation registering outrage and lauding the tape for unveiling the racist undercurrents of policing, the Holliday's footage captured the potentiality of the new technology. The beating video effectively questioned the basic presumptions of news journalism and served as a precursor to a new paradigm of viral video, citizen journalism, and home videos. It essentially changed the conceptions of access and surveillance, shifting the ability to capture images from cultural gatekeepers to a limited model of participation, thus redrawing the cartographies of what constitutes television content. Indeed, while Newman's study of the various formations that video has undergone makes it clear that the medium of video has a much longer history, he asserts that

the camcorder revolution was in a sense more literally revolutionary than other video revolutions, as its impact was seen in terms of not only changing social practices but also in terms of political effects, opening up communications to a greater range of voices and images and thereby diminishing state and corporate power.⁶⁷

Even highly specialized trade papers from the period realized the King tape's impact; consumer electronics magazine *Dealerscope Merchandising* described the event as marking the historical moment when the "camcorder 'revolution' shook the nation by exposing police abuse and its

⁶⁷ Newman, *Video Revolutions*, 67.

racial undercurrents.”⁶⁸ While the magazine itself is not well known, the significance of this remark cannot be underestimated given its status as what John Caldwell calls a “semi-publicly embedded text.”

In “Cultural Studies of Media Production: Critical Industrial Practices,” Caldwell, writing years later, identifies that the media industry generates rituals and mythologies about itself. While focused on the production elements of particular cultural producers rather than larger cultural discourse, he points out that the “media industry themselves invests tremendous resources in producing knowledge (and critical knowledge) about the industry.”⁶⁹ Mining layers of “industrial self-theorization,” Caldwell argues that the industry “excels at publicly generating over-arching metaphors, figurative paradigms, and master narratives that constantly frame and re-frame the production industry.”⁷⁰ Exemplifying this tendency, *Dealerscope Merchandising’s* assessment of the camcorder revolution casts this technology, racial violence, and progress into a similar master narrative of television and civil rights violence, marshaling the same discourse of intertwined legitimacy and racial violence.

However, what differed this time was the actual formulation of newness. Whereas civil rights footage was so ensnaring given the newness of images shown within the intimate space of the home, by the 1990s this spatial intimacy had already been in place for over twenty years. Americans, now accustomed to seeing images ordinarily unseen in the space and comfort of their own home, were no longer wowed by the linking of the televisual landscape and racial violence. In fact, part of Barbara Klinger’s *Beyond the Multiplex* argues that the 1990s were precisely the point at which home theater technology became a popular installation in middle class consumers’

⁶⁸ Cliff Roth, “Back from the Depths,” *Dealerscope Merchandising*, 34, 12 (December 1992): 34, cited in Newman, *Video Revolutions*, 67.

⁶⁹ Caldwell, *Televisuality*, 110.

⁷⁰ *Ibid*, 116.

homes. Creating a more immersive viewing experience, the influx of home theater technology is telling precisely because it indicates a weariness with television and an expressed need to remake the living room as a space of contact. Moreover, it was also around 1992 that virtual reality became a mainstream articulated desire, technology, and discourse. The moment was explicitly narrated as one in which, in the words of Apple Computer CEO John Sculley, “Television’s going to get a second chance, and there’s a chance to do it right this time.”⁷¹ Sculley meant, of course, that the virtual reality would constitute a new type of television, a replacement for the type of TV that had apparently failed to live up to its potential. Others people invested in virtual reality were even less kind to TV, with virtual reality pioneer Jaron Lanier proclaiming that “The best thing about VR is that it will kill TV.”⁷² Such statements, alongside the proliferation of technologies designed to enhance the cinematic and immersive qualities of television with home theater equipment, pointed to a presumption of television’s deficit. While not quite Minnowesque critiques of TV’s public service role, these were assessments levied at the affective and emotional capacity of television at that moment, positing something definitely lacking.

This is all to say that if civil rights racial violence had cultivated new regimes of looking and represented the most affective and pressing experience of television itself, by the time the King beating videotape was played and replayed, that pressing experience had now waned. Camcorder technology had indeed effectively revitalized the television industry with the former’s revolutionary capacity for the means of production, but the images themselves of King were not new—rather, they were legible and loaded with familiarity by the multidirectionality of memory. Too, the spatial logic of camcorder technology did not enable a new sense of intimacy, since its images were remediated onto television screens, in living rooms that were so used to the

⁷¹ William Boddy, *New Media and Popular Imagination: Launching Radio, Television, and Digital Media in the United States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 71.

⁷² Ibid.

sensory worlds of TV that they tried to remake them into home theaters and aspirational virtual reality. Perhaps these factors of stasis and spatial familiarity are why television's representational value by the time the King beating videotape was broadcast failed to stir the affective and emotional worlds of many white Americans.

Citizen Journalism and Viral Video in 1992

What the King beating videotape represented outside of its actual imagery (which was a testament to the continued racial violence against Black bodies) was the idea that newsworthy images could come from ordinary citizens. The narrative of citizen journalism and participatory media arrived at a particular time in television history during the 1990s and has only grown with the advent of digital media. Within this narrative the King tape has been retrospectively inducted as a milestone in media history. For example, Michael Goldstein, writing for the *LA Times* in 2006, profiled George Holliday fifteen years after the beating videotape and assessed his fame as having “pioneered ‘citizen journalism,’” a lofty title that has been more often ascribed to the tape in current times,⁷³ despite the term's almost wholesale association with digital media. Goldstein's label marks the significance of the King beating videotape in terms of the democratization of media and news: while not the first instance of a nonprofessional documenting a historic event, Goldstein asserts that the tape marked “a revolution of technology and social attitude that has made amateur reporters of us all.” Likewise, in 2011, major news outlets commemorated the event's twentieth anniversary by reassessing the beating videotape and its significance. Eric Deggan's CNN special report “How the Rodney King video paved the way for today's citizen journalism” ascribes a more detailed genealogy to Holliday's tape. While

⁷³ Michael Goldstein, “The Other Beating,” *The Los Angeles Times*, Feb. 19, 2006. <http://www.latimes.com/la-tm-holidayfeb19-story.html>

the Zapruder film of JFK's assassination is quite clearly an earlier instance of accidental recording, Deggans notes that it was the King beating videotape that signaled a paradigm shift wherein the ability of ordinary citizens to influence mainstream media was far more common.⁷⁴

These statements have only compounded over the years, as the field of media studies embraced the participatory potential of user-generated content. Originally focused primarily on the user-generated content created by fans, scholarship like that of seminal media theorist Henry Jenkins has investigate how fans textually poach meanings from cultural productions for their own purposes and pleasure.⁷⁵ Since Jenkins' initial work, scholarly attention has broadened as user-generated content via social media has become dramatically ubiquitous. Of particular interest is the ways that traditional and popular journalism have themselves undergone a dramatic shift in how they produce content, with more and more journalists emerging out of a digital moment where content is no longer determined by a top-down editorial process. In fact, certain news stories make news precisely because of their virality—that is, their non-directed and non-coordinated but seemingly contagious spread.

Within this discourse, crafting a narrative that originates with King videotape is highly significant. The tape's iconicity acts as a short-hand in referencing ideas of citizen journalism, participatory democracy and progress, and thus, has been utilized as for future digital media as well. A precursor to the type of mobile technologies that would further democratize the ability to record images, the beating video would eventually provide context for subsequent images of racialized violence recorded by ordinary people: the deaths of Oscar Grant, Eric Garner, Neda

⁷⁴ Eric Deggans, "How the Rodney King video Paved the Way for Today's Citizen Journalism", March 7, 2011, CNN.com
<http://www.cnn.com/2011/OPINION/03/05/deggans.rodney.king.journalism/>

⁷⁵ Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

Agha-Soltan, and many others. Examining recent publication on the Grant case and YouTube, Mary Grace Antony and Ryan J. Thomas' article in *New Media and Society* references King's notoriety and parallels. Indeed, retroactive labeling and calling it the first ever "viral video," both *The Huffington Post* and CBS News recall how the tape constituted an "early version of tape gone viral."⁷⁶ The recent book, *Rodney King and the L.A. Riots*, published in January of 2014 on Rodney King and the riots also labeled the Holliday videotape "an early viral video."⁷⁷ Much of the academic literature in digital media studies examining viral videos has focused on YouTube and the dynamics of viral marketing. In *The YouTube Reader*, authors assess the virality of videos as an avenue for marketing distribution⁷⁸ that signals a shift towards YouTube-generated branding and "word of mouse" global reach.⁷⁹ In contrast, the King tape was picked up by local news affiliates and then broadcast nationally after being picked up by CNN. The mainstream distribution channels were essential to getting the images of police brutality into television living rooms. In distinction, viral video is associated almost purely with digital media, where peer-to-peer sharing of content has dominated, creating more roadways for getting other types of content into the hands of users/viewers.

Clearly, the specifics of how the King beating videotape was distributed are different.

And yet in Stephanie Tripp's "From TVTV to YouTube: A Genealogy of Participatory Practices in Video," the Holliday beating videotape is an inspiration point for WITNESS, an international

⁷⁶ Erin Fuchs, "How a Tape of a Police Beating Went Viral Years Before Anybody Used the Internet," *Business Insider*, April 1, 2015; available at <http://www.businessinsider.com/how-did-the-rodney-king-tape-go-viral-2015-4>

⁷⁷ Jessica Rissman and Darnell Hunt, *Rodney King and the L.A. Riots* (Minneapolis: Abdo Publishing Company, 2014).

⁷⁸ Jean Burgess and Joshua Green, "The Entrepreneurial Vlogger: Participatory Culture Beyond the Professional-Amateur Divide," in *The YouTube Reader* eds. Pelle Snickars and Patrick Vonderau (Stockholm: National Library of Sweden, 2009), 89.

⁷⁹ Paul McDonald, "Digital Discords in the Online Media Economy: Advertising versus Content versus Copyright," in *The YouTube Reader* eds. Pelle Snickars and Patrick Vonderau (Stockholm: National Library of Sweden, 2009), 393.

human rights organization founded in 1992. Using Internet-video sharing technologies, WITNESS trains people to use handheld cameras to document abuse and record messages of resistance and dissent, making the linkage between the King video and user-generated digital video strikingly clear.⁸⁰ Like canon-formation, which is an act of willful fiction that draws upon disparate works to create a center of a discipline and a body of work, the culling of the King beating tape and these other incidents from digital media distribution models tells us something about how the history of digital media is being written and why—a question I take up in my later chapter with further examination of the recent events surrounding the rash of highly publicized incidents involving the deaths of Oscar Grant, Trayvon Martin, Mike Brown, and Eric Garner.

Ultimately, the amateur home videotape of the King beating not only indexed the memories of civil rights televised violence, it actually buttressed television's legitimacy once again, but this time through the discourse of citizen journalism. Beyond the images of violence done to Black bodies, part of this representational cross-imbrication has to do with the ways in which racial violence functions discursively within media industries and imaginaries. In terms of legitimacy, this type of inscription of worth and historical weight serves a purpose. Much like how civil rights and Selma's racial violence served to legitimate a medium in question, the King beating videotape served to re-legitimize a new type of television in its infancy. Thus, the connection between the visual vocabularies of Black bodies being beaten by police officers is present not only in terms of legibility, but also in the way that racial violence serves as a legitimating force for particular forms of media at particular historical moments. The use of racial violence served the television industry in a way that was beneficial and established the medium as a worthy source; as such, racial violence is both a hidden history and one of the

⁸⁰ Stephanie Tripp, "From TVTV to YouTube: A Genealogy of Participatory Practices in Video." *Journal of Film and Video* 64, no. 1 (2012): 11.

constitutive forces behind the very idea of technological, media, and racial progress. And yet the affective and emotional failures of the King tape also reveal how the logics of intimacy, racial violence, and newness operate, in spite of the commodification process. It would be over twenty years later that King would get an opportunity to re-appear on television screens, in a much different context and with drastically divergent results.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE EXGENCIES OF WITNESSING: Rodney King and *Celebrity Rehab*

[T]he entertainment industry and various other culture industries are likewise focused on the creation and manipulation of affects.... The labor is immaterial, even if it is corporeal and affective, in the sense that its products are intangible...

MICHAEL HARDT
“Affective Labor”

I knew I was gonna die. I thought I was dead. I was dead and came back to life,
that's what happened.

RODNEY KING
Celebrity Rehab with Dr. Drew

Rodney King's stunning epigraph is taken from his sudden re-appearance in the public eye during his stint on the Vh1 series, *Celebrity Rehab with Dr. Drew* (2008). When asked on the show to describe his beating, King articulated the event in these staggering terms. His summation elicits both an emotional and visceral response from audiences and, at the same time, immediately calls into question the act of dying. Examining the statement closely reveals that it is preoccupied with temporality: “I knew I was gonna die,” the prescient, “I thought I was dead,” the present, and “I was dead and came back to life,” the past. In all three components of King's statement, he assesses death as something inevitable but also something from which he inevitably returns. Is King alluding to the physical precipice of death or is this resurrection from a symbolic death meant to represent the mental trauma of the beating? Given the poetic and symbolic gestures contained within King's statement, it is clear that his testimony on this reality

television show is more than just a straightforward recollection but a communicative act that beseeches television audiences to reconsider the very epistemological basis of racial violence.

Rodney Glen King III died on June 17, 2012, in Rialto, California. Police found his body at the bottom of his pool and failed to revive him. The autopsy report found that the cause of death was accidental drowning; a combination of alcohol, cocaine, marijuana, and PCP found in his system reacted with a heart condition, resulting in a cardiac arrhythmia. Unable to save himself, King drowned. His actual death was an unexpected end to a life made forever public when his horrific beating at the hands of the LAPD was broadcast nationally, igniting the 1992 Los Angeles riots. His death reminds us of what Cathy Caruth identifies as the two stories involved in any remembrance of traumatic violence: “the story of the unbearable nature of an event and the story of the unbearable nature of its survival.”¹ King’s own words described the racial violence he endured as well as its haunting aftermath, and through his televised narration, viewers entered this ghostly realm with him. In Felman and Laub’s *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History*, they assert that a testimonial account is a performance intent on carrying forth memories by conveying a person’s engagement between consciousness and history.² This chapter begins with the account King offered on *Celebrity Rehab* in order to highlight the constellation of emotions and questions mediating the unexpected relationship between witnessing and epistemology. King’s notoriety was forever rooted in his beating by police officers in March of 1991 and the subsequent riots in 1992, but his reappearance in the public sphere in 2008 made a different kind of violence enacted upon him visible—the commodification of his beating and of his very identity. When King said, “I knew I

¹ Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 2010), 7.

² Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (UK: Taylor & Francis, 1992).

was going to die,” he referenced his own knowledge of the country’s long history of racial violence and illuminated a type of unseen violence and slow death³ that was made apparent to audiences through reality TV. Though the physical impact of the beating may have healed, King’s death re-inscribed and made visible the psychic scars and trauma that he carried with him as a result of the incident, manifested through his long struggle with and eventual defeat by addiction.

When season two of *Celebrity Rehab with Dr. Drew* premiered in October 2008, audiences were riveted by the unflinching depictions of addicted celebrities attempting to become sober. Battling addictions to alcohol, cocaine, marijuana, heroin, painkillers, and opiates, the program follows participants through the hellish throes of withdrawal and depression, the emotional volatility and anguish of group therapy, and finally (in some cases) to the eventual triumph of recovery. The philanthropic mission of the show, led by addiction specialist, Dr. Drew Pinsky,⁴ with his coterie of therapists, counselors, and staff, is to provide the tools to help celebrities self-manage their addictive behaviors, all the while operating under the voyeuristic gaze of the camera. This type of management and formation of subjects has been the focus of reality television media studies scholars such as Laurie Ouellette and James Hay. In their book, *Better Living Through Reality TV*, the authors argue that reality television does not distract “passive” audiences from participating in democracy and public life. Rather, reality television acts pedagogically— translating sociopolitical ideologies and circulating resources, scripts, and

³ The term “slow death” has typically been used within environmental justice scholarship. Rob Nixon writes that “slow violence” is a type of gradual destruction that is “typically managed through powerful strategies of distancing” that depend on “transnational corporate distance and...on both the slow emergence of morbidity and on legal procrastination” (2011, 449). I am indebted to Nixon, but use the term for my own purposes to draw out the politics of temporality within a public paradigm of suffering. See Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011).

⁴ I will refer to him hereafter as Dr. Drew, in keeping with the show's conventions.

instructions for citizenship.⁵ Characterizing the genre as one that espouses self-governing principles, Brenda Weber posits that this type of “makeover TV” enacts neoliberal ideologies and advances the privatization of the social service network. In other words, using shows like *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, *Extreme Home Makeover*, *The Dog Whisperer*, and others of their ilk as examples of makeover reality television, scholars have demonstrated that by employing a cadre of flashy professionals and resources to “makeover” private citizens, reality television shows audiences that private care of the self is not only possible but also preferable and necessary for good citizenry.⁶ Whether the targets for rehabilitation are dilapidated houses, haplessly unstylish straight men, or unruly pups in need of a human pack leader, these reality television shows implicitly uphold an ethic of self-care through an edict of privatization—emphasizing the individual rather than the structural, the private over the public. This shift has been a decades-long reversal of earlier narratives of the state-as-public-good that previously characterized America’s political center.

To fully understand how reality television replaces state care, one must investigate its previous forms. Dominant models within the US can be traced back to Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal and, more pertinent to this analysis, to John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson’s Great Society reforms. To be sure, the radical shift from an implementation of President Lyndon B. Johnson’s Great Society reforms in the mid-1960s, which were a set of domestic policies meant to eradicate racism and poverty, to the present is dramatic. Passed through a liberal Democratic house, these programs funded public education, access to healthcare, social security, as well as established national endowments for the arts, public broadcast, and environmental

⁵ Laurie Ouellette and James Hay, *Better Living Through Reality TV: Television and Post-Welfare Citizenship* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008).

⁶ Brenda Weber, *Makeover TV: Selfhood, Citizenship, and Celebrity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009).

protections legislation. As George Lipsitz asserts, since 1973, the US has undergone a huge change: “a combination of deindustrialization, economic restructuring, neoconservative politics, austerity economics” has transformed the US from a market economy into a privatized market society (in which every personal relation is permeated by commodity relations).⁷ Neoliberalism as a social phenomenon has largely been viewed as a class-based ideology that attacks the welfare state in advanced liberal countries. For David Harvey, the neoliberal state is characterized as an “institutional framework characterized by private property rights, individual liberty, free markets and free trade.”⁸ In the US history of neoliberalism, Lisa Duggan’s characterizes it as the redistribution of resources from the ground up and the reconceiving of the political flows of capital and aforementioned support that characterized American society.⁹ By the 1990s, welfare reform, fights to repeal affirmative action, the outsourcing of state powers and services, downsizing of the public sector, with an emphasis on consumer choice and a heightened expectation of personal responsibility cumulated in the undoing of a particular vision of American state social care. It was also at this time that reality television as a genre became popular—for reasons that I discuss later in more detail.

Celebrity Rehab’s goal of rehabilitation and its focus on personal, individuated addiction (as exemplified by the show’s emphasis on famous individuals) rather than the culture of addiction fits squarely within the ideological conventions associated with the reality television genre. But what happens to this neoliberal ideology when it encounters a participant like Rodney King, whose beating by four police officers served as the linchpin for the 1992 Los Angeles

⁷ George Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006), 84.

⁸ David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2005), 2.

⁹ Lisa Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality?: Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2012).

riots? Duggan reminds us that “neoliberalism was constructed in and through cultural and identity politics,”¹⁰ even though a discourse that now disavows the significance of race would suggest otherwise. David Theo Goldberg argues that racial neoliberalism is “marked first and foremost, by an active suppression of ‘race’ as a legitimate topic of term of public discourse and public policy.”¹¹ This dramatic shift, Goldberg notes, marks the distinction between antiracist politics and antiracialism. Whereas an antiracist politics “requires historical memory, recalling the conditions of racial degradation and relating contemporary to historical and local to global conditions... antiracialism suggests forgetting, getting over, moving on, wiping away the terms of reference.”¹² As Omi and Winant summarize, neoliberalism “deliberately fostered neglect of issues of race. It has, in effect, buried race as a significant dimension of its politics.”¹³

Rodney King’s presence was a refutation of this logic. His presence punctured and dismantled the present public rhetorics of “care” ostensibly provided by the state and privatized actors because he embodies the very physical and psychic ways that the state-sanctioned violence continues to effect racialized citizen bodies. In this way, King’s notoriety served as both an inescapable reminder and a cultural and historical touchstone of state-sanctioned racial violence. While *Celebrity Rehab*’s participants vary in registers of fame—from porn star Mary Carey, to *American Idol* reject Jessica Sierra, to Guns’n’Roses drummer Steven Adler, to name but a few—Rodney King’s appearance on the show as a season 2 participant simultaneously disrupted reality TV’s neoliberal mandate and made disturbingly visible the nexus of state-

¹⁰ Ibid., 3.

¹¹ Darrel Enck-Wanzer, “Barack Obama, the Tea Party, and the Threat of Race: On Racial Neoliberalism and Born Again Racism,” *Communication, Culture & Critique* 4, no. 1 (2011): 24.

¹² David Theo Goldberg, *The Threat of Race: Reflections on Racial Neoliberalism* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 21.

¹³ Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 1994), 152.

sponsored brutality, marginalized communities, and the psychic violence of racial terror. King himself did not necessarily articulate a critique per se of the ravages of institutional racism, but he did use the show as an opportunity to voice his own testimony and, by sifting through his painful memories, inform a serious revision of his beating, the 1992 riots, cultural memory, and racial violence itself. Ultimately, I contend that King's reemergence in the public sphere as a *Celebrity Rehab* participant not only ruptured the post-racial and neoliberal facets of the reality television genre, but also revealed the hidden linkages between racial violence and television's industrial and imagined worlds.

Reality Television and the Discourses of Quality and Historical Value

To fully understand the implications of King's appearance on *Celebrity Rehab*, a brief history of the reality television genre and its production circumstances is necessary. Since the mid-1990s, reality television has been popularized as a television genre and is now commonplace in primetime lineups. Originally conceived as fiscal strategy and a solution to the 1988 writer's strike—a twenty-two-week event that essentially halted scripted television production to a standstill—reality television quickly proliferated and then became a television staple in America and abroad. The economic impetus of the genre indicates the broader economic restructuring of American television in the late 1980s. With the proliferation of cable, the rise of niche marketing, and thus, smaller advertising shares as well as the proliferation of the VCR, reality television was pivotal in alleviating some of the financial pressure from the sphere of production.¹⁴ Reality television shows were often cheap to produce because they employed non-actors, did not require writers, and unlike scripted television, often did not involve elaborate sets. The shows embraced low-end production values, such as handheld cameras and the use of

¹⁴ Chad Raphael, "Political Economy of Reali-TV," *Jump Cut* (1997): 102–109.

available lighting, and relied on spontaneity rather than scripted action. These direct cinema techniques and modes of production were a direct result of the technological advancements of television production and the financial exigencies of the industry. The low-end modes of production also combined with feminized gender discourses to produce a public image of low social value yet high popularity and ratings yield.¹⁵

Laura Grindstaff's *The Money Shot: Trash, Class, and the Making of TV Talk Shows* examines the public discourse surrounding daytime talk shows—a discourse that dovetails in many ways with that surrounding reality television. Arising from the same industrial context and period as reality television, daytime talk shows appeared on channel lineups in the 1990s and were often labeled as “trashy.” Such a designation, however, as Grindstaff points out, often points less to actual socioeconomic status than to a show’s performative dimensions, how its cultural capital is expressed and received. Likewise, reality television’s denigrated status was a result of the mixture of production circumstances, product placement, casting practices that often sought out over-the-top personalities for ratings, and the gendered and classed discourses associated with the genre. In sum, reality television suffered from a crisis in public image as the worst that television had to offer, an apogee of the medium’s least socially redeeming values.

It was precisely this context, however, that made King’s presence on *Celebrity Rehab* particularly uncanny. The types of television genres that have previously tackled issues like state-sanctioned racial violence so overtly have often been news programs or primetime drama shows—programming associated discursively with “quality television.” Quality television is a descriptive term that has been popularly defined by broadcasting critics and scholars as television programming that possesses a level of “reflexivity” about television and its genres, and represents a “type of authenticity” and cultural critique that is valuable and incisive. These types

¹⁵ Ibid.

of cultural evaluations apply distinctly to fictional programming though non-fictional quality television has been largely associated with documentaries or noncommercial programming. In *MTM: Quality Television*, Jane Feuer, Paul Kerr, and Tise Vahimagi suggest that “quality television” has been defined differently by television critics and industry professionals. Whereas critics have concentrated on the textual aspects of the text (auteurship, creative innovation, narrative complexity, and high production values), industry assesses “quality” using the metric of a show’s demographics, specifically, how much of the desired age 18–49 demographic is watching.¹⁶ But while the conventions and definitions surrounding quality television are subjectively and contingently defined, the prestige and value produced by this type of labeling is far-reaching. Reality television is exceedingly popular with the 18–49 demographic, yet still suffers from a denigrated status, thus revealing the ambiguities of what counts as “quality television.”¹⁷ Despite a gain in critical attention amongst scholars and some recognition from the award ceremonies, like the Primetime Emmy’s, which celebrate and propagate the industry, reality television is very rarely associated with quality television despite its popularity with audiences. But this is what made King’s appearance so significant: as a figure inextricably associated with racial politics, state-sanctioned racial violence, and the critical potentials of media technology, King imparted a rarified historical and cultural value to *Celebrity Rehab* and, in turn to reality television in general, through his very presence.

Prior to King’s appearance, Vh1’s reality television lineup in the mid-2000s included some of the most notable programming from that era. Vh1 has successfully branded itself as a major player in the “celeb-reality” arena, where shows like *Celebrity Fit Club*, *I Love Money*,

¹⁶Jane Feuer, Paul Kerr, and Tise Vahimagi, *MTM: “Quality Television”* (London: British Film Institute Publishing, 1984).

¹⁷ For a more detailed look into debates on quality television, see Jason Mittell’s *Genre and Television: From Cop Shows to Cartoons in American Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

The Surreal Life and other such irreverent shows treat floundering celebrities and reality television personalities and their debasement as comedic entertainment. Especially derided and loved was the popular *Flavor of Love* and its spinoff, *I Love New York*. Emblematic of Vh1's programming, these shows' antics included drunken hook-ups, silly stunts, and manufactured contests that allowed contestants to compete for the affections of Public Enemy's Flavor Flav or Tiffany "New York" Pollard, respectively. Flavor Flav is of particular note given his route to fame as a member of the seminal and lauded hip-hop group, Public Enemy. Known for their culturally conscious hip-hop, the group often critiqued systems of power including white supremacy and the criminalization of black men in their music, while projecting an image of black militancy. While Flavor Flav was often the "hype-man" who provided comedic relief to the otherwise intellectually serious group, it was still disconcerting and surprising to see Flav's reinvention as a reality television figure. Though *Flavor of Love* was immensely popular, the show and Flavor Flav himself were criticized for enacting insidious black stereotypes. Indeed, a number of cultural critics deemed the show to be modern-day minstrelsy and a parade of demeaning black stereotypes for public consumption.¹⁸ *Flavor of Love* became a flashpoint in debates over how certain kinds of representational violence in the reality television world exist and do harm.

It is within this channel lineup that Rodney King appeared. A historical figure inextricably linked with issues such as racism, infrastructural critique, politics, and police brutality, the figure of King seemed oddly incongruous with Vh1's identity.¹⁹ As an

¹⁸ See Teresa Wiltz, "Is 'Flavor of Love' Just Trashy TV or Demeaning Minstrelsy?," *Seattle Times*, November 8, 2006; or Jennifer L. Pozner's *Reality Bites Back: The Troubling Truth about Guilty Pleasure TV* (Berkeley, CA: Seal, 2010).

¹⁹ Interestingly enough, Public Enemy would actually respond to the 1992 riots and King's beating in their 1992 song, "Hazy Shade of a Criminal." The video includes footage of the riots, alongside imagery depicting corrupt politicians and police shooting things, with Chuck

entertainment brand, Vh1 was clearly cognizant of his notoriety and what his presence on the show signified. In a recap article on Vh1's blog about *Celebrity Rehab 2*, blogger and cultural critic Rich Juzwiak interviewed Dr. Drew about the episode in which King recounted his beating:

Juzwiak: I think that scene is the most moving that *Celebrity Rehab* has ever offered.... I think what was most profound to me about that scene was the chance to watch history play from the inside out.

Dr. Drew: It's almost poetic. Greater minds than mine need to write about it. I'm just the doctor that listened to the story. But the culture commenting on culture commenting on history...here we are on this little reality show with Rodney King. When everyone else is gone, his name will be in the history books. And really, this was his Barbara Walters interview, you know? I don't think he really had a chance to do it before. It sounds like he's gone over it in pretty great detail. It was a fairly comfortable conversation for him, in terms of him owning the story. But I've never seen him do this on television before.²⁰

Unquestionably, Juzwiak, Vh1, and Dr. Drew knew that King's testimony would be a valuable historical commodity. It is evident that the historicity of King's appearance is commodity, but importantly one that must exist in relationship to the visibility television can provide. King's appearance might be considered what Ouellette has called "do-good television," which has enabled media outlets to "cash in on marketing trends such as 'citizen branding' and corporate social responsibility (CSR)... and exploit what business historian David Vogel calls the burgeoning 'market for virtue.'"²¹ Only two years after King's appearance on *Celebrity Rehab*,

D questioning "what's criminal?" as the repetitive hook for the song. Though the song does not reference King by name, it offers a clear critique of his beating and the systems of oppression and violence at work.

²⁰ Since the writing of this chapter, the Vh1 blog has been taken down. However, it is archived on Vh1's Facebook account in their notes section. Vh1 Facebook Page, "Examining Rehab 2 With Dr. Drew- Episode 3." <https://www.facebook.com/notes/vh1/examining-rehab-2-with-dr-drew-episode-3/38325181611/>

²¹ David Vogel, *The Market for Virtue: The Potential and Limits of Corporate Social Responsibility* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institute Press, 2005), cited in Laurie Ouellette, "Reality TV Gives Back: On the Civic Functions of Reality Entertainment," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 38, no. 2 (2010): 69.

Ouellette notes that MTV—which, like Vh1, is owned by Viacom—announced its intention to “replace trivial reality entertainment with issue-oriented and civic minded material.”²² Thus, Dr. Drew’s delineation of “culture commenting on culture commenting on history” was at once a marker of the show’s own self-reflexivity on the dialectics of culture and a branding technique.

Evidence of King’s unique status on the show was also affirmed in promotional materials found on Vh1’s website.²³ In marked contrast to descriptions of “Model/Actress” or “Celebrity Offspring” featured in the online cast bios for other participants of King’s season, the website categorized King uniquely as a “Historical Figure” (see Figure 6, 7, and 8).



Figure 6: Screenshot of *Celebrity Rehab* Season 3 cast member, Tawny Kitaen’s Vh1 biography. The show’s website categorizes her as a “Model/Actress.”
Source: Vh1 Website Cast Bio {dead link}

²² Ibid.

²³ Ouellette’s article also uses the example of the Vh1 show *Charm School* as illustrative of such civic-minded branding. She discusses the show’s emphasis on performing community service as well as its allusions to Barack Obama’s campaign. As she puts it, “tellingly, Charm School’s off-screen male narrator not only sounds a lot like Obama, he also punctuates the ongoing question of whether the show can transform party girls into ‘model citizens’ with the slogan, ‘Yes, we can’” (“The Civic Function of Reality Television,” 69).



Sean Stewart

Celebrity Offspring

Born: September 1, 1980

Age: 27

" Father is rocker Rod Stewart

" Mother is former model Alana Hamilton

" He's the only celebrity offspring featured on the show this season

" Sean is unmarried, but was engaged to Caleigh Peters for a few days in 2007. He threw her out days after their engagement was announced and they remain in an unhealthy on again, off again relationship.

Figure 7: Screenshot of *Celebrity Rehab* Season 3 cast member, Sean Stewart's Vh1 biography.

The show's website categorizes him as a "Celebrity Offspring."

Source: Vh1 Website Cast Bio {dead link}



Rodney King

Historical Figure

Age: 43

"Rodney King lives in Rialto, CA and is bankrupt

"Known for the 1991 beating by Los Angeles police which was caught on videotape, and was played all over the world

"The police officers' acquittal in April 1992 triggered the 'L.A. Riots' which set the city on fire with widespread looting, violence and deaths

Figure 8: Screenshot of *Celebrity Rehab* cast member Rodney King's biography, which is clearly distinguishes from his other cast mates. The Vh1 website categorizes him as a "Historical Figure."

Source: Vh1 Website Cast Bio {dead link}

Indeed, King's difference was further emphasized when most of his cast mates mistook him for a professional athlete or an actor from the movie *Boyz N The Hood*, rather than a figure enmeshed within a historical narrative of race relations in the US. The cast's misreading of King provided a fascinating glimpse into the expectations the participants themselves had of their relative status within the entertainment industry, reality TV, and channel branding.

King's historicity was further punctuated through the formalistic and aesthetic elements used to introduce him. *Celebrity Rehab*'s opening credit sequence has often relied on montages of films, concerts, or public appearances of the show's eponymous celebrities in order to establish their identity and fame. Channeling Gerard Genette, media scholar Jonathan Gray calls these references "paratexts," a variety of material that surround and inform a text's meaning as

well as audience expectation.²⁴ In this instance, these paratexts are texts in and of themselves as well as intertextual media references that provide audiences with a context to understand both the participants' heights of success and their subsequent descent into addiction. These clips tend to be within a similar genre of media text: high-quality footage of sold-out concerts in the case of Guns n' Roses drummer Steven Adler, footage of glamorous photo shoots with model Amber Smith, and network TV footage from *American Idol* to showcase the vocal allure of singer Nikki McKibbin. Viewers see all of these images juxtaposed with the effects of the drug-induced stroke on Adler's only partially operational face, the bursting pill cases of Smith's opiate addiction, and the decrepitude of McKibbin's alcohol abuse. This subsequent footage is typically shot on mobile phone video and is of low visual quality, which visually emphasizes and mirrors these stars' descent. Part of the dramatic tension of these introductory montages is to underscore the devastating effects drugs and alcohol have had on once-illustrious careers through an aesthetic narrative effected through production quality and media form.

In marked contrast to the other participants' introductions, King's montage begins with the grainy, handheld, George Holiday home video that captured King's brutal beating, paired with headline news coverage of the verdict exonerating the police officers, the chaotic and fiery violence of the 1992 Los Angeles riots, and finally, King's famous stuttering plea: "Can we—can we all get along? Can we—can we, all just get along?" King's particular form of celebrity differed from that of the other contestants, whose recognition generally linked to industry accolades, notoriety, accomplishment or talent. As King's introductory montage continues, he describes himself as "just a down-to-earth guy," reinforcing the notion that his was not a story of fame and ego gone awry, but of violent circumstances that forcibly made him into a reluctant

²⁴ Jonathan Gray, *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Paratexts* (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 6.

public figure. Indeed, when the scene switches to footage of a present-day King, it is apparent that his alcoholism is not a mere stint for publicity to boost an ailing career—a subtext that is thrown into sharp relief as other *Celebrity Rehab* participants consistently reminisce about their fame. King’s celebrity is distinct, one borne from a manufactured set of circumstances: from the modern trajectory of police brutality in collision with the new technology of camcorder video as well as from the long history of racial terror in the US.

Not a typical reality television contestant, King’s fame was as a type of pseudo-celebrity, based in the often-ignored and under prosecuted violent experiences of American life for Black and Brown people within mainstream media. He qualified in many ways as what Daniel Boorstein calls the human pseudoevent, in which “the celebrity is a person who is known for his well-knownness.”²⁵ But unlike most people classified as human pseudoevents—a term that more often refers to manufactured celebrities like Paris Hilton or Kim Kardashian whose fame comes from being famous—King’s accidental celebrity was not something he actively sought.²⁶ In this way, he upset the classification and expectations of the reality television genre, particularly those expectations specific to Vh1’s branding. And Vh1 was quick to recognize and capitalize upon this: King’s historical identity was consistently touted by Vh1’s promotional materials and by Dr. Drew, the creator and executive producer of the show. In this way, King served to rehabilitate the devalued genre of reality TV itself, as well as Vh1’s specific standing. Similar to the televisual legacy instantiated by civil rights footage,²⁷ Vh1 utilized King’s status to advance the channel’s own claims to quality and cultural worth.

²⁵ Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America* (New York: Vintage, 2012), 57.

²⁶ Laura Grindstaff, *The Money Shot: Trash, Class, and the Making of TV Talk Shows* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 165.

²⁷ See chapter 2 for a detailed analysis of civil rights and television’s relationship.

In one particularly stunning moment, King is shown utterly inebriated, barely able to put together coherent sentences. Nonetheless, he utters a statement that captures the tragic historicity of his very identity. He states that he is not your average celebrity, that he is woefully “stuck in time.” For King, this issue of history and being “stuck in time” is crucial and crucially interrelated. Indeed, media scholar Marita Sturken writes, “the videotape of the Rodney King beating is an image that in itself created history.... This brutal beating of a black man by white police officers... came to represent all race relations in the 1990s... [it signified] the relentless violence of the present.”²⁸ The altered exhibition of this videotape in the court trials of Stacy Koon, Laurence Powell, Theodore Briseno, and Timothy Wind, the police officers charged with the beating, proved to be crucial in exonerating them of culpability. By exhibiting the tape in a series of stills rather than as a recording of live action, the defense effectively changed the videotape’s formalistic qualities, evacuating it of its malicious nature and greatly altering its meaning. As Sturken describes:

...the stills of the King video reduced the events to isolated gesture; blows became hands raised in anticipation, frozen postures without dynamic violence...it rescripted Rodney King as the agent of his interaction with the police rather than object of brutal and unreasonable force... an image of Rodney King “in complete control” of the situation, in the words of one juror.²⁹

What Sturken’s analysis did not anticipate was that King himself, like a series of frozen images, would also be frozen in time, forced to relive the beating and its psychic trauma through his personal addiction. King’s severe alcoholism is put on full display as the show’s introductory montage continues. Employed as a part-time tow truck driver for some childhood friends, King is shown drunk on the job, vomiting out the side window of the truck, and most disturbingly, collapsing in front of the tires of a car he is supposed to be impounding. Too drunk to stand,

²⁸ Marita Sturken, *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 38–39.

²⁹ Sturken, *Tangled Memories*, 39–40.

King's head comes precariously close to being crushed. He goes on to state in an interview, immediately after downing a Heineken, "If I can wake up to a beer, I'm in a good life... If you haven't downed a beer at 11 o'clock, you are not human."

Part makeover show and part competition show, *Celebrity Rehab* both adheres to and violates the expectations of these two sub-genres within reality television. As Ouellette and Hay specify, makeover TV performs the "business of social work by identifying addiction as the problem, screening and evaluating cases, documenting their severity, interviewing witnesses, and consulting doctors and other professionals."³⁰ And *Celebrity Rehab* does just this, putting the contestants' addictions on display, while simultaneously providing them with the privatized social service meant to assist them. The nature of the show's competition, however, is distinct, in that the contestants are clearly not competing against each other. Rather, they are locked in a deadly contest with their own addiction, a competition that extends far beyond the diegetic world of reality television. While other competition shows in the genre build tension in order to provide a sense of closure by the end of the series, *Celebrity Rehab* forecloses that possibility because of the very nature of addiction: to be addicted is a perpetual, never-ending addiction. In this analogous way, King's "stuck in time" comment mirrors the temporal realities of addiction, simultaneously and always re-living the addiction as well as the violence of his brutal and traumatic beating. Hard as the show runners might try, there is no easy resolution for the cameras or the audience within the show.

Critiques of Dr. Drew and the show have largely centered on the collapse between clinical observation and media commodification and exploitation. Dr. Drew's justification for showcasing these celebrities' addictions has been to posit that media itself is a vehicle for

³⁰ Laurie Ouellette and James Hay, *Better Living Through Reality TV: Television and Post-Welfare Citizenship* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008), 71.

education in the treatment of addiction, a notion that some media scholars can agree upon. However, the show has received criticism for deliberately putting the patients in hostile situations in order to acquire results and ratings. As Chris Norris writes in his *New York Times* article about *Celebrity Rehab*, “Hitting Bottom”:

Jeffrey Foote, a clinical psychologist who specializes in the treatment of substance abuse, points out that ‘the velvet-glove confrontational stuff Pinsky does is what works for TV, but it’s not what works for patients.’ In fact, the Web site for Foote’s Center for Motivation and Change Web site uses a clip from “Celebrity Rehab” to demonstrate poor techniques. “The dramatic confrontations seen on the show are actually more likely to drive less-severe substance abusers, who are by far the majority, away from seeking treatment.”³¹

King himself registered this concern in his autobiography, *A Riot Within*: “Let’s face it, if you need to be in front of millions of viewers with a camera crew in your face every minute of the day, you’ve got your priorities for getting sober pretty screwed up.”³² King ultimately decided to do the show for financial reasons as well as his inability to stay sober in the Alcoholics Anonymous program. What such criticisms highlight is the affective domination inherent to the makeover show genre, despite the fact the participants in *Celebrity Rehab* willingly subject themselves to this hyper-mediated environment as part of their treatment. King acknowledged this conundrum and Dr. Drew’s complicit role in the process by sharing an anecdote when he first arrived to the recovery center:

He tipped off his satisfaction with us by smiling, but only very slightly. And if you weren’t looking right at him at that very second, you would miss it. I caught it when I grabbed a hold of Jeff’s wheelchair, but that’s because I was looking right at him, behaving like a student who wants the teacher to approve of what he’s doing. It’s a very insecure side of me, but any sign of approval can keep me going for days. Shine that apple— here, Teach.³³

³¹ Chris Norris. “Hitting Bottom,” *The New York Times*, December 30, 2009. Accessed April 18, 2010. <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/01/03/magazine/03Pinsky-t.html?pagewanted=all>

³² Rodney King and Lawrence J. Spagnola, *The Riot Within: My Journey from Rebellion to Redemption* (New York: HarperOne, 2012), 190.

³³ King and Spagnola, *Riot Within*, 197.

Given King's relationship to Dr. Drew and the show's conventions, King's reluctance to revisit his memories of March 3, 1991, the night of his beating, is explicitly addressed for only two episodes. In the third episode of the season, Dr. Drew's voiceover narration details King's avoidance of discussing the beating. Shelly, one of the resident techs, is the first to hear of any reference of that night when King tells her that he is practicing boxing maneuvers just in case he will box Powell, one of the police officers involved in the beating, in a sponsored match for money. As he tells her with a smile that he has "no grudge," Shelly's confusion and skepticism mirrors the audiences. But later, when Dr. Drew asks King to confront his past and speak of the infamous beating, it is obvious that the trauma of that night still haunts him. At the mere mention of the beating, King gaze becomes distant, as if his memories rush in to overwhelm him, testifying to its perpetual presentness for him. Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience* stresses how trauma cannot be located in a "single place or time"; instead, trauma becomes a reiterative event through which the wounding of the initial trauma repeats itself, constituting a double wounding "as a result of an experience that finds no resolution within the victim's mental schema."³⁴ For King, this reiterativeness is evident in the way that he describes the beating: "Oh, it's always with me," King confesses, "but I don't bring it up unless its ...," his voice trails off. King's personal trauma is clear in this scene. But for both King and the viewers, the beating is a cultural touchstone that remains relevant with time. Indeed, the beating's significance has arguably found renewed, if tragic, relevance given the recent media visibility of the murders of Oscar Grant, Mike Brown, Trayvon Martin, Tamir Rice, Eric Garner, Walter Scott, and Sandra Bland. With new mobile cell phone technologies democratizing the captured video, the King beating has reemerged at the forefront of discussions of American race relations and their

³⁴ Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 9.

apparent failure to change over time. In a sense, the King beating and its significance continue to play on a reiterative temporal loop as the discourses of media technology and progress come face to face with persistent and enduring state-sanctioned racial violence.

In his autobiography, King writes, “I still didn’t want to talk about the beating, but Dr. Drew was pretty determined to draw it out of me. He said he couldn’t believe that it wasn’t still burning inside me. I told that it was, but I didn’t really care to go in there and stir it up much. He said this was my chance to tell him about it and that he would really like me to open up if I could. I felt the conflict within me, but that was when I asked myself, ‘What am I doing on this show if I’m not willing to listen to the doctor?’ So what the hell, I started telling him about that night as honestly and completely as I could.”³⁵ Dr. Drew’s encouragement of King’s disclosure stems from a medical motivation for dealing with trauma and addiction as much as it does from television genre expectations. In Grindstaff’s ethnographic study of the production process of daytime talk shows, she calls this type of emotional expectation and encouragement, “fluffing.” Using porn industry terms, she labels the moment of confrontation or an outburst of fierce emotion—the shot that television producers of these daytime talk shows are clearly seeking to provoke—as the “money shot.” Her work reveals the crucial role of particular production assistants and producers in procuring these money shots. The preparation for this type of emotional manipulation typically involves asking prodding questions, encouraging the participants to relive moments of great emotional intensity in order to set up an emotional climax that will be too explosive and spontaneous to be read as acting or inauthentic. While Grindstaff’s

³⁵ King and Spagnola, *Riot Within*, 203.

sexualized metaphor may be more fitting to the genre of daytime talk TV, its usage indexes how the realms of consumer capitalism involve the affective labor of its participants.³⁶

Tracing the shift from an industrialized production towards a networked, postindustrial society dominated by informational exchange, Michael Hardt posits that labor shifted from the production of material goods towards the immaterial as the dominant form of labor. Indeed, Hardt's notion of affective labor posits that in this new informational economy, the affective realm is a primary site for immaterial labor—with the entertainment industry focused “on the creation and manipulation of affect. This labour is immaterial, even if it is corporeal and affective, in the sense that its products are intangible, a feeling of ease, well-being, satisfaction, excitement, or passion.”³⁷ Thus, knowledge, information, affect, and communication are not only products, but according to Hardt, these affective labors were now also the highest valued labor. As he states, “where production of the soul is concerned, as Musil might say, we should no longer look to the soil and organic development, not to the factory and mechanical development, but rather to today's dominant economic forms, that is to production defined by a combination of cybernetics and affect.”³⁸

While the entertainment industry and television in particular is known to be a business dominated by capital interests, Hardt's emphasis on the production of affect as the most valuable labor shifts the critical frames of media studies towards a more nuanced understanding of how audience reception and political economy are intertwined in other ways. As Grindstaff's study makes apparent, the materialist turn towards production studies and the immaterial affective labor practices of industry are inextricably linked, particularly when we consider the genre of

³⁶ Laura Grindstaff, *The Money Shot: Trash, Class, and the Making of TV Talk Shows*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

³⁷ Michael Hardt, “Affective Labor,” *Boundary 2*, 26, no. 2 (Summer 1999): 96.

³⁸ Hardt, “Affective Labor,” 97.

reality television. Building on the previous chapters insights regarding the monetization of emotion in my first chapter wherein the commoditized self and feeling is sold as product and my second chapter's emphasis on legitimacy's production through racial violence, it is clear that King's affective labor on *Celebrity Rehab* was part of a larger pattern and made visible the way in which racial violence is monetized, commodified, and utilized within media industries. In this particular instance, racial violence was made to function as a tool of legitimation for reality television and Vh1 specifically.

Within the show itself, it is never explicitly acknowledged but strikingly clear that Rodney King knows that this affective labor is part of what he's expected to deliver. His very presence necessitates a discussion of his history, whether he wants to discuss it or not. So, there is an air of inevitability when, in a one-on-one interview with Dr. Drew, away from the other patients and staff, King finally begins to describes the fateful night. He provides the personal details and context often omitted from official narratives of the night: describing the celebratory mood he was in because he had landed his old construction job back, how he had brought along two of his friends that night, that drinks were on him at the bar, and that he had been overindulging in alcohol. He recounts that he was then, twenty-five years old, and assesses it as the strongest point in his life. Littered throughout his account are personal details—for example, that King and his friends had decided to take a ride to the dam where King's father used to take him fishing—that give texture to the event in an unprecedented way.

He continues his account fluidly: he and his friends are “riding, listening to music” when the Highway Patrol attempts to pull them over. King mentions that post-beating, he told the press that he did not see the highway patrol, but here, he admits that he did see them, but that “I didn't want to stop since I was on parole for a robbery conviction, so I kept running.” King's

willingness to admit the false narrative that he spun to the press indicates that historical distance has enabled him to gain clarity and a form of control over his own story that was impossible during the height of media coverage. This statement is significant for its clear revision of his own story but also indicates that the format of the one-on-one interview and the consistent cameras around King perhaps fostered an environment and provided an opportunity in which he finally felt able to divulge the nuances of his thought process rather than just recount the facts of the night. But to be sure, the prolonged intensity of reality television cameras captured more of his retelling than any other cultural text in public circulation.

This display of interiority and storytelling by King continues when he provides more reasoning behind his evasive driving: “I didn’t want to slow down because I already knew that there was a beating there if I stopped.” When Dr. Drew pauses and repeats with a tentative disbelief, “You already knew that they were gonna...?” King explains, “Like I said, I was raised up in the ‘70s, the sight I used to see, the way that the sheriffs used to put it down on the guys in Altadena, it wasn’t nothing nice.” When Dr. Drew interjects, “So, you figured if they pulled you out of the car, that that’s what was going to happen,” King nods his head emphatically, replying, “No, that was what was going to happen. I already knew the routine; I’ve seen it too many times.” King’s foretelling of the future, based on knowledge of “how the police put it down in Altadena” as he phrases it, indicates how King, in a sense, witnesses his own beating before its actual occurrence; his certainty (“that was what was going to happen”) marks the profound psychic violence that predates King’s bodily injury and alludes to the historical continuities and ubiquity of violence done to black bodies. Furthermore, his observational critique punctures the post-racial, neoliberal worldview that makeover reality television often creates and advocates as ideal.

As discussed previously, what these shows reflect is a larger cultural, political, and societal shift towards the elimination of the social safety net of public infrastructure. Indeed, the TV makeover “participates in the projects of citizenship, where the neoliberal mandate for care of the self in the service of the market fuses with values of a mythic, egalitarian America,” creating what Weber dubs “Makeover Nation.” In other words, these makeovers construct a good citizen who participates in consumer culture in order to transform into “themselves—only better!”³⁹ This participation signals a definition of citizenship hinged upon consumerism. Within these makeover narratives, the makeover subjects who have committed “fashion felonies against society,” for example, deserve restricted citizenship rights until they are corrected and transformed into an American normative racial and class legibility (read: white and middle-class). In addition, the post-makeover subject is always constructed as effusively thankful and more often than not, they are portrayed afterwards as newly and profoundly empowered. This dress-for-success logic, where modes of consumerism equate to a better self, more confidence, a better job, and happiness, embraces the logic of the American Dream. While central to American’s conception of self, this distinctly American ideology of meritocracy, a “pull yourself-up by the bootstraps” sense of accomplishment, is only viable if it disregards the realities of structural racism and patriarchy. Reality television, as a reflection of this ideology, is a symptom of the cultural ubiquity of these types of relationships. Too, as symptom that manifests into something greater, the genre’s forwarding of these values and ways of being perpetuate these ideals, subtly convincing audiences of the normalization of these values.

If the gains of the civil rights movement and the Great Society reforms sought both to acknowledge the structuring power of racism and gender discrimination and to eradicate

³⁹ Brenda R. Weber, *Makeover TV: Selfhood, Citizenship, and Celebrity*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009).

inequality, the countermovement that followed sought to nullify and reverse its gains. In truth, Lipsitz's observation is all too accurate when he states that the most "visible, vital and influential" social movement of the past century is not in fact, the civil rights movement of the 1960s, but rather the social movement that mobilized against it.⁴⁰ The well-organized and successful, conservative, often white movement of the 1970s, '80s, and '90s rolled back affirmative action, fought against school desegregation and enforcement of fair housing laws, and eradicated social welfare programs. And at the same time, this conservative movement held up colorblindness or the notion of "not seeing color" as the pinnacle of social and racial justice. This ideology is suffused with the rhetorics of individualism and egalitarianism, and justifies opposition to policies that address racial inequity by first simply recognizing difference.⁴¹

Reality television (and media in general) as a purveyor of culture and a reflection of it, espouses these logics. Thus, it is hardly surprising that the matrices of race, class, gender, and sexuality oppression are ignored as tenable barriers in the makeover world. In its place, these shows essentially "makeover" the role of the state by stepping in to provide for the subject at hand. In doing so, the privatized logic of reality television implicitly critiques welfare politics and, thus, the communities that depend on those services. In line with the genre's neoliberal logic, these shows and *Celebrity Rehab* too, try to erase the explanatory power of race, class, and gender oppression within their overarching philanthropic missions. Yet King's statement is a refusal of this logic. Instead, King's anecdote here, his assuredness in witnessing his own beating, is a dramatic contradiction of the "can we-can we all just get along?" statement now synonymous with how people remember King and his commentary on race relations and racism

⁴⁰ George Lipsitz, *Possessive Investment*, 112.

⁴¹ Sarah Florini, "Recontextualizing the Racial Present: Intertextuality and the Politics of Online Remembering," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 31, no. 4 (October 2014), 314–26.

in general. In fact, what is clear is that King's own history of witnessing of police brutality, in combination with his own experience is not solely a personal trauma, but a historical one as well— one that precedes his bodily injury and the legacy of which continues. Contained in his critique then is a refusal of the neoliberal, colorblind logic of reality television and an assertion of predictive truth. King's anticipatory knowledge of racial state-sanctioned violence, as viewers know, was accurate. And King knew this precisely because he recognized the systemic and institutionalized racism used against African American communities as terroristic tactics of domination.

When King starts to recount the beating itself, his syntax becomes littered with pauses and “ums,” indicating the emotional weight of his story. King tells Dr. Drew how, as he was surrounded, he begged one police officer “not to do this. Tell them they don't have to do this.” He describes the beginning of the brutal attack steadily: getting kicked in the temple, a police officer asking him, “How do you feel now?” and his response, “I feel fine.” As the officers swarmed in, he recalls, “That's when bam, uh, Koon hit me with the taser,” King's arm and finger mimics the shooting of a taser gun. “And then he asked me, ‘Well how do you feel now?’ And uh, I couldn't say nothing and they tased me again, and then they stopped it.” King's whole body jerks as he says this, imitating the stopping of the taser. “And he said, that's when he said, ‘We're gonna kill you n*****.’”⁴² When King tells Dr. Drew this sentence, he adopts the cadence and the facial expression of Koon, projecting a menacing expression with a slight smile. This chilling statement is followed by King's description of his desperate attempts to defend himself against the abuse of police officers: “And that's when I went to uh, break. I threw up my hands to let them know I didn't have no gun. But I'm running; I'm trying to break. But I didn't

⁴² It is interesting to note that Vh1 censored King's articulation of the word “nigger” in this context. As a cable channel, Vh1 has the option to censor or broadcast racial epithets. According to Vh1's standards, King's usage warranted censorship.

know that my leg was broke, so when I threw up my hands like that [King flails both of his arms above his head], my leg went out on me, I couldn't do nothing but fall back down. And the only thing I could do at that point was to protect my goods, which was the brain. And I grabbed that head and put that one hand on it and everything else was broken bones and you name it after that." King spreads his fingers wide, grips his head tightly with his hand, and hunches his shoulders defensively. When Dr. Drew observes, "You must have thought you were going to die," King's response is staggering. "I knew I was gonna die. I thought I was dead. I was dead and came back to life, that's what happened... There's not a day in my mind that uh... I know who I am, but since the world knows me like that... and the way I got beat like that, it's a [unintelligible] memory everyday I wake up to know who I am, who I really am in this world. Part of our, some of our country's bad baggage." When Dr. Drew asks him point blank if he's pissed, King concedes, nodding, "Yeah, it pisses me off. That's why I'm in the program. I'm trying to... get myself, to be me, you know what I mean?"

Sociologist Laura Grindstaff recognizes the often-unacknowledged importance of personal testimony: "Historically, personal experience has been an important means by which white women, people of color, the working class, and others denied expert status have asserted the reality of their lives, particularly the reality of their oppression and disadvantage."⁴³ To paraphrase Grindstaff, the role of the testimonial creates alternative epistemological opportunities that validate the experiences of those who have been devalued or marginalized. King's account of the attack runs roughly seven minutes from the moment he begins. A lack of music cues, the omission of voiceover narration, a refusal to cut out sections where King stumbles upon his words or where he is intelligible all make it clear that the show treats his

⁴³ Grindstaff, *Money Shot*, 226.

testimonial as historically significant, a marked contrasted to the typical flippant connotations associated with the genre.

In recounting King's testimony of the beating, I have chosen to include the certain aspects within his syntax that are normally omitted—irruptive or repetitive phrases, words, hesitations and silences. In doing so, I aim to punctuate the doubled acts of translation in operation in his account. The first translative act is transcription. Like the watch-ability of media texts, readability hinges on aspects of fluidity, clarity, and coherence, reflecting the decisions that the work of translation does. Reflecting the difficulties of King's utterances forces readers to contend with the highly charged nature emotional speech and testimony in reading. It creates an account in which the simple words become strange in their context, and incomplete clauses or unfinished sentences mark both the unsayable and the unknowable. The effects of King's testimony call into question the very way that history is remembered and continually renewed. It also implicates audiences into a process of questioning the very terms in which we know the past. As an epistemological upending, King's testimony enacts what Levinas calls the "traumatism of astonishment," or what Roger Simon and Claudia Eppert describe as "the experience of something absolutely foreign that may call into question what and how one knows."⁴⁴

By including (and thus emphasizing) rather than omitting King's pauses and moments of unintelligibility or incoherence, I want to reframe his testimony as an act of translation—one in which his account is less significantly a display of factual knowledge but more importantly a process of discovery and disclosure that must undergo a series of linguistic and conceptual translations. Taken this way, his silences or incoherencies are not absences or syntactic hiccups

⁴⁴ Roger Simon and Claudia Eppert, "Remembering Obligation: Pedagogy and the Witnessing of Historical Trauma," *Canadian Journal of Education* 22, no. 2 (Spring 1997), 180.

within a retelling but rather critical spaces pregnant with meaning. As Jodi Kim points out in a different context, there can be a coherence to incoherence: the lack of coherence does not reveal a deficiency of logic, but rather counter intuitively, its presence.⁴⁵ In other words, incoherence can index certain knowledges and experiences unsayable through language, where the trauma of past experience exceeds language and renders limits to its narration. Indeed, in Elaine Scarry's seminal book, *The Body in Pain*, she argues that given pain's inexpressibility and unshareability, pain does not merely defy language, but destroys it.⁴⁶ In this way, the violence done to King is bodily marked through speech, in the gaps, the hesitations, the silences, the ums, the unintelligible, and should not be discounted as inarticulateness but as a profoundly fitting expression of the unknowability of twinned psychic and physical violences and how they endure. To read King's account in this way is to take seriously what Dori Laub calls the "excess" inherent in the testimony of traumatic events. According to Laub, this excess is marked by the multidimensional texture of testimony, "in its emphases as well as its silences, in its outbursts as well as its hesitations, in its pronouncements as well as its uncertainties, and in its narrative elisions as well as its exaggerations."⁴⁷

Additionally, the intensity of King's retelling, the way that King stares off distantly, barely making eye contact with Dr. Drew, the way that his body jerks and moves, simulating a taser gun firing when he says, "they tased me again," the way King takes on the cadence and facial gesture of Koon, all indicate that King was experiencing "a virtual remembrance—what Langer calls a deep memory in which the past is re-experienced as if it were immediately

⁴⁵ Jodi Kim, *Ends of Empire: Asian American Critique and the Cold War* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2010).

⁴⁶ Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 4.

⁴⁷ Simon and Eppert, "Remembering Obligation," 182.

present.”⁴⁸ To articulate pain and trauma in such terms, to translate and re-experience those memories that have impacted one so severely to be driven to deadly substance abuse, is a process that requires an act of translation and affective labor.

I detail King’s recounting of the night in such heartbreaking specificity because I believe doing so recognizes King’s testimony as an ethical choice to which I must bear witness rather than simply watch. As Roger Simon and Eppert explain, “‘bearing’ witness to historical trauma demands (but does not necessarily secure) acknowledgement, remembrance, and some indication that the provision of the testimony has been of consequence. One must bear (support and endure) the psychic burden of a traumatic history, and acknowledge that memories of violence and injustice press down on one’s sense of humanity and moral equilibrium.”⁴⁹ To account for, unpack, and parse King’s testimony in detail is to bear witness to the memory work that has been done. Sturken argues that memory takes on the form of cultural reenactment, a retelling of the past as way to create narrative closures, to promote processes of healing.⁵⁰ Although this is true, I argue that this scene, this retelling of the past, a type of cultural reenactment via reality television testimonial, can simultaneously create new possibilities for narrative openings, ones that engage with the perpetual present of the past. If the violence done to King was “undone” by the mode of exhibition of the beating video in court as many scholars like Sturken and John Fiske have argued, then King’s recounting of the events, filtered through his struggle with addiction, serves to reinscribe that violence—but from a new perspective. With all of its heartwrenching detail, King’s retelling acts as a testimonial that reopens the historical narrative for revision. If King’s public story, his public narrative ended when he naively stuttered, “Can we—can we all just get along?” then in *Celebrity Rehab* he is afforded the rare chance to revise

⁴⁸ Ibid., 180.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 178.

⁵⁰ Sturken, *Tangled Memories*, 24.

this statement, an exceptionally uncommon opportunity for those victimized by the state and those marginalized by King's specific race and class. As Rodney King states, "I was dead and I came back to life." Proclamations of a post-racial era imply that state-sanctioned violence and racism, the genesis of King's public story, is dead, a thing of the past. However, like King, this historical narrative has also been revived, brought back to life, revised, and re-circulated. Its temporal transcendence from grounded historical event into a recursive and reiterative narrative stands in contradiction to the teleological discourse of technological and racial progress. His public narrative represents past, present, and future imaginings of the nation's relationship with race and policing.

The Labor of Subjecthood and Fatherhood

It is obvious that King himself was unable to "get along" with the traumatic violence enacted upon his body and psyche. His reemergence in the public sphere as a reality television show participant more than fifteen years later announced both the continued state-sanctioned violence of police brutality and the reiterative psychic violence of trauma. This alone represented a serious disruption of the neoliberal mandate of the reality television genre, as discussed previously. But King also appeared on the show to reclaim his very identity, one that has been appropriated by history and corrupted by publicness, an outcome of reality television that is typically repressed. King's overwhelming loss of subjecthood—hijacked by first by state violence and then by processes of racism and dehumanization—was further exacerbated by the media's commodification of his very name and identity. In Greg Braxton's article on King's post-*Celebrity Rehab* life, King made quite clear what the stakes were for him:

[He] said he appeared on the show to demonstrate that he has reformed and that he is not the cowering victim in the grainy videotape. Most of all, he did it to reclaim his name.

“Over the years, a lot of rappers—Lil’ Wayne, Ice Cube—have used my name in their songs,” said the 43-year-old King, who had his first drink when he was 8. “I’m a real touchstone of history. But they don’t know me as a person. I understand the hurt, and now I’m seeking help for myself. Putting myself out there is a good way for me to overcome the addiction. I want my kids to understand me, and it was easier to show them by being on TV.”

Robbed of subjecthood, King recognized that his own words and experiences had been written out of the public narrative. It was this very omission that drove him to appear on *Celebrity Rehab*. Of course, the irony was that the medium to which King lost his name was now the one he turned to in order to reclaim it. “Culture commenting on culture commenting on history” was Dr. Drew’s summation. This type of reflexivity was similarly mirrored by King’s desire to reappear on television. His chance to show that he “is not the cowering victim in the grainy videotape” almost twenty years later drew attention to the ways in which, until then, media outlets had been satisfied with the Holliday beating videotape, second-hand witnesses, and the police account of the beating. King was rendered a black body, a commodity that symbolized both violence and its condemnation, but never given the opportunity for testimony. Even the trial itself lacked King’s account of the beating since King’s lawyers advised him against testifying due to his previous convictions; they erroneously believed that the videotape’s horrific violence would speak for itself. King’s very identity thus became a hypertext, a narrative of racial violence that continues to shape understandings of the murders of Black men at the hands of police officers captured on video today. The status of victimhood was conferred to King, yet undermined by the silences he was forced to maintain within the official historical record. His testimony in *Celebrity Rehab* thus allowed for an important historical revision and reclamation of identity.

King’s stated desire for his children to “understand him” was of particular note considering the dominant discourse of pathology surrounding Black fatherhood and Black

families. Daniel Moynihan's seminal government-commissioned report *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, released in 1965, crafted an enduring paradigm of pathology within black familial relations. It contained "frightening statistics about broken Negro families, illegitimate Negro children and Negro welfare recipients...[and states that] Negro family instability is a basic cause of the Negro inequality...."⁵¹ While Moynihan also argued for governmental assistance in eradicating white racism, a major factor in Black poverty, social scientists and newspapers fixated on his claims that the disintegration of the Black nuclear family stemmed from single, Black mothers and the abandonment of Black fathers. Selectively filtered into popular discourse, the report was read as a call for the cutting of social welfare programs by relying on stereotypical and racist notions of Black men and emasculating Black women. Though published in 1965, the report's ramifications within the public imaginary as well as political legislation have been enduring and highly influential.⁵²

It was against this discursive backdrop, then, that King talked of wanting to renarrate his own story and identity for his children. Interestingly, his assessment that it would be "easier to show them by being on TV" revealed a recognition that his legacy, for better or worse, was mediated through television. His relationship with the medium was a contradictory one: as he pointed out, his identity was co-opted, first by television but then over and over again by those who evoked his name, from hip hop artists to the public at large. His notoriety and his trauma lived in perpetuity, funneled through the medium of television. But in this instance, by appearing on *Celebrity Rehab*, King attempted to use television as a surrogate, a type of forced, public intimacy and mediated affect with his own children who were otherwise alienated from him by

⁵¹ Ryan Williams, "Savage Discovery: The Moynihan Report," *The Nation*, November 22, 1965.

⁵² James T. Patterson, *Freedom is Not Enough: The Moynihan Report and America's Struggle over Black Family Life—from LBJ to Obama* (New York: Basic Books, 2013), xiv.

his addiction. Through the auspices of the show, King labored not only for Vh1's prestige and commodification, but also for the reconstitution of the Black family within the historical shadow of Moynihan's report. Given reality television's relationship as a privatized proxy for state care, that this attempt at familial reconciliation was made through reality television has profound implications for how the project of Black fatherhood is viewed. It seems as though the project of Black fatherhood is beyond the scope of state care: in Moynihan's report and the decades that followed, it has been framed repeatedly as an unworthy project. King's affective labor, however, attempted to recuperate this. The reclamation of his identity and his relationship with his children was part of King's endeavor to "get myself, to be me," to make the transformation from object to subject.

How can we look at King's affective labor, then, as what Hardt identifies as immaterial yet intangible? In Tiziana Terranova's "Free Labor: Producing Culture of the Digital Economy," she details the rise of free labor, a relationship between the online economy and what she terms "the social factory."⁵³ Terranova outlines the concept as the process "whereby 'work processes have shifted from the factory to society, thereby setting in motion a truly complex machine."⁵⁴ This machine, however, is not restricted to the Internet or the digital but points to the possibility that the digital economy is a working model for the future (and an oft-forgotten past) of capitalist production. The commodification of King's story, in which he participates in order to create a sense of intimacy and connection with his family, embodies this shift; as Lipsitz puts it, "every personal relation is permeated by commodity relations."⁵⁵ To be sure, reality television contestants like King are encouraged to perform the self in particular ways in front of the camera

⁵³ Tiziana Terranova, "Free Labor: Producing Culture for the Digital Economy," *Social Text* 63, vol. 18, no. 2 (2000): 33–57.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ George Lipsitz, *Possessive Investment*, 84.

that anticipate the dominance of social networks and the shift towards the ever-public, voluntary “free” space of the user-generated content of social networks. If reality television is a pedagogical space to work out the scripts of neoliberalism, then it may also prime audiences for the “rewards” of selling yourself online, where you participate actively in the commodification of self. In this way, King’s affective labor on reality television may have preceded but anticipated the features of the digital, networked age.

Refusing the After-body and Resolutions

Continually emphasized throughout the show is the continuous and unending work associated with battling addiction. As Weber points out, one of the central conventions of the makeover reality television show is its construction of the “After-body,” the happy-post makeover subject who is effusively thankful. Part of the power of transformation associated with the makeover lies in the fact that the narrative closes with the After-body still intact; the makeover show always ends with the mandatory “big reveal” that showcases the happy post-makeover subject.⁵⁶ Experts rest assured in their handiwork and the participants are effectively transformed into “themselves—only better!” The long-lasting effects of the makeover, however, are not examined. Weber points out that shows typically do not do updates on their makeover subjects, thus keeping the power of the transformation static and intact. In those rare instances that a show does proceed with an update, however, any subsequent deviation away from the standards set by makeover experts is represented as an unruly, “bad” subject whose resistance is cast as misfit, ill-informed, and short-sightedly counterproductive to the beneficial change they truly need.

⁵⁶ Weber, *Makeover TV*, 29–30.

Celebrity Rehab, however, diverges in its depiction of the After-body. While the show does participate in the mandatory “big reveal” where family, friends, and loved ones compliment the participant’s change and progress, the show refuses to provide narrative closure. At the formal ceremony, the crucial decision of choosing to live in a sober-living facility is a test of the participant’s dedication to the process of recovery. Dr. Drew’s consistent emphasis on the rate of relapse in recovering addicts demonstrates that this makeover is never completed, can never be completed. Even Shelly, a consummate professional and levelheaded expert on the show, continually claims her status as an addict. One is always an addict, even when they are not actively using the drug in question. And one must always be in recovery, no matter how much time has passed. Thus, at the final ceremony, when King chooses to go into a sober-living facility, where he will appear on the *Celebrity Rehab* spin-off, *Sober House*, he is afforded a continued presence that exceeds his public recounting of his beating. Like the never-ending process of addiction and rehabilitation itself, the historical narrative is refused closure. In this analogous way, on *Celebrity Rehab*, King’s addiction and very presence reminds us of the relentless violence of the past in the present. The show makes clear that addiction is a reiterative disease, one that a person must struggle with daily. There is no cure; there is no After-body, but rather a daily, never-ending project and process of rehabilitation. Likewise, the racial violence that King experienced is reiterative, first through the trauma of racial terror that enabled him to anticipate his beating, then through the actual physical violence done to him, and then through the protracted afterlife of this violence and his struggle with his addiction. If the exhibition of the videotape disappeared the violence enacted upon King, then his painful account on *Celebrity Rehab* helped to reinstate it. King’s reiterative reliving of his beating had a poignant symmetry

with his battle against addiction—a battle that forgoes conclusion and instead manifests in a reiterative, partial healing that never truly heals.

Despite the show's tacit acknowledgement of the impossibilities of narrative closure, on a subsequent episode of *Sober House*, King does revisit the site of his beating, bringing with him a letter of forgiveness. Although show encourages audiences to read this as a narrative closure, I contend that the obvious discomfort of King at this site undermines the closure he seemingly obtains. In contrast to the long, deliberate retelling of his beating, King rushes through the reading of his "forgiveness letter," stumbling on his words, becoming fidgety. His hands are shaky and unsteady as he tries to place a miniature Bible and bouquet of flowers on a road barrier at the site. His previous testimonial, while interspersed with some hesitation, was a thoroughly thought out act. As Dr. Drew previously noted, "It sounds like he's gone over it in pretty great detail... in terms of him owning the story."⁵⁷ The same cannot be said for his visit on *Sober House*. As cars zoom by them, King and Dr. Drew stand hesitantly on the side of the road as Rodney has difficulty reading the letter. He is nervous and obviously distressed. In *LAist*'s brief article about this moment, Dr. Drew shares that King "got a little jacked-up being there. He had some post-traumatic stress symptoms. He was getting a little anxious, his speech was getting pressured. I'm sure if I measured his blood pressure and pulse, it would have been way up."⁵⁸ Clearly, the confrontational style that makes these shows so successful does not necessarily prioritize its participants' mental health and nor does it provide finite closure.

⁵⁷ Since the writing of this chapter, the Vh1 blog has been taken down. However, it is archived on Vh1's Facebook account in their notes section. Vh1 Facebook Page, "Examining Rehab 2 With Dr. Drew- Episode 3." <https://www.facebook.com/notes/vh1/examining-rehab-2-with-dr-drew-episode-3/38325181611/>

⁵⁸ Elise Thompson, "Rodney King Forgives Officers," *LAist*, February 22, 2009; available at http://laist.com/2009/02/22/rodney_king_forgives.php

What this scene represents, I argue, is the impossibility of a narrative closure for such a traumatic event. While King's personal recovery may necessitate forgiving the officers who almost beat him to death, issues of national forgiveness are a different matter. The beating has been written over, the site now turned into the L.A. County Children's Museum. As Dr. Drew notes:

The other unbelievable thing is that we were standing there looking at that building with the crazy roof and he said, "This didn't used to be here. You used to be able to see the lake." He was trying to run to the lake that night. We go inside and it's the L.A. County Children's Museum. They built the L.A. County Children's Museum on the site of the beating! That's crazy. We talked to the directors and they were like, "Yeah, we heard that happened somewhere around here." It happened eight feet from there!⁵⁹

If King's presence in the public sphere reminds us of the nation's traumatic past, then the erasure of the site by building over it, by placing a children's museum over the site of state violence, simultaneously forgets it. As scholar Barbie Zelizer in *Remembering to Forget* claims, the act of remembering is also an act of forgetting and in fact, "[m]emories become not only the construction of social, historical, and cultural circumstances, but a reflection of why one construction has more staying power than its rivals. The study of collective memories thereby represents a graphing of the past as it woven into the present and future."⁶⁰ If the site itself has been erased from history, destined to be always "somewhere around here" but never present, then Rodney King's reemergence in the public sphere demonstrates how the shifting ground of memory is continually renewed. King's beating interview is no longer available on Vh1's official site as series ended in 2012, after five seasons. Online, however, the torrents of the show remain available for users to download and view, ensuring that King's testimony remains present. Therefore, while the geographical site may be written over and quite literally built over, the

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Barbie Zelizer, *Remembering to Forget: Holocaust Memory Through the Camera's Eye* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 5.

cultural ground forever associated with King and his place in history remains steadfast. *Celebrity Rehab* is not without its faults—the strained forgiveness scene is only the most problematic example—yet King's appearance nonetheless offered a meaningful revision of history.

Furthermore, the meaning of the show and King's appearance on it does not remain static. Though anchored in a specific context and production circumstance, the show and the memory work it effects gain new meaning as time progresses, as audiences re-watch or watch the show in different historical contexts. Reception, one must remember, is always informed by the historical and embodied positioning of the spectators. Tragically, King's death serves as an after-paratext to the show's notoriety. His death casts the show as a central chapter within King's story of injustice and subsequent addiction, immortalizing both the beating and the subsequent psychic trauma he suffered. As a larger discussion on the merger or historical intersection of new media and racial violence, this dissertation has found its footing in iconic and hypervisible instances. Inevitably, by focusing on the spectacular and the iconic, this visibility marginalizes the banal and everyday forms of violence. This type of privileging makes the “fast” deaths of Oscar Grant, Michael Brown, Tamir Rice, Trayvon Martin, Walter Scott, and Reshina McBride visible and narrativizes the spectacular story of racial violence. The title of this chapter highlights the notion of being “stuck in time” in order to acknowledge and hopefully redress some of this particular intellectual violence. In using the adjective fast, I attempt to make the visibility of police-sanctioned death non-normative and make visible, instead, the overlooked slow death which King's story exemplifies. Unlike so many other victims of state-sanctioned racial violence, King survived his horrible attack. But King's presence on *Celebrity Rehab* and his eventual death in 2012 complicate this discourse by illustrating how the afterlife of racial violence haunts us and endures. Simon and Eppert argue that by witnessing, “one must bear (carry) and thus transport

and translate stories of past injustices beyond their moment of telling by taking these stories to another time and space where they become available to be heard or seen.”⁶¹ While the focus in this chapter is on a specific media genre, a specific show, and a specific figure, I hope that by unveiling the banal ways that racial violence operates within something as seemingly innocuous as reality TV, the less spectacular, slow deaths of Black and Brown lives will be refracted and seen. What *Celebrity Rehab* did was astoundingly noteworthy: it enabled audiences to be “stuck in time” with King, to evaluate how history was made, to bear witness to how it was remade on our television screens, and to realize that the obligation of that witnessing is an exigency of present.

⁶¹ Simon and Eppert, “Remembering Obligation,” 178.

CHAPTER FIVE

TWEETING THE SITUATED IMAGINATION: Sandra Bland, Visual Evidence, and Acts of Refusal

I was one of the lucky ones, to have had it caught on tape....

It's a blessing that the camera was there.

RODNEY KING¹

Thank you for recording! Thank you!

SANDRA BLAND

Are we witnesses who confirm the truth of what happened in the face of the world-destroying capacities of pain, the distortions of torture, the sheer unrepresentability of terror, and the repression of dominant accounts? Or are we voyeurs fascinated with and repelled by exhibitions of terror and sufferance? What does the exposure of the violated body yield?

SAIDIYA V. HARTMAN

Scenes of Subjection

During a panel commemorating the twentieth anniversary of the 1992 riots, Rodney King sat down with National Public Radio's Pat Morrison and recounted many things about the life-changing beating that captured the nation's attention in March 1991. As a notorious figure associated with the nation's worst riot, King detailed his life with addiction, the media's appropriation of his name and image, and importantly, his feeling that he had failed to live up to the noble (and ennobling) civil rights subjects who came before him.² While a number of King's insights necessitate analysis, the epigraph that opens this section is particularly significant. King's comment implies that the presence of media technology, epitomized by the infamous George Holiday home videotape, represents a seemingly newfound accountability in the face of

¹ Rodney King, interview with Pat Morrison, *The Los Angeles Times*' Festival of Books, 2012. Attended by author.

² Pat Morrison, "The Burden of Being Rodney King," *The Los Angeles Times*, June 18, 2012.

racism and racial violence. That King is at once grateful for this technology *despite* its failure to convince the jurors of the illegality of the beating is pivotal, and indexes the vast worlds of contradiction, complexity, and ideology that comprise American discourses about progress, violence, media, and race. The perpetuation of such investments in technology as a remedy to racial violence have continued today: in early May 2015, the Obama administration allocated twenty million dollars towards the implementation of police body cameras,³ despite the numerous instances, including King's, in which video evidence has been used to exonerate police officers and condemn victims. Thus, his observation makes the discourses that equate the presence of media technology as extra ordinary visible. Moreover, when King designates himself as "one of the lucky ones, to have it caught on tape," the remark illuminates the sustained and continued presence of violence perpetrated on black bodies as simultaneously exceptional *and* quotidian.

Over twenty years later, the camera was there yet again. Sandra Bland, a twenty-eight-year-old Black woman, was pulled over in Prairie View, Texas, for a failure to signal—a minor traffic violation. Bland had just moved to Texas from Naperville, Illinois, for a new job at Prairie A & M University as a student alumni liaison. Her subsequent arrest and abuse by Officer Brian Encinia was recorded by both the police dash cam and a bystander and circulated on news outlets and social media. The videos showed that the minor traffic violation ignited an increasingly heated conversation resulting in Bland being physically slammed to the ground, arrested, and placed in jail. When she saw a bystander filming the incident, a handcuffed Bland cried out, "Thank you for recording! Thank you!" before being placed into the back of the police vehicle. She would die three days later in an unmonitored jail cell on July 13, 2015, from what police

³ Julia Edwards, "Obama Administration Says to Provide \$20 Million for Police Body Cameras," *Reuters*, May 1, 2015.

allege was a suicide by hanging. The suspiciousness of Bland's death drew national outcry, fomented by the media publicity generated by #BlackLivesMatter⁴ activists on Twitter, and caused the District Attorney and the FBI to classify Bland's death as a murder investigation. In December of 2015, a grand jury declined to indict anyone on charges of murder.

More than isolated incidents, King and Bland's experiences and words index the complex and often contradictory ideas behind our conceptions of social justice, technology, and racial change. To turn our attention specifically towards technological development and its discourses is to investigate "one of the primary sites through which we can chart the desires and concerns of a given social context and preoccupations of particular moments in history."⁵ Indeed, their remarks exemplify the persistent belief that racial violence's visibility alone will provide the indisputable visual evidence and documentation necessary to reform it. Moreover, this faith in the visual capture of racial violence implies that this evidence, gifted to us through new mobile forms of recording and technology, will result in different outcomes of accountability, protection, and safety— to manifest "something akin to freedom" from violence but is not freedom.⁶ Framed in this way, King and Bland's gratitude exemplifies the utopian hopes of the technologically visible and a specific strand of techno-utopianism, a totalizing narrative that technology is inherently liberatory. Similar to Siva Vaidhyanathan's concept of "techno-fundamentalism,"⁷ or the investment in technology as a type of rabid fundamentalism that

⁴ #BlackLivesMatter is a social movement that organizes and protests police brutality and state-sanctioned violence. More details on the founding and proliferation of the movement can be found later in the chapter.

⁵ Marita Sturken and Douglas Thomas, *Technological Visions: Hopes and Fears That Shape New Technologies* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2004), 1.

⁶ Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 105.

⁷ Siva Vaidhyanathan's popular book, *The Googlization of Everything (And Why We Should Worry)* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), claims that Google's central place in "organizing the world's information and making it universally accessible and useful (Google website)" has lead the search engine to assume roles that should be occupied by public

blindingly celebrates technology and rapid change as synonymous with societal advancement,⁸ this technological utopism is not just relegated to contemporary thinking. Though Vaidhyanathan grounds his analysis in the specificity of digital technology, he is not alone in identifying this presumption of technology as a type of savior. Indeed, philosopher Martin Heidegger's *The Question Concerning Technology* argues that technological is not the specificity of technology per se but rather a type of poeisis, a way of bringing forth or revealing assumed to constitute "the realm of truth."⁹ In these two divergent treatises on the nature of technology (one as critique, one as poetic investment), both of these authors identify this persistent reading of technology as metonymic of progress and truth. Understanding how this type of visually-centered techno-utopianism is deployed in relation to the most visible of racial violences illuminates the impossibility of disaggregating race from any concept of innovation, progress, and the US's investment in technology. That racial violence is, in fact, a defining and enduring facet of American life, makes it a technological one as well.

It is evident that expanding visual technologies and their capabilities to capture racial violence has produced more spectators than ever before. But such gains in the technological

institutions rather than a privatized corporation. While most of his claims center on Google as a specific case study, Vaidhyanathan's summation of techno-fundamentalism and its wide-ranging effects is clear: "We have a blind faith in technology.... The particular kind of hubris that energizes Google is the notion that you can always invent something to solve the problem that the last invention created. That's technofundamentalism. It's an extreme form of the pragmatic orientation that... assumes not only the means and will to triumph over adversity through badges and schemes but also the sense that invention is the best of all possible methods of confronting problems" (75–6).

⁸ For historians Carl Becker and J.B. Bury, the "myth of social progress emerged from the Enlightenment idea of the perfectibility of man through the application of reason.... over the last two centuries, technology has piggybacked onto social progress by creating the rush of change without social improvement" from Joel Dinerstein, "Technology and Its Discontents: On the Verge of the Posthuman," *American Quarterly* 58, no.3 (2006): 572. See also, the "rhetoric of the electronic sublime" in James Carey and John J. Quirk. "The Mythos of the Electronic Revolution." *The American Scholar* (1970): 395-424.

⁹ Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology* (Abingdon, UK: Garland Science, 1954), 294.

capacity for visibility have nonetheless failed to deliver the totality of emancipation and justice that technology promises— in fact, the sheer number of Black deaths, with young Black men killed by police¹⁰ numbering nine times the national average, speaks to the frequency and ubiquity of racial violence’s continued presence. As Marita Sturken and Douglas Thomas identify, “society’s capacity to project concerns and desires on technology operates as a primary form of social denial; the belief that a new technology can solve existing social problems reveals a refusal to confront fully the deeper causes of those problems and the complexity of human interaction.”¹¹ Such refusal effects more than just denial, it obscures the ways in which racial violence serves as one of the conditions of possibility for certain media technologies to demonstrate their worth. Images of racial violence have been paradoxically held up as the evidentiary proof for technological progress— the eyewitnesses and the person recording the incident are not enough, it is the testimony of technology that is valued most for it presumably makes witnesses of us all. In this way, “the convergence of violence and cultural advances does not repudiate our notions of ‘modern’”¹²; rather, the former concretizes the latter.

In sum, racial violence becomes one of the pivotal links to concretizing technological progress: it provides the justification for technology in its capture, and indexes interlocking discourses around freedom, violence, and visibility. It is precisely because of this connection between the discourses of technology as liberation from racial violence that this chapter looks to the social networking service (SNS) Twitter to investigate how the mediation of racial violence has changed with online networks. Thus far, my dissertation chapters have all examined the

¹⁰ Jon Swaine, Oliver Laughland, Jamiles Lartey, and Ciara McCarthy, “Young Black Men Killed by US Police at Highest Rate in Year of 1,134 deaths,” *The Guardian*, December 31, 2015.

¹¹ Sturken and Thomas, *Technological Visions*, 3.

¹² Jacqueline Goldsby, *A Spectacular Secret: Lynching In American Life and Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 23.

process of watching racial violence as an inherently complicated endeavor beyond the purely visual domain: the first chapter demonstrated the historical, affective, and political alchemies of domestic, suburban space and watching civil rights television; the second examined how the legitimacy and social worth of the TV industry gets crafted from watching and remembering racial violence; and the third chapter queried the epistemological boundaries of racial violence itself and revealed how testimony could produce a form of moral witnessing in the unexpected genre of reality TV. This chapter engages with the social media and the various forms of documentation, questioning the concepts of technological progress and visual evidence and interrogating the belief that seeing brings us closer to the ontological truth of racial violence. Different than previous media, I posit that Twitter provides a networked platform that enables us to “see” differently, to experience racial violence outside the boundaries of what is typically constituted as visual evidence.

I interrogate Twitter in particular for multiple reasons. First, from 2010 to 2011, the revolutionary protests across the Middle East, dubbed by mainstream news outlets as the Arab Spring, were often characterized as the direct result of social media technology and usage, leading critics, journalists, and many Western news outlets to extol these protests as “Twitter revolutions.” The public imaginary of the Arab Spring in the US became a story of social media, one that touted Twitter as the new revolutionary tool for implementing Western-style democracy.¹³ After all of the demonstrations, uprisings, and democratic coups, it was Twitter that became the enduring meta-story that eclipsed the many narratives of the protesters on the

¹³ For more on the Arab Spring, see Gilad Lotan, Erhardt Graeff, Mike Ananny, Devin Gaffney, Ian Pearce, Danah Boyd’s “The Revolutions Were Tweeted: Information Flows During the 2011 Tunisian and Egyptian Revolutions” and Nadia Idle and Alex Nunns’ *Tweets from Tahriri*.

ground, with social media network playing an enabling role for protesters and journalists.¹⁴ This led to a worldwide image of Twitter as heralded as a technology of the people, one capable of toppling governments and dictators.¹⁵ The coverage of the protests by Western journalists often expressed a fervent triumphalism of the social network's capacity, ascribing an almost machinic agency to technology itself while eschewing in-depth coverage of the historical and political relationships within the nations in question. In June 2009 *The Atlantic* ran an article, "The Revolution will be Twittered" that proclaimed, "You cannot stop people any longer. You cannot control them any longer. They can bypass your established media; they can broadcast to one another; they can organize as never before... they will use technology to displace old modes and order."¹⁶ In essence, Twitter became a technology explicitly tied to freedom. Therefore, much more than other platforms, Twitter is emblematic of the current notions of

¹⁴ The idea that Twitter's role was the prominent factor behind the surge of protests during the Iranian election protests in 2010 reached such ubiquity that even the Obama administration weighed in. As *The New York Times* reported, State Department official Jared Cohen sent Twitter an email, requesting they "delay scheduled maintenance of its global network, which would have cut off service while Iranians were using Twitter to swap information and inform the outside world about the mushrooming protests around Tehran" (Mark Lander and Brian Stelter, "Washington Taps Into A Potent New Force in Diplomacy," *The New York Times*, June 16, 2009.)

¹⁵ Suffice to say, Twitter did enable faster communication networks and gave unprecedented access to journalists, who, in turn, spread information to their readers. Network-driven genres like social network sites and microblogging have indeed complicated the contexts and structures of communication in public. Because of Twitter's multiple roles as an archive, newswire, and a mobile, communication technology, this attribution makes sense; it clearly assisted in facilitating communication between protestors as well as the dissemination of information from citizen journalists to broader audiences. News outlets could mine hashtags as an archive for context and multiple perspectives as well as follow real-time actions of protestors in ways that were not possible before. As Nadine Idle and Alex Nunns explain, "The fact that Hosni Mubarak's regime took the step of blocking the internet, despite the millions of dollars lost to the economy, is a testament to the fear it provoked among the rulers. This is where commentators who seek to downplay the role of social media come up short... every revolution is different, shaped in part by the technology available to those who make it and those who try and stop it" (*Tweets from Tahrir*, 21). It is important to note how Idle and Nunns' sentiment here emphasizes the human agency of usage and the means by which people utilize social media in unintended ways.

¹⁶ "The Daily Dish," *The Atlantic*, June 13, 2009.

technofundamentalism, particularly in regard to the constructs of freedom. Similarly, the SNS has been instrumental for #BlackLivesMatter activists and protestors, who utilize the site for organizing, publicity, and establishing an online presence to protest incidents of state-sanctioned violence. While the discourses surrounding #BlackLivesMatter have not been explicitly framed around freedom in a domestic context, the underlying premise behind these protests is one connected to the search for freedom *from* violence. Therefore, these multiple factors establish Twitter as the premiere site of investigation for the intersecting logics of racial violence and technology.

What is more, I contend that Twitter acts as a new type of medium, where the photographic is part of a data mixture that remediates and reconstitutes images, videos, text, and interactive messaging and retweeting. This wild heterogeneity constitutes a new formulation of multi-sensorial witnessing that interacts differently with racial violence by breaking the ocularcentrism, or the dominance of the visual as a master sense and a “synecdoche for human perception,”¹⁷ of previous instances. This chapter looks to the prominent hashtags that emerged from the Sandra Bland case to investigate these new dynamics of spectatorship that emerge with Twitter’s experiential stream. And I ask: how does the SNS violate, revise, or re-imagine racial violence from a trans-media visual history of Black death that includes Emmett Till and photography; civil rights television; and Rodney King and camcorder video, to a synthetic textual and visual formation? Keeping in mind Hartman’s evocative question, “what does the exposure of the violated body yield?”¹⁸ I focus on the social movement #BlackLivesMatter and

¹⁷ James W. Cook, “Seeing the Visual in US History,” *The Journal of American History* 95, no. 2 (2008): 432–41.

¹⁸ Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 3. My analysis clearly differs from Hartman’s as she investigates scenes of terror in the hardly discernible and the mundane, eschewing the oft-familiar spectacular scenes of violence that characterizes slave

two hashtags in particular, #SayHerName and #IfIDieInPoliceCustody. I posit that these hashtags illuminate the ways that Twitter can enable different sensory modalities that puncture the visual representation of violence. Moreover, I contend that the epistemological interventions of Black feminist theory focused on the experiential provide us with a way to read #IfIDieInPoliceCustody and #SayHerName as acts of collectively situated imagination that responds to the failures of the visual. I also argue that Twitter is a particularly suitable forum for these types of acts of situated imagination: the formalistic and technocultural aspects of the interface encourage these imaginative and creative impulses through its constrictive and limited borders of the platform's 140-character interface. Twitter's readability in these instances forces users to be economical with language yet imaginative and creative with their modes of communication. By examining the collective, networked sonic ruptures and imaginative worlds of Twitter users, these hashtags register a disenfranchisement with visual documentation, query visuality's dominance, and represent an anticipatory non-spectatorship that refutes the impulse of visual documentation as sole evidentiary proof. Like the other case studies of the dissertation, this chapter engages the processes of witnessing and spectatorship but asks if the affective modes of online networks, via Twitter, have changed our conceptions of connectivity and seeing. How does the medium differently mediate these instances of Black death than previous visual forms and what potentials can arise from such differences? To fully understand this intervention, I begin by describing the specificities of Twitter, both as a network and medium, as well as its user base.

Who is Tweeting? Twitter As A Situated Medium

narratives. While her scenes of subjection may differ, her work and the questions that remain are relevant to both spectacular and quotidian forms of racial violence.

In Lisa Nakamura's *Cybertypes: Race, Ethnicity, and Identity on the Internet*, the author identifies the ways the Internet "propagates, disseminates, and commodifies images of race and racism" as unique.¹⁹ Drawing on Lev Manovich's distinction between the cultural layer (i.e., content) and the computer layer (i.e., infrastructure, interface, and other machine/technological forms that structure the computer environment),²⁰ Nakamura's seminal study combines the two in order to illustrate how their dynamics are co-constitutive, examining the "process by which computer/human interfaces, the dynamics and economics of access, and the means by which users are able to express themselves online interacts with the 'cultural' layer or ideologies regarding race that they bring with them into cyberspace."²¹ Keeping this crucial intervention in mind dictates that investigating how and why raced Twitter users utilize the social network service is to understand the technological specificity of Twitter as well.

Founded in 2006 as a microblogging site that allows users to post 140-character messages or "tweets," Twitter is a social network that has been the focus of much critical and scholarly interest.²² Because it runs the gamut of user interactivity, from a newswire or news aggregator to a venue for personal testimony and experience, to a space for celebrity access and endorsements, Twitter is emblematic of the challenges of writing about social media. New tools, policies, and features are developed and implemented and existing tools are constantly updated. For Twitter this has included the addition of Trending Topics, the function of hashtag organizing, and the integration of desktop capacity and usage, to name a few. Too, user adaptation and creative use

¹⁹Lisa Nakamura, *Cybertypes: Race, Ethnicity, and Identity on the Internet* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 3.

²⁰ Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Boston: MIT Press, 2001).

²¹ Nakamura, *Cybertypes*, 3.

²² See Lotan et al, "The Revolutions were Tweeted;" Harlow, "Overthrowing the Protest Paradigm?"; Stepanova's "The Role of Information Communication Technologies in the 'Arab Spring'"; Davidov, Tsur, Rappoport's "'Enhanced Sentiment Learning Using Twitter Hashtags and Smileys;" this is a mere sampling of the articles aggregated by the Arab Spring incidents.

ensure that social media is continually shifting, and has thus often been described a moving target.²³ As a medium, Twitter has a number of attributes that distinguish it from its other social network contemporaries. Unlike other social networks that emphasize user profiles or the network, Twitter's tweets comprise the content of the site and its main focal point. These 140-character messages were originally intended for Short Messaging Service (SMS) communication, and therefore tweets' brevity enables convenient messaging, encourages rapid readability, and allows the messages to traverse SMS networks without truncation.²⁴

Andre Brock and Sarah Florini have both noted how these factors contribute to Twitter's technocultural and interface specificity, making it a preferred SNS for users' whose only Internet access is relegated to phones.²⁵ While mobile phone Internet usage has become ubiquitous in 2015, it was not so when Twitter was first introduced in 2006. Online access was and is a historically differential process, contingent on a number of factors, primarily socioeconomic and geographic, that often fall along raced and classed lines. Well-worn debates over the digital divide have been replaced with increasingly nuanced analyses of the modalities of access and usage, in large part because mobile Internet access provides new pathways to online engagement. As Trebor Scholz reminds us, we have entered into a "global turn in online sociability. While the 2 billion Internet users are indeed a global minority, the 5 billion people and their families who use cell phones are not."²⁶ Indeed, scholars Fox, Zichur, and Smith have determined that 54% of Internet users access through a mobile device, while Smith found that 95% of Twitter users

²³ Bernie Hogan and Anabel Quan-Haase, "Persistence and Change in Social Media: A Framework of Social Practice," *Bulletin of Science, Technology and Society* 30, no. 5 (2010): 309.

²⁴ Andre Brock, "From the Blackhand Side: Twitter as a Cultural Conversation," *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 56, no. 4 (2012): 535.

²⁵ Sarah Florini, "Tweets, Tweeps, and Signifying': Communication and Cultural Performance on 'Black Twitter,'" *Television and New Media*, 15, no. 3 (2013): 223–37.

²⁶ Trebor Scholz, ed., *Digital Labor: The Internet as Playground and Factory* (New York: Routledge, 2012) 3.

access the platform through a mobile device.²⁷ Smith also found that 64% of African Americans are wireless Internet users.²⁸ Because the monetary status required to own personal computers influences which modalities communities access and which social networks they join, Black users were early adopters and continue to be avid users of Twitter, comprising 25% of all U.S. users.

In other words, Twitter's interface has created a user base vastly different from other prominent social networks such as Facebook.²⁹ The latter's interface was created for personal computers use, and boasted initial users exclusively from elite institutions. Because of the social network's initial roll out to prestigious .edu email addresses—indeed, limited at first to harvard.edu addresses, there was an immediate social segregation along classed lines. Twitter, on the other hand, with its minimalist interface was far more likely to be used by users whose primary

²⁷ Brock, "Blackhand Side," 535.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ That new technologies and the discourses that surround them are not neutral has been the topic of much of the important work done in digital media studies and beyond. An illustrative example the often-unseen racialization of certain social media platforms and technologies is danah boyd's work on social network sites. She examines the platforms and their user interfaces and contends that they are far from neutral, but rather inflected and immersed in the discourses of race and class. Looking at teens' choices to use Myspace or Facebook as their preferred social network, boyd found that these choices were essentially underwritten by the raced and classed associations and dynamics associated with the two platforms. Boyd's article goes on to detail that the social categories reproduced within two sites—with teens characterizing Myspace as "ghetto" while ascribing a seemingly "elite" stance to Facebook—reflected the larger spatial and racial dynamics associated with offline spaces. Factors such as Facebook's initial roll-out restricting users to those with an harvard.edu email account, then to other Ivy League schools, and eventually to other top-tier schools, other universities, and finally high schools thus crafted an image of the social network as "elite" and as a collegiate rite of passage. Too, the aesthetics of the two sites, with the customization of Myspace personal pages differing from the uniform and "professionalized" look of Facebook, reflected boyd's subjects' cultural assumptions. With more nuance, boyd's work makes it clear that racial formations get reproduced online within social media sites through a number of factors like user demographics and aesthetics, despite the narratives of technological utopianism of borderless and democratic online spaces. Boyd, Danah. "White flight in networked publics?" *How Race and Class Shaped American Teen Engagement with Myspace and Facebook.* Ed. Lisa Nakamura and Peter A. Chow-White. vols: Routledge (2013): 203-22.

internet access was mobile phone-based, a technological reflection of socio-economic status. The specificities of Twitter's simplistic interface differ from most browser-based social networks that adhere to the organizational patterns of photo galleries, applications, advertising, and widgets, punctuating design-wise and visually demonstrating how the economic imperative is inextricably linked to technological function.

Moreover, in contrast to Facebook users who typically build upon "real world" connections to strengthen preexisting ties, Twitter's built digital environment is one where users are more apt to follow public figures, celebrities, activists, and others that they do not know personally. This allows users to curate and build their personal information environments centered on people of interest and topics.³⁰ Whereas individualized algorithms curate posts based on users' preferences on Facebook, Twitter's timeline stream structure does not inherently privilege one post over another. It is structured instead like a ticker tape chronicle of commentary, essentially made for live-tweeting events since April of 2014.³¹ Based on the people the user chooses to follow, Twitter's streamlined page updates in real time and aggregates everything into one stream. This immediacy allows for a liveness that is both temporally urgent and a robust yet fragile archive.³² Unlike live television broadcasts, users have immediate, searchable access to look back on those events through hashtag organization, making Twitter a formidable archiving tool and giving scholars and news outlets alike a rarified access to data from users that would ordinarily take an enormous amount of effort to gather. The practice of

³⁰ Dejin Zhao and Mary Beth Rosson, "How and Why People Twitter: The Role that Micro-Blogging Plays in Informal Communication at Work," *Proceedings of the ACM 2009 International Conference on Supporting Group Work*, 243–252. ACM

³¹ Kyle Vanhemert, "The Design Behind Twitter's Revamped Profiles," *Wired Magazine*, April 9, 2014; available at <http://www.wired.com/2014/04/the-design-process-behind-twitters-revamped-profiles/>

³² Its fragility is derived from the ephemerality of its storage capacity and archiving ability. My epilogue more fully addresses the implications of such tenuousness and ephemerality to the writing and researching of digital subjects and objects.

using hashtags is a kind of collaborative tagging and organization evolving with community use and is often referred to as a practice of folksonomy.³³ Twitter thus acts as a tool par excellence for culling thoughts and opinions from users who use the service on a wide array of topics. Most importantly, it archives sentiments from radicalized communities and populations normally occluded from traditional archives.

The self-described Black Twitter community often uses Twitter and hashtags for intra-community communication and contradicts dominant preconceptions of the digital divide. Moreover, Black Twitter unsettles the technological imaginaries and online identities often constructed and assumed to be white, male, heterosexual, and middle class. As Brock notes, that Twitter's technocultural and interface specificity was specifically geared towards mobile phones usability had vast implications for different types of online (and offline) communities: "Twitter's ubiquity and ambiguity— design decisions made to encourage adoption of the service— enabled material access to the service with little loss of functionality; an important point to realize when considering that Blacks access the Internet (and Twitter) primarily through mobile devices."³⁴ According to Brock, the high degree of adoption then lead to a digital media environment where "African American discursive culture— specifically signifying's focus on invention, delivery, ritual, and audience participation" found a receptive and connective home.³⁵ Indeed, Brock notes that the hashtag is a user-created metadiscourse that, in the context of Black Twitter, serves as "sign, signifier, and signified.... Becom[ing] a call for Black Twitter participants to recognize

³³ Michele Zappavigna, *Discourse of Twitter and Social Media: How We Use Language to Create Affiliation on the Web* (London: A&C Black, 2012), 36.

³⁴ Brock, "Blackhand Side," 545.

³⁵ Ibid.

performance and respond in kind.”³⁶ These tweets are a “discursive performativity... within boundaries of time and space.”³⁷

I expand on Brock’s crucial insights, and investigate the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter for contextualization, before focusing in on the specific hashtags, #SayHerName and #IfIDieInPoliceCustody. While the exclusivity of the hashtags used in Brock’s analysis relate to contextual and insider knowledge within a segment of the Black population and plays off such insider contexts, #BlackLivesMatter is at once a re-declaration of humanity and a multi-racial, social justice-oriented organizational tactic that speaks to Black and multi-racial audiences. It pivotally addresses anti-Blackness in an attempt to dismantle it while trying to unveil the violences that endanger Black lives. The hashtag not only advocates the preservation of Black lives in relation to state-sanctioned police violence, but also the valuation of Black lives’ worth, writ large. In contrast to the case studies that ground Brock’s analysis of Black Twitter, the hashtag does not necessarily make itself contingent on “insider” knowledge of Black culture and cultural references. In fact, #BlackLivesMatter attempts not just to highlight the severe and unjust violence disproportionately inflicted upon Black communities and individuals but to radically shift the political and social discourse in order to reform the very systems of oppression that disenfranchise and terrorize African American communities. That this hashtag has appeared and then grown to become a national movement based heavily within the technological specificity of Twitter is not mere serendipity, but a confluence of factors concerning the axes of identity as tied to the modalities of online access, adoption, and usage.

#BlackLivesMatter

³⁶ Brock, “Blackhand Side,” 538-539.

³⁷ Brock, “Blackhand Side,” 537

Alicia Garza, Opal Tometi, and Patrisse Cullers, three Black, queer radical organizers based in Oakland, California, created the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter and related social media movement as a call to action after Trayvon Martin, an unarmed Black teenager with merely a bag of Skittles and an iced tea in his possession, was assaulted and killed by a volunteer neighborhood watchman, George Zimmerman. Claiming self-defense, Zimmerman was eventually exonerated under Florida's Stand Your Ground laws despite the body of evidence against him. As Patrice Cullors recounts, "Alicia Garza first uttered the words in a love note to Black people. I slapped a hashtag on it because I understood the power of spreading messages. Opal Tometi... helped us develop the broader social media platform...."³⁹ The profile of the hashtag grew in the aftermath of Martin's and Michael Brown's murder, a Black teenager who was shot and killed by police and whose dead body was left for four hours in the middle of a Missouri street. Various witnesses stated that Brown had his hands up when he was shot seven times while running away from the police officer who killed him, Darren Wilson. Brown's death in Ferguson marked a very public turn in the movement against racialized policing and galvanized activists to gather and organize under the banner of #BlackLivesMatter and the Ferguson protests.

As a response to Martin and Brown's murders and the ensuing media coverage that demonized the teenagers, the hashtag itself was conceptualized as an "ideological and political intervention in a world where Black lives are systematically and intentionally targeted for demise. It is an affirmation of Black folks' contribution to this society, our humanity, and our

³⁹ Patrisse Marie Cullors-Brignac, "We Didn't Start a Movement, We Started a Network," *Medium*, February 22, 2016; available at <https://medium.com/@patrissemariacullorsbrignac/we-didn-t-start-a-movement-we-started-a-network-90f9b5717668#.x9rdt08n9>

resilience in the face of deadly oppression.”⁴⁰ #BlackLivesMatter became a rallying and organizational tactic that drew consistent attention to cases that mainstream journalistic accounts had already abandoned in favor of other stories. This type of percolation or “stickiness”⁴¹—the probability that a piece of information will pass from a person who knows or mentions it to another person who is exposed to it—reveals the way that mainstream media outlets have generated stories by making the very virality of certain hashtags and online attention itself newsworthy. This type of ground-up media coverage is a reversal of what has traditionally been a top-down flow of information and attention, with established media outlets’ editorial process choosing what their consumers value. This ability to circumvent traditional media monopolies for sustained attention is the focus of Zeynep Tufekci’s “Not This One: Social Movements, the Attention Economy, and Microcelebrity Networked Activism.” Tufekci examines the differences between old and new media not as a divide but as a shift in a “hierarchical information ecology.” Focusing attention on the “newly emergent micro celebrity activists” and how they gain access and become conduits directing the flow of attention and visibility,⁴² the article make it clear that the monopolistic media models that dominated previously have changed to account for online media presences and modern modes of sousveillance. Similarly, Sanjay Sharma’s article on Black Twitter notes that Twitter is a “noisy environment,” one that fights for attention through various methods like the reification of attention in Trending Topics or organizational strategies

⁴⁰ Alicia Garza, “A Herstory of the Black Lives Matter Movement,” *The Feminist Wire*, October 7, 2014; available at <http://www.thefeministwire.com/2014/10/blacklivesmatter-2/>.

⁴¹ Daniel M. Romero, Brendan Meeder, and Jon Kleinberg, “Differences in the Mechanics of Information Diffusion Across Topics: Idioms, Political Hashtags, and Complex Contagion on Twitter,” *WWW’11 Proceedings of the 20th International Conference on World Wide Web*, 2011, 695–704.

⁴² Zeynep Tufekci, “Not This One: Social Movements, the Attention Economy, and Microcelebrity Networked Activism,” *American Behavior Scientist* 57, no. 7 (2013), 862.

like the hashtag.⁴³ To be sure, this competitive notion of attention did not start from Twitter or social media, as media environments of “old” media like television fought for the attention of audiences in a post-network, cable proliferation age through fragmentation. The rise of niche programming then was television’s solution to attention dispersal.⁴⁴ But the specificities of Twitter as a medium have enabled new avenues for attention within media industries and movement organizing tactics other than the privileging of a highly visible leader.

#BlackLivesMatter contrasts with its civil rights antecedents, who relied on publicity related to charismatic leaders like the so-called “Big Six,⁴⁵” a coterie of leaders of prominent civil rights organizations. Within popular discourse, emblematic examples include the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), Martin Luther King, Jr., the Nation of Islam, and Elijah Muhammed or Malcolm X. The creators and organizers of #BlackLivesMatter differ in that they have not encouraged or relied upon a single highly visible spokesperson to represent the fledgling movement. As Cullors-Brignac stated, “We don’t have one strong leader model. You can’t kill the movement by killing the leader because there are many. But decentralization does not mean disorganization. We are highly organized.”⁴⁶ This refusal of a charismatic, public leader to serve as figurehead of the social movement speaks to the politics of Black feminist

⁴³ Sanjay Sharma, “Black Twitter?: Racial Hashtags, Networks and Contagion,” *new formations: a journal of culture/theory/politics* 78 (2013): 46–64.

⁴⁴ For more on this industrial shift see Amanda D. Lotz, *The Television Will Be Revolutionized*, (New York: NYU Press, 2014). Connecting this shift to the prominence of different representations, see Herman Gray, *Watching Race: Television and the Struggle for Blackness*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1995) and chapter 2 of this dissertation.

⁴⁵ The “Big Six” refers to the chairman, presidents and leaders of six prominent civil rights organizations, which include James Farmer of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE); John Lewis of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC); Roy Wilkins of the NAACP; and Whitney Young of the National Urban League; and, with some contention, either A. Philip Randolph of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, a socialist and labor movement organization, or Dorothy Height, president of the National Council of Negro Women.

⁴⁶ Sara Sidner and Mallory Simon, “The Rise of Black Lives Matter: Trying to Break the Cycle of Violence and Silence,” *CNN.com*, December 28, 2015; available at <http://www.cnn.com/2015/12/28/us/black-lives-matter-evolution/>.

thought and theory, one that has influenced #BlackLivesMatter and is deeply attuned to collectivity and rejects a hagiographic impulse. Instead, the three founders developed an inclusive and multipoint platform in support of all Black lives but “particularly highlighting the egregious ways in which Black women, specifically Black trans women are violated.”⁴⁷ This inclusive, radical intersectionality of #BlackLivesMatter hearkens back to The Combahee River Collective Statement, a statement issued by a collective of Black feminists actively committed to “struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression.” The statement was written in 1979 by those who saw their particular task as “the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the face that the major systems of oppression are interlocking.”⁴⁸ As they put it, “The synthesis of these oppressions creates the conditions of our lives. As Black women we see Black feminism as the logical political movement to combat the manifold and simultaneous oppressions that all women of color face.”⁴⁹ This collective statement emphasizes not only intersectionality but also how organizational structures within activism can replicate certain types of power structures and oppressions—a lesson that has clearly influenced BLM’s political goals and structure.

Placing these interlocking systems at the center of analysis rather than at the margins is the central premise of Black feminist thought, as exemplified by Black feminist thinkers⁵⁰ such as Kimberle Crenshaw, who coined the term intersectionality, as well as Patricia Hill Collins, whose emphasis on “intersectional paradigms” reminds us that “oppression cannot be reduced to

⁴⁷ Cullors-Brignac, “We Didn’t Start a Movement.”

⁴⁸ The Combahee River Collective, “The Combahee River Collective Statement,” in *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*, ed. Barbara Smith (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1983): 264-74.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ For more on Black feminist theory, see works by bell hooks, Jacqui Alexander, Angela Davis, Audre Lorde, and *The Color of Violence: The INCITE! Anthology* edited by Andrea Smith, Beth E. Richie, Julia Sudbury, and Janelle White, (*Cambridge, MA: South End, 2006*).

one fundamental type, and that oppressions work together in producing injustice.”⁵¹ The legacies of this epistemological intervention are prolific, both in activist work like BLM and in academic feminist literature. Thus, as public protest and notable critiques against police brutality and mass incarceration gravitate towards focusing on the criminalization and deaths of Black men, this political genealogy reminds us that such attention need not—and, indeed, must not—participate in the erasure of Black women.

Though all of the BLM hashtags emerge out of what Tufekci identifies as a shift in the “hierarchical information ecology,” the hashtags focused on Black women in particular are prime examples of this since the matrices of gender and racial oppression have resulted in persistent erasure. It is precisely because of this tendency that the hashtag #SayHerName emerged. Sandra Bland is merely one of many Black women who have lost their lives to police violence. In Ann Arbor, Aura Rosser, a forty-year-old African American woman was shot and killed by police insider her own home. But while her death provoked some (though still limited) local protest, it failed to generate the same amount of national attention and public protest as Mike Brown or Trayvon Martin. Renisha McBride, Sandra Bland, and countless other Black women whose names have not been hashtagged illustrate the differential visibility allocated to Black men versus Black women. It is this type of erasure that highlights the need for intersectional analyses within a movement that makes people of color central. Both the #SandraBland and the #SayHerName hashtags act as rebuttals of the silences Black women have to endure even in death. They urge us to say her name because so often, viewers and readers do not hear Black women’s names, let alone speak them. As Tufekci notes, hashtags are able percolate and sustain interest in news stories in ways that are unprecedented, signaling a distinctive new media

⁵¹ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 18.

moment. It is a new mode of curatorial revision within the larger information flood of online life that signals how, as Wendy Chun puts it, the network enables us to map the previously unmappable.⁵²

In Patrice Cullors-Brignac's blog post for *Medium*, "We Didn't Start a Movement, We Started a Network," the founder traces how the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag has now spread into network of Black radical activism. The national "Black Life Matters Ride," in which activists rode to Ferguson to protest Mike Brown's death, gathered around six hundred people who worked alongside St. Louis-based organizations to amplify their efforts. This collective mobilization inspired activists to create eighteen Black Lives Matter chapters in their communities and towns— as Cullors-Brignac put it, "broadening the political will and movement building reach catalyzed by the #BlackLivesMatter project and work on the ground in Ferguson."⁵³ Now a grass-roots organization, the larger movement consists of a strong digital online presence under the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter as well as a more traditionally organized chapters. I focus on the hashtags and their online social media presence because it encapsulates the strategies of not only the organization, but also lay users who are not affiliated with chapters but stand in solidarity with the larger movement.⁵⁴ While Cullors-Brignac's post alludes to a more traditional network of activist chapters, it is undeniable that the network culture has been integral to manifesting the offline, geographical chapters. Indeed, the use of Twitter to bring attention to police violence has skyrocketed with #BlackLivesMatter protests. In the study "Beyond the Hashtag: Ferguson, #Blacklivesmatter, and the Online Struggle for Offline Justice" released by American University's Center for Media and Social Impact, scholars traced the

⁵² Wendy Chun, *Control and Freedom: Power and Paranoia in the Age of Fiber Optics*. (Boston: MIT Press, 2008).

⁵³ Cullors-Brignac, "We Didn't Start a Movement."

⁵⁴ This analysis also allows for a more radical inclusivity, as disabled and other people who are not able to protest in traditional forms can participate.

tweets related to police brutality over a period from early June 2014 to late May 2015.⁵⁵ Their figure below demonstrates the volume of tweets that surround incidents of police killing, brought on by awareness generated in part by hashtag recognition and publicized protests. The sheer amount of tweets indicates the attention generated by protests but also points to the vast online network and participation of Black Lives Matter activists on Twitter.

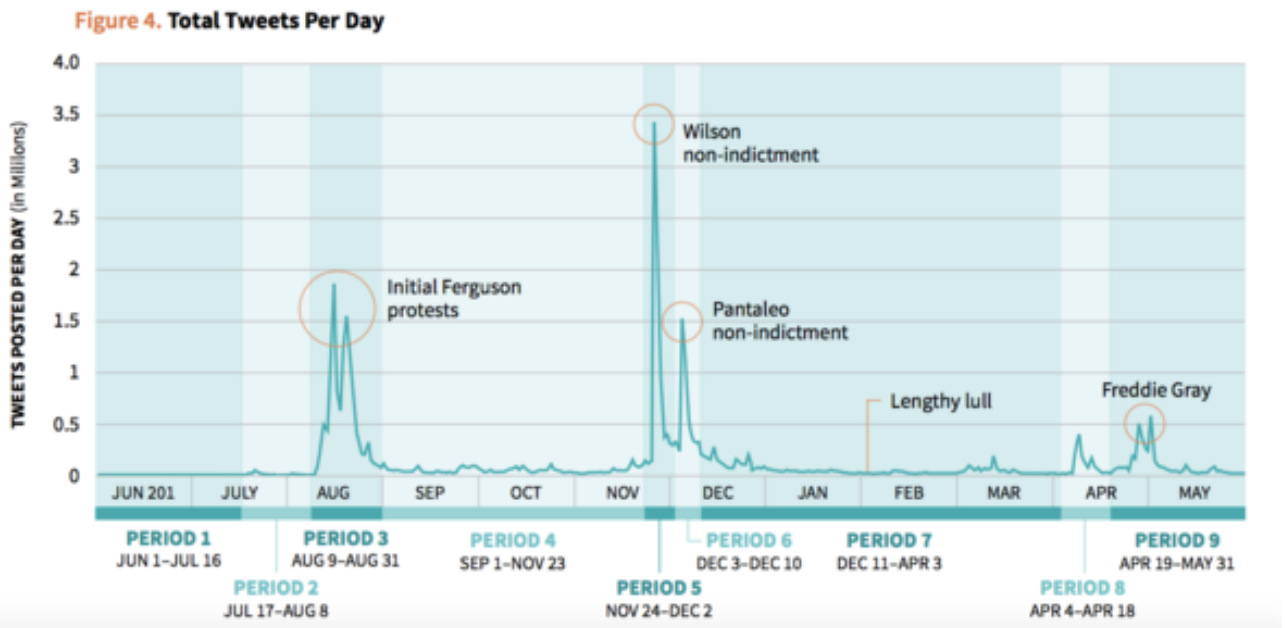


Figure 9: Police Brutality-Related Tweets Per Day, early June 2014 to late May 2015. Source: Deen Freelon, et al., “Beyond the Hashtag: Ferguson, #Blacklivesmatter, and the online struggle for offline justice,” American University’s Center for Media and Social Impact (Creative Commons License: 2016).

What is more, the users interacting with the hashtag are able to make new meanings under the rubric of the hashtag itself by integrating their own opinions and information. Twitter’s interface goes beyond simulation and compression of “old” ways of organizing to new

⁵⁵ Deen Freelon, et al., “Beyond the Hashtag: Ferguson, #Blacklivesmatter, and the online struggle for offline justice,” American University’s Center for Media and Social Impact (Creative Commons License: 2016).

behavioral codes altogether that users have created alongside the interface. Looking to spectacle and spectatorship, the hashtag and non-spectatorship, I argue that the content of Twitter's data mix, with its emphasis on the textual, produces new ways of seeing racial violence outside the parameters of the image/images as the sole arbiter of the evidentiary. Twitter's interface particularity differentiates it from dominant mediums like television and film. Aesthetically, it is comprised of different modes of visual capture: photographs, video clips with sound, video clips without sound, automatic playing of Vines (endlessly-looped video clips taken by users), and the pictures and articles' thumbnail pictures. Too, the domination of tweets as short, textual messages is a primary constituent of the platform, and provides context for news articles as well as user anecdotes and framing.⁵⁶ These factors, in combination with the dialogical social practice of users who simultaneously create and use the network in publicly accessible spaces, present a new experiential mode of racial violence spectatorship. Along with the temporal immediacy of the live-stream, this specificity engenders new social architectures of watching, or modes of engagement and understanding racial violence.

Visibility, Spectacle, and the Scenario of Racial Violence

In April 2015, video footage of Walter Scott's murder by police officer Michael Slager in North Charleston, South Carolina, spread rapidly across social media and mainstream news outlets. Captured by a citizen journalist, the footage shows Scott slowly running *away* from Slager. Slager shoots Scott four times in the back and once in the ear; Scott falls to the ground. The footage then shows Slager walking up to Scott's bleeding body and, without administering medical aid, placing a taser next to Scott's body. If not for the cell phone video shot by Feidin

⁵⁶ Elements of Twitter are comprised from old media like video but the mix and presentation of the content is distinctive. For more on the process of remediating old media, see Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin's *Remediation: Understanding New Media*. (Boston: MIT Press, 2000) and Lev Manovich's *The Language of New Media*.

Santana, the taser would undoubtedly have been used as evidence to implicate Scott in his own death and justify Slager's deadly actions. Instead, a grand jury indicted Slager on a charge of murder. Scott's family, like Bland and King in the epigraphs that begin this chapter, conveyed gratitude for the footage, which disabused Slager's justifications for self-defense with ample visual evidence. Despite the legal victory of Slager's murder indictment, the moral implications of watching Scott's death became a national conversation. Analogous to the Rodney King videotape, Scott's murder was replayed countless times during mainstream news coverage and, in the words of Brittany Cooper, became a "cultural spectacle," offering up a scene of Black death up for national consumption.⁵⁷

The video was a highly visible example of state-sanctioned death that further fuelled protests against police violence. Unlike King's beating however, Scott's death resulted in no reforms or investigative commissions. Scott's murder, despite its media visibility, did not create the same sense of collective national moral outrage like the March on Selma or the King beating, incidents that I examine in detail in Chapter 2. Nonetheless, the footage of Scott's murder did move critics to question the effectiveness and uses of the visual capture of Black death. Critiques were raised by activists, educators, and others who questioned the ethical implications of viewing Scott's murder in a seemingly endless loop. Like Cooper, some articulated a refusal to look because of difficult imagery but also because of an inured and fatigued sense of watching anti-black violence without systemic change.

More generally, the spectacle of the image has been most famously examined by Guy Debord's in *The Society of the Spectacle*. DeBord argues that "the spectacle is not a collection of

⁵⁷ Brittany Cooper, "Walter Scott and the Cultural Spectacle," *Salon*, April 8, 2015.

images; rather, it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by images.”⁵⁸ His condemnation of the society rather than the spectacle itself illuminates the nexus of social relationships at stake in the image. Regarding the nature of the society of the spectacle, he states, “the spectacle cannot be understood as an abuse of the world of vision, as a product of the techniques of mass dissemination of images.... It is a world vision which has become objectified.” Media studies has certainly taken up Debord’s interest in the spectacle and thoroughly critiqued his theses by demonstrating how hegemony is never fixed and is always in flux. One of the distinctive tenets of the Birmingham cultural studies critique, as articulated in Stuart Hall’s seminal essay, “Encoding, Decoding,” is the notion of that users and viewers derive and make meaning in ways contrary to those intended by the texts’ producers.⁵⁹ In essence, Hall demonstrates how varying meanings are created by audiences, arguing for a more careful consideration of audience interpretation rather than the hypodermic needle mode of reception advanced by the Frankfurt School of critique.⁶⁰ Similarly, this dissertation, by parsing the spatial, temporal, and subjective factors in watching, seeks to illuminate Debord’s oversimplification of a complex process and performance of spectatorship.

In relation to racial violence, the visual domain is besieged by contradiction and contention. On one hand, photographic documentation enables us to witness forms of racial violence that have been hidden or disavowed from public US life. However, as Nicole Fleetwood points out, “the visual manifestation of blackness through technological apparatus or through a material experience of locating blackness in public space equates with an ontological account of

⁵⁸ Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1995), Thesis 4.

⁵⁹ Stuart Hall, “Encoding/Decoding,” *Social Theory: Power and Identity in the Global Era 2* (2010): 569-599.

⁶⁰ See Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer’s “The Culture industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception,” *Stardom and Celebrity: A Reader* (2007): 34-43. as a representative text of this school of thought.

black subjects.”⁶¹ In other words, visual representations of Blackness come to stand in for Black subjecthood. The same could be said for the ontological account of anti-Black violence. Indeed, we are able to understand anti-Black racial violence’s descriptive contours through mediated forms—how else would television viewers react to King’s beating with such immediacy?⁶² On the other hand, the hegemony of the visual in recognizing racial violence delimits the very terms in which that violence is understood. Hartman’s *Scenes of Subjection* posits that the spectacle of Black suffering can create “the dissimulation of suffering through spectacle.”⁶³ If visual evidence is all that is required to make racial violence knowable, then why do images of anti-Black violence exist in such seemingly endless repetition? Since Walter Scott’s death, footage of Laquan McDonald, a Black teenager in Chicago, being gunned down by a police officer walking in the street was released. Even more disturbingly, in the time since this writing, there have likely been more such incidents and recordings. These accumulative instances demonstrate that we know the cartographies of racial violence’s visual representation. We know them from civil rights televised footage, from the Rodney King beating videotape, from Oscar Grant, from Eric Garner, from Sandra Bland. And yet this visual intimacy does not prevent these incidents from occurring. In this way, the hegemonic discourses of the visual and, by extension, the technological, are anchored in logics of visibility and knowability that simultaneously obscure. What I mean by this is: the tightly-bound association of racial violence’s recognizability to the visual has created a dynamic that simultaneously moves us closer to and further away from its ontological truth.

⁶¹ Nicole Fleetwood, *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 13.

⁶² See Chapter 2 for a more detailed discussion of multidirectional memory.

⁶³ Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 22.

Racial violence's repetition seems to violate narrative teleology and closure. Darren Wilson drew upon older narratives and racial associations to justify Mike Brown's murder, calling him "superhuman" and a "beast." Rodney King was similarly accused of being on PCP and also displaying superhuman strength. These racialized ideas are the national ideas and imaginaries of race. In its repetition, state and racial violence becomes a type of performance of white supremacy and dominance that finds the national stage all-too-often. According to anthropologist Christen Smith, instances of state-sanctioned racial violence like Scott's murder constitute a "scenario of racial contact," in which these mediated instances exemplify performances equipped with a "process of embodiment and subject making with plots, scripts, and spectacles that have tangible, material effects."⁶⁴ The consequence of such ubiquitous performances is that visibility and the visual realm have become the dominant cartographies to our very understanding of racial violence. The knowability of the visual regime of state-sanctioned violence through police brutality has become the metonym and the dominant trope for all racial violence within the US, and certainly the most legible. Thus, these moments of racial violence act as scenarios whose literal repetition indexes the historical repetition of its visible predecessors: civil rights television gave legibility to King's beating, which operated as a multidirectionality, re-informing civil rights protest as well as the Scott murder.

If Scott's death captured national attention because it was a hyper visible moment that revealed a systemic fragment of white supremacy via police enforcement, Sandra Bland's death a mere few months later was stunning in its contrast. The mystery surrounding Bland's death revealed the intersections of patriarchy and white supremacy as it collided with state-sanctioned violence. In Taylor's concept of the scenario, "its portable framework bears the weight of

⁶⁴ Christen Smith, "Scenarios of Racial Contact: Police Violence and the Politics of Performance and Racial Formation in Brazil," *e-misfèria* 5, no. 2 (2008).

accumulative repeats. The scenario makes visible, yet again, what is already there: the ghosts, the images, the stereotypes... The scenario structures our understanding. It also haunts our present, a form of hauntology that resuscitates and reactivates old dramas.”⁶⁵ This unknowability has become a continual haunting with the prevalent question circulating “what happened to #sandrabland” on Twitter after her death. Bland has become emblematic precisely because she asks of us to consider the faulty equivalences of visibility, publicness, and safety with media technology. This becomes particularly poignant considering the role visibility plays in her memory: the hypervisibility of her arrest and her knowledge surrounding the value of these images contrasts with the obsfucation, hiddenness, and unknowability of her death.

The hashtags that emerged from this mystery, #SayHerName and #IfIDieInPoliceCustody, mark a complicated nexus of discourses related to the dominance of vision, the nuanced forms of surveillance, and media specificity. What is more, they index the highly gendered dynamics of both cultural memory and the narratives of racial violence, and the acts of imagination that can occur in the absence of visual evidence. They comprise a new representational form for racial violence as well as a new politics of representation, all within Twitter’s experiential stream.

#SayHerName

In Elizabeth Alexander’s article “‘Can You be BLACK and Look at This?’: Reading the Rodney King Video(s),” she investigates how previous archival instances of racial violence inform Black spectators’ reading of the Rodney King beating videotape. Alexander invokes previous legacies of documentation, most notably from slave narratives and the infamous

⁶⁵ Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 28.

photograph of Emmett Till, to demonstration how the sensorial modes of the King tape's exhibition function in relationship to the past. Alexander begins by detailing Frederick Douglass' 1845 autobiography and how the pivotal and brutal scene of witnessing his aunt's beating augments the ocular with the aural:

I would awaken at the dawn of day by the most heart-rending of shrieks of an own aunt of mine, whom he used to tie up to a joist, and whip upon her naked back till she was literally covered with blood. No words, no tears, no prayers, from his gory victim, seemed to move his iron heart from its bloody purpose. The louder she screamed, the harder he whipped.... He would whip her to make her scream, and whip her to make her hush....⁶⁶

In this horrible account, the eliciting and policing of sound—"He would whip her to make her scream, and whip her to make her hush"—makes the aural the primary, legible focus and sensory register of Douglass' retelling.

Moreover, the author examines the 1955 murder of Emmett Till, one of the most iconic visual instances of anti-Black violence. The fourteen-year-old Black Chicagoan was visiting Mississippi relatives when he was kidnapped, beaten, shot in the head, and thrown into the river, all for allegedly whistling at a white woman. Upon seeing Till's waterlogged and mutilated face, Mamie Till, Emmett's mother insisted on an open, glass-topped casket "so all the world [could] see"⁶⁷ the atrocity of the crime.⁶⁸ Thousands gathered and the photograph of Till that appeared in *Jet* galvanized a generation of Black spectators into civil rights activism. Alexander lingers on the visual means by which Black spectators found profound resonances of Till's murder within their own biography. I use this example, however, to emphasize how Till's death stems from an

⁶⁶ Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 1995).

⁶⁷ See Maurice Berger, *All for the World to See: Visual Culture and the Struggle for Civil Rights* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010).

⁶⁸ Elizabeth Alexander, "'Can You Be BLACK and Look at This?': Reading the Rodney King Video(s)," in *The Black Public Sphere: A Public Culture Book*, ed. The Black Public Sphere Collective (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995),

auricular violation of racial propriety. His alleged whistle became a sonic representative of perceived sexual threat against a white woman and virtue, underscoring how the sonic enacts multiple registers of policing and racial violence.

For Black women, in particular, the consequences of such aural rebellion can be found one the most “brutal acts of mob violence on record.”⁶⁹ In 1918, Mary Turner, a Black woman from Valdosta, Georgia, publicly threatened to press charges against the men who had lynched her husband. Before a crowd of several hundred, Turner was hung upside down, shot, set on fire before “a member of the mob cut open her belly and her unborn baby fell on the ground; it was stomped to death after it gave out a cry.” One newspaper justified the lynching by stating that “the people in their indignant mood took exceptions to her remarks as well as her attitude.”⁷⁰ In essence, Turner and her unborn child were lynched in response to her sonic audacity.

As Turner’s example demonstrates, for Black women to register dissent is both profound and profoundly dangerous. While it will never be revealed precisely what happened to Sandra Bland in that unmonitored jail cell, it is clear that her verbal confrontation with Encinia contributed to her arrest. To be sure, it was Bland’s escalating, voiced annoyance and contempt that caused Encinia to similarly “[take exception] to her remarks as well as her attitude.” Bland’s engagement in a vocal sparring match with Encinia, and the act of voicing indeed her pleasure in threatening to take him to court for the arrest expresses the conviction of her own agency, and her confidence in the protections provided by the criminal justice system. Then, when she sees the bystander recording the incident, her cries of gratitude testify to the assumed accountability of visual documentation. Bland’s challenges and questioning of Encinia’s ability to justify his

⁶⁹ Julie Buckner Armstrong, “The People... Took Exception to Her Remarks”: Meta Warrick Fuller, Angelina Weld Grimke, and the Lynching of Mary Turner,” *The Mississippi Quarterly* Winter (2008): 113.

⁷⁰ Quoted in *ibid.*, 113.

actions represent what Regina Bradley has called a “sonic disrespectibility.”⁷¹ The response to that sonic disrespectability was swift. In the dash cam video of the incident, when Sandra Bland continues to voice her disbelief over these disproportionate actions for a minor traffic violation, Encinia asks her to step out of the vehicle and threatens to “light [her] up.” When he slams her to the ground and holds her there, Bland exclaims that this might trigger her epilepsy—and it is only then that she is forced into silence through pain and fear. And only when she is silenced and whimpering in pain does Encinia finally relent. He takes her into custody and three days later Bland would be dead.

The consequences Bland suffered for the audacity of speaking illuminate the high stakes of the sonic for Black women. The incident resonates in ways that profoundly reflect the very nature of the #SayHerName hashtag, which both commands a metaphorical articulation upon the reader and eschews the visual realm for a networked commemoration through Twitter.⁷² The #SayHerName hashtag appeared on Twitter almost immediately after the video of Bland began circulating on social media and journalistic sites. The aural is a place of witnessing, Alexander notes. Thus, the hashtag is at once a command and a plea: a command to reject the silence that normally resounds when Black women are killed by police with little to no publicity and a plea for Bland’s collective commemoration. Thus, the hashtag is a declaration, a dissent, a witnessing, and a request for user interactivity. It articulates how the twinned oppressions of race and gender have rendered Black women invisible in dominant narratives of police violence and refuses to let Bland and other Black women remain unmourned and forgotten, activating instead networked

⁷¹ Regina N. Bradley, “Sandra Bland: Say Her Name Loud or Not at All,” *Sounding Out!*, November 16, 2015; available at <http://soundstudiesblog.com/2015/11/16/sandra-bland-sayhername-loud/>

⁷² This is in contrast to the corporeal and visual gesture of “Hands Up, Don’t Shoot” that BLM activists have used to commemorate Mike Brown.

ties of collective memory and interaction. The specificity of #SayHerName invokes Taylor's argument of cultural memory embodied through performance:

...the bodies participating in the transmission of knowledge and memory are themselves a product of certain taxonomic, disciplinary, and mnemonic systems. Gender impacts how these bodies participate, as does ethnicity.... The mental frameworks—which include images, stories, and behaviors—constitute a specific archive and repertoire.⁷³

While Taylor's insights relate to embodiment and the ways that bodies transmit memory, the hashtag's similarly enacts a form of embodiment that denies the non-corporeal performance of online life. Poignantly, the hashtag amplifies Bland's original sonic disrespectibility by unifying and sustaining protest in an online, fevered shout. The hashtag urges us to say her name, circumventing the precariousness of the visual by grappling instead with the sonic through the networked dynamics of both Twitter as a technological tool and Black Lives Matter as a network itself.

#IfIDieInPoliceCustody

If #SayHerName invokes another sensory realm in order to disrupt and revise the national imaginings and memory of racial violence, #IfIDieInPoliceCustody is a situated, albeit bleak envisioning of the future. If, as Smith argues, these police encounters are national performances, then these tweets, these 140 characters, can be seen a type of counter performance or expressive practice that insists on the continuation of the performance, now rendered visible through text. Despite the fact that the call and response dynamics of Black Twitter have different intentions and motivations than those of the #IfIDieInPoliceCustody, the meta-discourse of these hashtags is clearly illuminated in these testimonies. To be sure, the hashtag #IfIDieInPoliceCustody is a crucial element to the serialized story of Sandra Bland's death and part of the larger scenario of

⁷³ Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*, 86.

racial violence, in general. As previously discussed, the role of the visual is poignant: Bland's gratitude for the visual capture of her arrest would be recontextualized within an assemblage of discourses and eventually come to haunt her death. Therefore, these tweets are acts of interlocution that accrue legibility within a network of amalgamation, virality, and spectatorship. What is more, the tweets become more than the sum of their parts; they are performances, testimonies, anticipatory living wills.



Figure 10: Screenshot of #IfIDieInPoliceCustody hashtag Twitter feed, July 29, 2015.
Source: Twitter

The idea of tweets acting as notarized public statements is a fact made even more visible by the users themselves. Take, for example, the above #IfIDieInPoliceCustody-hashtagged feed,

in which Twitter user @Pythagoras on July 29, 2015, asked: “Can Twitter be our living will? Hope so.” His identification of the hashtag as a public notary testifies to the lack of official avenues for Black voices to be heard and presumed innocent before the criminalization of their death. The phrase “fearing for my life” in the face of almost-superhuman Black strength has been invoked in numerous instances of police-sanctioned violence and death: Rodney King’s assailants used it in conjunction with accusations that he was on PCP; Darren Wilson used a variance of this statement to dehumanize Mike Brown and justify the shooting; the reports of Trayvon Martin’s recreational drug use and social media accounts were circulated as proof that he was not “a good kid.” As user “Super (Black) Woman @The_Femini” on August 10, 2015, put it: “its so sad that black ppl have to consider making #IfIDieInPoliceCustody tweets just to keep our character intact after our deaths.” Likewise, user “@TFB_king13”’s post under the #IfIDieInPoliceCustody hashtag, accompanied by multiple images, seemed to speak to this very tendency. The images appear to show (presumably) the user in an array of situations, but the most compelling is a picture of him cradling his newborn nephew or niece, with an in-image text reading, “World’s best uncle.” His use of images aligns him with the tropes of respectability politics—a type of publicity tactic that coheres to bourgeoisie notions of taste and decorum meant to appeal to the moral consciousness of mainstream US society. Sartorial markers are important signifiers in this; as Robin Kelley notes, “the political implications of dress as an assertion of dignity and resistance should not be dismissed as peripheral... Clothes have their social meanings....”⁷⁴ Thus, “TFB_king13”’s inclusion of an image of himself wearing formal attire serves as a clear marker of distinction and respectability. The humanizing element of these pictures cannot be underemphasized, especially in light of Martin and Brown’s post-mortem

⁷⁴ Robin Kelley, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), 45.

criminalization. The powerful visual rhetorics of this user become makeshift, notarized public statements that position images meant to speak back to an anticipated future vilification. In essence, these tweets are the anticipatory disruptions of a future obituary pre-inscribed by racial profiling and criminalization.

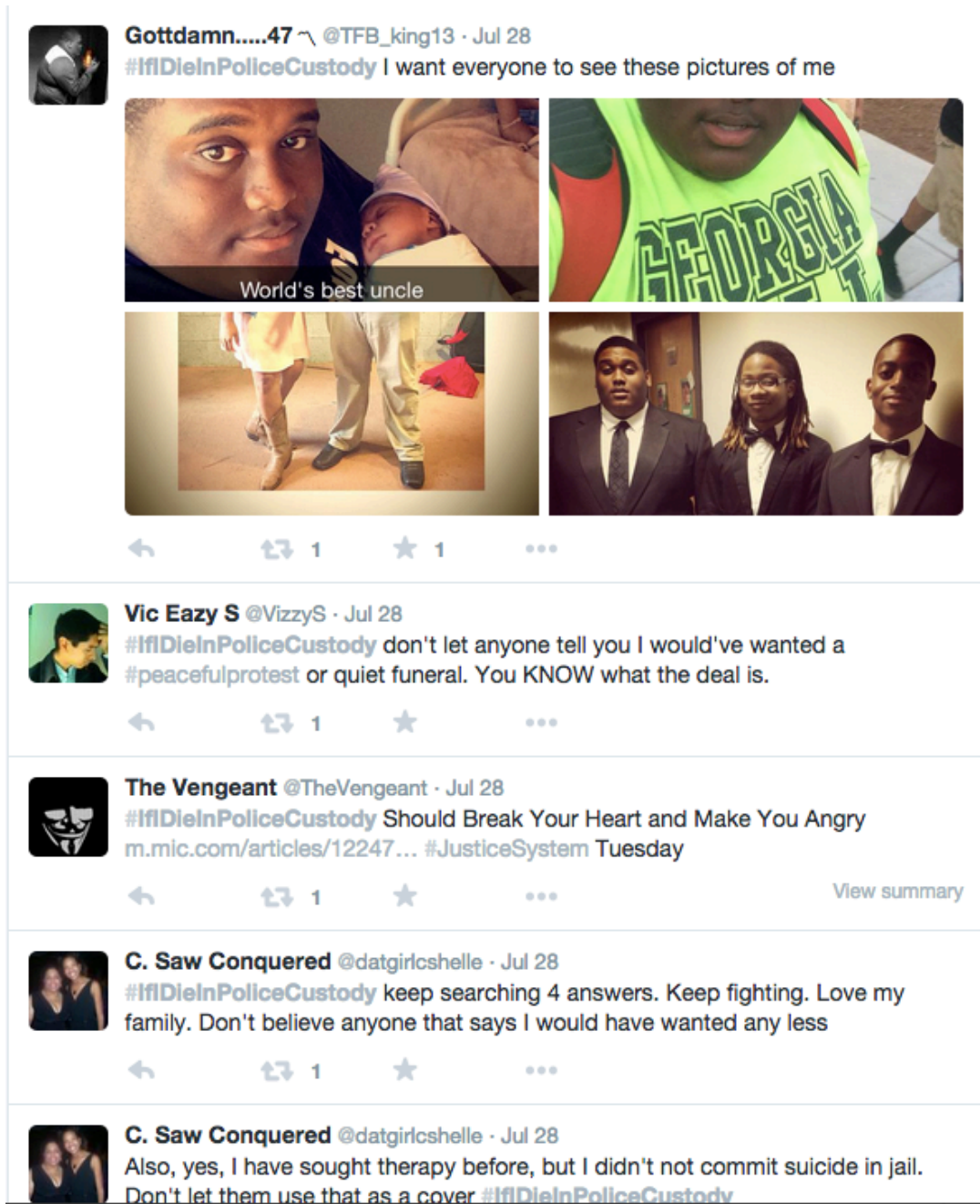



Figure 11: Screenshot of #IfIDieInPoliceCustody Twitter feed, July 28, 2015. Source: Twitter


In contrast, “Dria, @carefreedria” points out, the effort to humanize oneself should not have to ascribe to respectability politics. Instead, she insists: “do not say ‘I was a good kid; because this does not pertain to my life value. Every single black life...,” exemplifying what Lisa Marie Cacho describes as the “social value of life.” In “Racialized Hauntings of the Devalued Dead,” Cacho explores her own complex emotional responses to her cousin’s death, reckoning with the fact she struggled and failed to ascribe value to his life and life choices. For Cacho, it was an inherently complicated task precisely because her cousin Brandon failed to embody normative markers of good citizenship through respectability and productivity. Calling him a “bad kid,” “deviant subject,” and “unproductive citizen,” Cacho identifies that value is made relationally: “Lindon Barrett theorized that value needs negativity; the ‘object’ of value needs an ‘other’ of value as its ‘negative resource.’”⁷⁵ In resisting that narrative and the conscription of value to “good” kids only, @carefreedria rejects the capitalistic neoliberal order and respectability politics that appraise productivity and ascribe value while simultaneously justifying the killing of Black people deemed “unworthy.”

⁷⁵ Lisa Marie Cacho, “Racialized Hauntings of the Devalued Dead” in *Strange Affinities: The Gender and Sexual Politics of Comparative Racialization*, ed. Grace Hong and Roderick Ferguson (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 26–27.


 **Justice League NYC** @NYjusticeleague · Aug 3
 "I will light you up!" - He said.
 "Quit faking!" - He said.

Our women are not seen as human.
 #SayHerName #IfIDieInPoliceCustody


← ↻ 14 ★ 15 ...

 **Justice League NYC** @NYjusticeleague · Aug 3
 We CLAIM THE HUMANITY OF THESE WOMEN. We SEE them. We FEEL 4 them. We MOURN them. #SayHerName #IfIDieInPoliceCustody

← ↻ 7 ★ 4 ...

 **SuperProducerLFieldz** @IAm_LFieldz · Aug 3
 I was happy, I loved my family and I enjoyed making music.... I'm not depressed or suicidal #IfIDieInPoliceCustody I didn't harm myself.


← ↻ 4 ★ 3 ...

 **ahlon gavins.** @foxychocolate · Aug 3
 Photoset: micdotcom: #IfIDieInPoliceCustody is the tragic hashtag we now need The tragic and widely... tumblr.co/ZeqLYy1r7Q64R

not end my own life. And protest in the spirit of the founding fathers.

10:03 AM - 17 Jul 2015

← ↻ 352 ★ 387

 **dria** @carefreedria Follow

#IfIDieInPoliceCustody do not say "I was a good kid" because this does not pertain to my life value. Every single black life

foxychocolatelady

Figure 12: Screenshot of #IfIDieInPoliceCustody Twitter feed, August 3, 2015.
 Source: Twitter

These tweets indicate the desire and the need to provide evidentiary proof against the inevitable narratives that police officers use to justify the administration of deadly force against

racialized subjects. Returning to Figure 10, user Tiffany Shawn “@mnrtv” tweets, “#IfIDieInPoliceCustody please know suicide has never ever been a consideration of my worst thoughts. Demand answers!” In other words, what “@mnrt” is asking for is accountability and transparency, at the same time that she refuses to believe the official narratives provided by the Texas Prairie View police department. With Bland’s death shrouded in such suspicion, both answers and accountability have been largely absent from the aftermaths of these highly visible deaths. Despite the highly visible Black Lives Matter protests that have disrupted transportation systems, courthouse, and places of commerce, the lack of accountability for the murders of African Americans by police in 2015 has been staggering: no indictments for Mike Brown, Eric Garner, Sandra Bland, Tamir Rice, and a hung jury for Freddie Gray.

Users like “@veggietrucks,” who in Figure 10 asserts “#ifIDieIPoliceCustody it was not by my hand, nor was it justified actions. I would never threaten an officer, period,” have taken to Twitter to articulate preemptive measures to disabuse their deaths from the same public criminalization. While the visual, in theory, has consistently been called upon to provide protection from this type of criminalization and hold officers and others accountable for anti-Black violence, this is rarely the case in practice. These users seek justice and accountability and, at the same time, register an imagined and predictive sense of death and contestation. Such testimonies create a public living will and discursive performativity that gains power through its collectivity and networked capacity. The hashtag is a statement of predictive futurity that announces the ghosts of past as present: the legacy of violence against Black and Brown bodies is always present, but just as evident are the ways that technology, surveillance, and the visible can fail⁷⁶ at any moment when necessary to hide the mechanics of state-sanctioned violence.

⁷⁶ I am specifically referencing Bland’s suicide. Though prisons and jail cells are places of hyper surveillance, visual evidence of her suicide has not been unearthed. This failure of the

That is not to postulate that these users' tweets refuse to reproduce the scene of violence. #IfIDieInPoliceCustody encourages users to imagine their own death and comment on the anticipatory blindness of both mechanisms of surveillance and *souveillance* (literally, surveillance from below— or surveillance from ordinary citizens). The hashtag's hypothetical problematic alludes to a space of anticipatory non-spectatorship— a space of absence and invisibility that is part of a genealogical inheritance from Bland's unseen jail cell to the gaps in the archives of slavery. Therefore, these tweets comprise many other things: commentary on the media coverage and humanity-robbing narratives, as well as a disenfranchisement with visual evidence itself, both in visual evidence's hyper visibility as well as its absence.

Despite the lack of footage and the lack of visual evidence, these Twitter users reproduce Bland's death by referencing to their own subjectivities and imaginings of racial violence. In short, these tweets become acts of what Marcel Stoetzler and Nina Yuval-Davis describe as the situated imagination. In their description, the concept is a “ theory of imagination rooted in corporeality as well as in society; as constructing the social world and its meanings as it is; as well as providing the ‘anticipatory desires’ and resistance to society’s ‘reality-principle.’”⁷⁷ Based on Black feminist standpoint theory, which situates experience as knowledge and refutes claims of objectivity, these authors argue for the crucial project of acknowledging the imaginative as a space of reclamation, knowledge, and investigation. For them, experience is “made by the senses and mediated through the faculties of the intellect and the imagination, produces knowledge as well as imaginings, and along with them meanings, values, visions, goals, and critical and creative, along with reactionary and destructive, potentials. Here lies

visual, in conjunction with the failure of the dash cam video to indict murder charges, demonstrates this idea.

⁷⁷ Marcel Stoetzler and Nina Yuval-Davis, "Standpoint theory, Situated Knowledge and the Situated Imagination," *Feminist Theory* 3, no. 3 (2002), 324.

rooted the possibility and indeterminacy of (or else the ‘freedom’ to) social change.”⁷⁸ In many ways, Twitter is a situated forum for such acts of situated imagination: the interface encourages these imaginative and creative impulses through its constrictive 140-character interface. As Twitter’s Creative Director Biz Stone has assessed, “creativity comes from constraint.”⁷⁹ Retained even once Twitter move to desktops and web clients and subsequently re-narrated as a distinctive feature, the formalistic and technocultural aspect of this 140-character limit encourages creativity through brevity. Twitter’s readability in these instances forces users to be concise yet imaginative and creative with their modes of communication. In this economy of language, conciseness can be powerful indeed: even the hashtags themselves, #BlackLivesMatter, #SayHerName, #IfIDieInPoliceCustody, operate in the registers of the poetic and the profound, the urgent and the contextual. What is more, the aforementioned prominence of Black users who engage Twitter is much higher than other social networks, precisely because of its mobile usage and adoption. Thus, in a very nuanced way, it is a prime venue for the situated knowledges and situated imagination of Black users that differs from the conventions of Black Twitter in distinct ways.

Although #IfIDieInPoliceCustody does not explicitly call out its Black referentiality, its nuanced intent is nonetheless clear. In tweets that imagine their own death, users perform a type of profound commemoration, whereby the subjectivity of Bland gets rewritten as their own. The hashtag promotes identification with Bland by drawing upon the history and situatedness of Black communities’ historical interactions with policing and state-sanctioned violence. It is a type of mutual inhabiting that illuminates the digital strategies of presence that these users enact when linked together. This mutual inhabiting can also be characterized as what Marianne Hirsch

⁷⁸ Stoezler and Yuval-Davis, 326.

⁷⁹ Carolyne Zinko, “What is Biz Stone Doing?,” *SF Gate*, April 5, 2009. <http://www.sfgate.com/living/article/What-is-Biz-Stone-doing-3165704.php>

describes as postmemory.⁸⁰ Analyzing photography as the visual means of transmission, Hirsch's concept identifies that some memories that predate people's birth are so powerful and deep, sometimes so traumatic, that they constitute memories in their own right. While Hirsch focuses on the dynamism of family and gender as the enabling space for Holocaust remembrance, Elizabeth Alexander notes, "black people [have forged] a traumatized collective historical memory which is reinvoked at contemporary sites of conflict."⁸¹ Jodi Kim's examination of the postmemories of WWII Japanese internment utilizes Hirsch's concept to analyze author David Mura's own literary and imaginative projection of memories onto his father. Kim identifies that Mura uses his own creative renderings of the past to fill in the silences and gaps for his father's time in internment camps. His imaginative projections indicate that postmemory and creative transmission of memory can exist even in repression of memory itself, created by the heavy silences of repression and forced generational historical and personal amnesia.⁸² Mura's acts of postmemory are a retrospective act, the intentions of which are to fill in a historical vacuum created by trauma. This concept has clear implications for the #IfIDieInPoliceCustody for users who engage with the creative prompt in the hashtag itself. In this way, users' collective imagination becomes a source of alternative epistemology that simultaneously announces and surpasses its own borders. Importantly, Mura's retrospective postmemory contrasts with the futurity and *anticipatory* imaginative acts of these users.

Whereas Stoetzler and Yuval-Davis' claims position the situated imagination as producing an imaginative liberation, the scenes of imagined death contained in these tweets are no less

⁸⁰ Marianne Hirsch, "Surviving Images: Holocaust Photographs and the Work of Postmemory," *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 14, no. 1 (2001): 5–37.

⁸¹ Alexander, "'Can You Be BLACK and Look at This?': Reading the Rodney King Video(s)," 83.

⁸² Jodi Kim, *Ends of Empire: Asian American Critique and the Cold War* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2010)

imaginative and no less necessary. In fact, the grim imaginative acts of #IfIDieInPoliceCustody open up the insurrectional qualities of ontology itself. These acts imagine a death that has not yet happened but they also open up the questions of ontology that asks whose lives are made valid through the extension of reality making or worlding? And finally, how might reality be remade in this preemptive articulation?

In Nicholas Mirzoeff's *The Right to Look*, he charts how visuality has been dominated by regimes of looking. Looking across period and continents, he describes visuality as the act of authority, domination, and colonization, as it is the visualization of (colonized) history. Countervisuality, in contrast, is the rebuttal of the domination and a resistance to the grand narrative of looking, a decolonized "right to look." For Mirzoeff, counter visuality is a political project geared towards "the attempt to reconfigure visuality as a whole."⁸³ In this way, these tweets contain an intersectional postmemory of racial violence's trauma and a critique of the history of spectatorship. These users' imaginative and situated tweets undermine the very basic assumptions surrounding visual evidence and racial violence. Through their articulations of an anticipatory non-spectatorship, these Twitter users register a deep suspicion of the photographic and its uses, indexing how contentious the visual regime of racial violence has become.

In essence, these users transmit their deep skepticism of the ocularcentrism of racial violence's renderings.⁸⁴ The term ocularcentrism has been used describe the older philosophical ideal of sight as the noblest of the five senses but a more contemporary usage describes the tendency to imagine the past in visual terms.⁸⁵ Martin Jay used the term in the late 1980s efforts

⁸³ Nicholas Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011) 24.

⁸⁴ For visual studies seminal works, see John Berger's *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin UK, 1972); Hal Foster, ed., *Vision and Visuality* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1988); David Freedberg, *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

⁸⁵ Cook, "Seeing the Visual in US History."

to denaturalize older Enlightenment models of vision as the Western master sense⁸⁶ and to question the critical impulse of the reliance on the visual as a regime of truth over other sensory registers. These tweets position their writers as both spectators and creators of their own potential scenes of subjection and death not through the visual regime but through a subjective reading of text. In this way, the tweets constitute a rejection of the documentary and constitute a refusal to look rather than a right to look, informing a process of counter visibility's reconfiguration that rejects the totality of the visual's truth. In other words, these tweets assert the primacy and validity of personal imagination and futurity as knowledge. Within Twitter's network, these collective expressions constitute a new form of documentation. For these users, the most valuable knowledge produced by the visual capture of racial violence is the awareness that technology's promise to serve as savior is just that—a promise, as yet unfulfilled.

But if Twitter's experiential mode is a never-ending stream that merges text, images, and videos, with site design and user interactivity rather than the dark confines of the theater or the glowing screen of the television within the American home (which to be fair, all include different levels of audience interactivity), then the logics of looking have been drastically supplemented and changed. Counter visibility is perhaps a misnomer that simplifies that which has become increasingly supplanted by an experiential multi-sensorial mode of the stream rather than purely *just* the visual.

Within #SayHerName and #IfIDieInPoliceCustody are users' interactions with sensory and imaginative acts that speak to the ubiquity and fatigue⁸⁷ with consumptive visual practices of racial violence. These hashtags and the users that utilize them illuminate the alternative spaces

⁸⁶ Martin Jay, "Scopic Regimes of Modernity" in *Vision and Visuality*, ed. Hal Foster (Seattle: Bay Press, 1988).

⁸⁷ The aforementioned Brittany Cooper's piece about Walter Scott exemplifies this fatigue.

that can be uncovered by critiquing the visual regime and turning instead to a multi-sensorial mode of subjectivity that incorporates reading practices, looking, listening, and world-making through the technocultural specificities of Twitter. As Simone Browne, writing on the surveillance of Black subject, writes, “rather than looking solely to those moments when blackness is violently illuminated, I highlight certain practices, rituals and acts of freedom and situate these moments as interactions with surveillance systems that are both strategies of coping and of critique. This is to say that ‘ritual heals’ and ‘constitutes the social form in which human beings seek to deal with denial as active agents, rather than as passive victims.’”⁸⁸ Thus, Twitter’s important capacity might not necessarily be the singular ability to circulate images and “live tweet” events as they happen. It might also be the ways that these specific hashtags register a distrust of the visual. It might be the way they represent a new experiential mode of racial violence. And it might be the way that these hashtags disrupt the hegemony of the visual as innately evidentiary, challenging the associated narrative conceptions of spectacle, racial violence, and technological rescue.

⁸⁸ Simone Browne, "Everybody's Got a Little Light Under the Sun: Black Luminosity and the Visual Culture of Surveillance," *Cultural Studies* 26, no. 4 (2012), 546.

CHAPTER SIX EPILOGUE

In December 2014, the UK series *Black Mirror* became available in the US through Netflix's video streaming service. The series, dubbed a dystopian, *Twilight Zone*-inspired take on modern technology and its effects, consists of two seasons, with each episode foregrounding the contradictory and dark nature of technology and media in daily life in the global north. Though the series is a British export, *Black Mirror*'s season 2 episode, "White Bear," provided an unintended resonant critique and eerily prescient comment on the current political climate in the US.¹ Indeed, the timing of the series' online availability in the US to more than fifty-million Netflix subscribers² coincided with a growing awareness of #BlackLivesMatter, a national protest movement centered on stopping police brutality and state-sanctioned violence against Black citizens. The list of highly visible instances of state-sanctioned death that surrounded *Black Mirror*'s online availability included Oscar Grant in Oakland, California, whose death was captured by mobile phone video; Trayvon Martin in Florida, whose devastating cry was recorded by a 9-1-1 operator; Mike Brown, whose bullet-ridden body lay on a Ferguson, Missouri, street for four hours; Eric Garner, whom bystanders recorded dying from an illegal chokehold administered by New York police; and Sandra Bland in Prairie View, Texas, whose videotaped response from an unlawful traffic citation would be a haunting precursor to her alleged suicide in a Texas jail cell.

¹ *Black Mirror*, "White Bear," written by Charlie Brooker and directed by Carl Tibbins (Channel 4, February 18, 2013).

² James O'Toole, "Netflix passes 50 million subscribers," *CNN Money*, July 22, 2014.

With such recorded incidents of state-sanctioned violence providing the social backdrop to the US availability of “White Bear,” the parable on spectatorship, voyeurism, mobile video technology, punishment, and the spectacle of violence came at a time when such questions and issues were at the forefront of US consciousness. Acclaimed within critics circles as it is tech press (*Tech Insider* called the show “must-watch” and “one of the best new TV shows”³) recommendations for the show appeared on my Facebook wall alongside political critiques of police brutality, white supremacy, and the prison-industrial complex spurred by the #BlackLivesMatter movement, as activists used Twitter as an organizing tool to spread its messaging. The hashtag #BlackLivesMatter was created by three Black, radical, queer women based in Oakland—Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullers, and Opal Tometi—all of whom were galvanized by the highly publicized death of Trayvon Martin, a black teenager shot and killed by neighborhood watch volunteer George Zimmerman. The hashtag was conceptualized as an “ideological and political intervention in a world where Black lives are systematically and intentionally targeted for demise. It is an affirmation of Black folks’ contribution to this society, our humanity, and our resilience in the face of deadly oppression.”⁴ As instances of state-sanctioned violence against African Americans became increasingly high profile thanks to the ubiquity of recording devices on cell phones, #BLM’s publicity and protest campaigns, and increasing media scrutiny, it catapulted the topic of anti-Black, state-sanctioned racial violence into a national issue. Black Lives Matter would become, in the words of CNN, a “‘social juggernaut’ [that] changed the ways people talk about police brutality and inequality.”⁵

³ Dave Smith, “Everyone Should Watch Black Mirror,” *Tech Insider*, December 28, 2015, <http://www.techinsider.io/everyone-should-watch-black-mirror-2015-12>.

⁴ Alicia Garza, “A Herstory of the Black Lives Matter Movement,” *The Feminist Wire*, October 7, 2014, <http://www.thefeministwire.com/2014/10/blacklivesmatter-2/>.

⁵ Sara Sidner and Mallory Simon, “The Rise of Black Lives Matter: Trying to Break the Cycle of Violence and Silence,” *CNN.com*, December 28, 2015, <http://www.cnn.com/2015/12/>

It is within this social and political context that I watched “White Bear,” an episode that serves as a dark exploration of the ties between technology, visibility, racial violence, and the criminal justice system. The episode begins abruptly, with a Black woman named Victoria Skillane jolting awake in her living room in front of an illuminated television screen transmitting an irregular geometric symbol. As she explores her surroundings, Victoria comprehends that she has survived a failed suicide attempt from medicated pills; the pills have failed to end her life, but they have inexplicably wiped her memory. Exploring the streets of an eerily empty town, she finally spies people through the windows of neighboring homes and attempts to communicate with them. The people, mostly white, middle-class British citizens, fail to react to her desperate pleas for assistance but, instead, unceasingly yet silently record her actions on their mobile phones. As her frustration grows and her cries attract more silently recording spectators, the dynamic shifts to contained excitement. A masked man appears, reaches into the back of his car to remove a shotgun, and starts hunting Victoria with an apparent determination to kill. It becomes clear that this is a dystopic world in which technology has compelled people to become either psychotic killers or silent voyeurs, unable to do anything but record on their mobile phones. The rest of the episode takes audiences through a horrific scene of tortured, mutilated, and lynched bodies of women, revealing a terrifying world in which the actual threat of violence is paired disturbingly with the psychological torture from the silent participation and tacit complicity of the voyeurs. As the violence escalates, these spectators refuse to stop filming and intervene, calling into question the equivalences of publicness, visibility, safety, and accountability— equivalences that have also been an underlying presumption of many victims of racial violence such as civil rights protesters and television, Rodney King and camcorder technology, and Sandra Bland and mobile phone video, to name a few. Once Victoria is trapped

[28/us/black-lives-matter-evolution/](https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/28/us/black-lives-matter-evolution/).

and cannot escape from those hunting her, the scene changes shifts again, this time to a stunning metanarrative reveal: this world of silent voyeurs is actually an elaborate amusement park and Victoria is the main attraction.

As viewers, we learn what these silent participants have known all along: that Victoria is guilty of abducting a six-year-old Black girl and using her mobile phone to videotape her murder, committed by Victoria's white fiancé. The intermittent flashbacks that have appeared throughout within the episode are now compiled, and we see Victoria's spectatorial glee at the little girl's murder. We realize that all that came before was an elaborate, staged performance within "Justice Park," designed to punish Victoria by replicating her treatment of her victim. As Victoria weeps and exclaims that she is sorry, it is revealed that she has been and will be forced to repeat this physical and psychological torture in an endless, reiterative loop for a rotating crowd of silent, recording spectators. As the process begins to erase her memory so the punishment and a spectacle of justice can be dispensed anew, Victoria begs for the ringleader of the park to kill her and end her suffering.

The feeling after the episode ends is difficult to describe. Victoria, the episode's seeming protagonist and our point of identification, has been revealed as a perpetrator of the very same complicit violence that we, as viewers, have come to abhor throughout the episode. Yet our identification with Victoria is not necessarily lessened by the disclosure. The narrative evinces instead a contradictory and complicated sense of betrayal. Rather than turning us against Victoria, the betrayal makes us question the whole cycle of "justice" and consider more critically the implications of technology, watching, and witnessing. In a review in *The New Yorker*, author Emily Nussbaum summarized a guiding motif throughout the show's episodes: there is a "a

humane concern at how easily our private desires can be mined in the pursuit of profit.”⁶ Indeed, the episode makes visible how the roles of media technology and spectatorship, memory and forgetting, and the visual economy and spectacle of racial violence become instrumentalized through various means and for various ends. The voyeurs are the watching audience and patrons in a commercialized criminal justice system, where justice has been commodified and sold to citizens/spectators. These people are both voyeurs and participants, interactive actors in an network of mobile technology, and nodes of surveillance for this elaborately staged play of state-sanctioned, commercialized racial violence for restorative justice.

Viewed in the context of the U.S. in December 2014, the episode was particularly haunting because viewers could so easily read it as an indictment of themselves: the spectators in the episode mirrored back a nation of spectators watching anti-Black racial violence but doing nothing, condoning torture and death through their inaction. “White Bear” seemed to make apparent our spectatorial practices and implicate us in a world where technological seeing does not equate to justice or freedom from racial violence but, disturbingly, exacerbates it. In so much as “White Bear” is a fictional text, the Black deaths surrounding my act of watching make the dark world of “White Bear” one where truth and parable intertwine, where fiction and fact become transmutable. When I see Victoria, I cannot help but think of Sandra Bland and her alleged suicide. When I see the ubiquitous, recording phones of “White Bear,” I recall Sandra Bland, upon seeing a bystander recording her arrest, exclaiming in gratitude, “Thank you for recording! Thank you!” In both instances, the presence of technology becomes a torturous hope—that technology’s ability to visually document racial violence will provide accountability at the very least and act as a protective savior at best. But how did media technology’s heroism

⁶ Emily Nussbaum, “The Seductive Dystopia of “Black Mirror,” *The New Yorker*, January 5, 2015, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/01/05/button-pusher>.

become such an entrenched and persistent belief? What exactly are the cartographies of this hidden relationship between new media, seeing, and racial violence? How does this relationship affect the imaginings of race, technology, and racial progress? And finally, how does this relationship create particular modes of spectatorship in the consumption of racial violence? These are the questions that have been the guiding concerns and the constellational center of this dissertation.

These instances of racial violence are historical flashpoints where the intertwined stories and histories of race, media technology, progress, and violence within the US become visible. How these iconic instances of mediated racial violence become apparent and for what ends has been this dissertation's main concern. In my last chapter, "Tweeting the Situated Imagination" I concluded by demonstrating how users' tweets constituted living wills in their imaginings of their own death at the hands of police officers and acts of disenchantment with visual evidence as protective and innately exculpatory. However, I do not wish to end with such a pessimistic yet important act of imagination and visual refusal—I am far from advocating an end to the uses of racial violence's visual representation. The impact of the visual in igniting the work of social justice and shifting the political, social, and cultural discourses in the American society is undeniable; to say otherwise would be historically and intellectually dishonest. However, harboring a suspicion and a criticism over the ways that these images are deployed, used, and consumed is paramount. As Wendy Chun's *Control and Freedom* assesses, "... from the breach between seeing and being seen, between representing and being represented. Publicity is an enabling violence—but not all publicity is the same. The key is to rethink space and time—and language—in order to intervene in this public and to understand how this public intervenes ... in

order to understand how the Internet both perpetuates and alters publicity.”⁷ Indeed, the most interesting questions center on what kinds of critical purposes such spectacles create and advance, what kinds of imaginaries are produced, and what must be attended to and be held accountable for what they obscure and birth in their wake.

Within this critical enterprise, inevitable occlusions, blind spots, and underdevelopments emerge and provide an opportunity for expansion. In its nascent form, *Sights of Racial Violence* began as a comparative ethnic studies project centered on African American and Asian American interactions and cultural productions in response to the 1992 riots. I intended to write not only about cross-racial antipathy, but also about how imaginative acts within a spectator/witness’s subjectivity could form cross-racial affinities, transforming ideas of racial essentialisms, hostilities, and conflict. Though this project has morphed into a trans-media history of racial violence and new forms of media, understanding how the social practices of watching and spectatorship exist in a racial matrix of relationality is still crucial. This project limited its focus to primarily domestic white and Black audiences and users. However, the variegated ways that race functions within the US, the nation’s multi-racial composition, and the interplay between US domestic racial violence and the visual technologies of wars abroad dictate that new media technologies and racial violence must be understood beyond that binary. From the links between Vietnam, the nation’s first living room war, and the civil rights movement, to the First Gulf War and the 1992 riots, to #BlackLivesMatter and present-day drone strike visualizations, the visual vocabularies of racial violence are mired in a history that concretizes and exceeds national borders. Therefore, I hope that future work will examine the nature of domestic and international

⁷ Wendy Chun, *Control and Freedom: Power and Paranoia in the Age of Fiber Optics* (Boston: MIT Press, 2008), 16.

scenes of racial violence and subjection, putting logics of US Empire and militarism and theories of comparative racialization into conversation.

In discourses of cross-racial empathy and racial violence, media technology has been configured as a gift. It bestows upon us the gift of visibility, producing new ways of seeing the world around us, bringing to light the injustices or the hopeful interactions of those thought to be so contrary, rendered antagonists by history and inequity. In the case of racial violence, however, the technology's gift is seemingly more pressing. In this context, the gift is made legible through the idea of freedom— freedom from violence through technology's gift of visibility. In Mimi Nguyen's *The Gift of Freedom*, the author focuses on the subject of freedom as “an object of knowledge and a critical methodology that discloses for us the assemblages and power through which liberal empire orders the world.”⁸ The terms precarity, biopolitics, biopower all bespeak the fact that the discourses of freedom exist in a coupled dyad with violence for legibility. In other words, the gift of freedom for some is contingent on and precedent to the seeming necessity of violence unto others. While I do not dispute this relationship, this dissertation takes this coupling of freedom and violence to an unexpected and different context wherein domestic, mediated anti-blackness and violence marks a profound relationship between the discourses of freedom and progress, not through legislative law and war, but through the media technology. While the contours of the relationship are merely sketched within dissertation, investigating these constructs of freedom more fully is a critical endeavor that hopefully will be pursued by others.

Moreover, to attend to the matters of watching, witnessing, emotion, and imagination activated in such acts as part of our methodological and critical process pushes us to reassess the

⁸ Mimi Thi Nguyen. *The Gift of Freedom: War, Debt, and Other Refugee Passages* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 5.

facets of what remains permanent or ephemeral. Attending to the history of media technology and racial violence would not be complete without identifying that part of the archive I examine is ephemeral. For instance, Twitter's time-sensitive capacity for storage means that the tweet is itself is an archival object both fixed (contained in a server) and ephemeral (but only for a time). The tweets constitute a fragile archive, wherein these tweets will disappear and no longer be available. In "White Bear," Victoria's experience of racial violence is predicated on the forgetting of the perpetual and reiterative racial performance of her terror and subjection in a public, surveilled world— a simultaneously poignant, disturbing, and accurate way to describe new media and racial violence's history within the US. However, what endures might not be in the objects and archives left behind but in the ways that audiences remember their own acts of witnessing, watching, and feeling. As this dissertation has shown, these processes have enabled alternative possibilities for accountability and visibility as well as circumscribed discourses of racial progress. Thus, the task and challenge of watching the sights of racial violence undoubtedly remains locating those futurities and acts of resistance that overcome, challenge, and change this historical trajectory.

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