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Black bodies at risk: Exploring the corporeal iconography of the anti-police brutality movement

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Abstract

Black bodies at risk are in constant conversation with each other. The Black witness who films a fatal police encounter on her phone is talking to the Black victim, promising not to leave him in his final moments. The distant Black witness who sees that video then talks back to the witness and the victim, creating powerful imagery that amplifies the tragic footage. In this manner, those working under the broad banner of the Black Lives Matter movement have reimagined a dynamic Black visual public sphere, where moral arguments about police brutality are sustained through an assemblage of strategic visual appeals. In this essay, I argue that this call-and-response of Black corporeal iconography forms the vanguard of embodied protest journalism in the 21st century. I explain how the concepts of "strong objectivity," which is rooted in feminist standpoint theory, help validate and liberate the flesh witnessing of the marginalized. Moreover, I offer two broad categories of imagery that Black activists create most often in response to fatal police shootings: historic juxtapositions and symbolic deaths.

Keywords

Black Lives Matter, crisis communication, embodied witnessing, objectivity, protest journalism, truth, visual public sphere

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Introduction

"Please don't shoot her," I whispered. Someone had emailed me a clip of Brittany "Bree" Newsome's now-iconic climb to the top of the 30-foot flagpole at the South Carolina state house. I watched the petite, African American woman scale it with apparent ease, then calmly cut down the Confederate flag. She raised the traditional symbol of white nationalism and said: "You come against me with hatred and oppression and violence. I come against you in the name of God. This flag comes down today! (The Tribe, 2015)"

Newsome made it down the pole safely and into the waiting handcuffs of area authorities. "I am prepared to be arrested," Newsome told the police—one white, the other black—as she unhooked herself from the flagpole. The police helped her over a small fence that surrounded it. "The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?" she said breathlessly as she was taken into police custody. Her partner, James Tyson, who had been filming the protest with his smartphone, was arrested too that Saturday, June 27, 2015.

Newsome's choice of Scripture punctuated a painful realization: just ten days before her civil disobedience, Dylann Roof, a white man, had gone into Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, participated in an hour of Bible study, and fatally shot nine black people. Various legacy media outlets reported that he wanted to start a "race war." The imagery of a black woman with the Confederate flag in her hands thus activated Twitter that Saturday morning. Hours after her climb, the hashtag #FreeBree began trending. A San Francisco-based organization, called CREDO Action, opened an IndieGogo crowdfunding account to raise money for her bail. Celebrities, such as the NBA's Dwyane Wade, urged people to donate. The campaign exceeded its goal of US$ 20,000 in less than a day—garnering US$ 70,000 in just 7 hours. In the following weeks, Newsome appeared in a round of morning news shows. Artists even rendered her in cartoon form, often as a superhero (Moreno, 2015; Ramsey, 2015). The Movement for Black Lives had a new icon. In this article, I wish to explore the powerful, deliberate, and fresh imagery that activists working under this banner have inspired.

When faced with video after video of fatal police shootings of Black men, women, and children, African American protesters have responded by creating a new kind of public sphere. Unlike the discursive public spheres that were first posited by Habermas et al. (1991), Fraser (1990), and Squires (2002), today's reboot leverages iconography, rather than text, to make strong political appeals. Pullen (2011) has surmised accordingly, "Public debate now relies heavily on visual images rather than verbal discourse, as traditional news outlets as well as new media traffic in images as much as words." The problem with this pictorial turn, however, is that its critics question whether grand, performative acts of protest that are staged for smartphones, such as Bree Newsome's, can be classified as objective forms of crisis reporting (Moller Hartley and Askanius, 2020).

Priorly, scholars have referred to this as the dominant "paradigm of veridiction," in which professional journalists sought to report the objective truth through "courageous free speech" (Barker, 2019). By this logic, anyone operating outside of the legacy media space was assumed to be biased and inherently untruthful. Both reporters and news audiences have been skeptical of Black Lives Matter-themed video footage, therefore, on

the grounds that user-generated content from activists holds inherent bias (Klein, 2020). *How can Black citizen journalists, who report from the conflict zones of their own communities, report news neutrally?*, some have asked.

I argue that this emphasis on Black citizen journalists' objectivity undermines their ability to reimagine a compelling visual public sphere for global news publics. Instead of focusing on their impartiality, I believe media scholars must instead expand existing news epistemologies to consider the kinds of risky, embodied crisis communication—or what Harari (2009) calls "flesh witnessing"—that contemporary Black activists produce most commonly. I offer two broad typologies of Black flesh witnessing that fit this description: historic juxtapositions and symbolic deaths. In the essay that follows, I will explain how both techniques have leveraged mobile-mediated images of Black bodies at risk to convey urgent reportage.

First, I will explain how Black witnessing, in the US context, has been dangerous work, for more than 200 years. Next, I will share how the careful creation and deployment of the Black visual public sphere has served as a historical counter narrative since the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. Lastly, I will explore how today's Black Lives Matter movement protesters have used their bodies-at-risk to build upon the visual communication of their forebears. Taken together, I will explain why Black Lives Matter activists' fresh iconography should be deemed a form of embodied protest journalism, which summons moral and political communities in its deliberate mediation of suffering and death.

The truth is in the trauma

Three overlapping eras of domestic terror have shaped Black life in America: slavery, lynching, and, now, police brutality as a gateway to mass incarceration (Richardson, 2020). Throughout the first two eras, African Americans could not bear witness openly to the human rights injustices being meted out against them. Enslaved Black people were not encouraged to look upon their peers who were being beaten or otherwise punished, for example, lest they incur a similar wrath. Bell hooks (2015) wrote accordingly: "The politics of slavery, of racialized power relations, were such that the slaves were denied their right to gaze. …[yet] all attempts to repress our/Black peoples' right to gaze had produced in us an overwhelming longing to look, a rebellious desire, an oppositional gaze."

That repressed gaze contained untapped agency, hooks argued, which took many generations to extract. The Post-Civil War era following Reconstruction was not the time to unleash it, as lynching became the way to control newly freed Black people in the late 1800s. For this reason, lynching photography does not depict groups of African Americans looking on as other Black people were hanged. They were not cowering in the corners of any of the infamous postcards that people once sold to commemorate the killings. African Americans were likely huddled at home or fleeing town altogether (Dray, 2003).

In the mid-20th century, however, the paradigm shifted. For the first time, African Americans could bear witness to mediated accounts of the cruel Jim Crow South with

unaverted eyes. Throughout the 1960s, African American news audiences saw Black bodies bounced around by fire hoses and snarled at by police K-9 German Shepherds on their nightly broadcasts (Bodroghkozy, 2012). They saw their churches hollowed out by bombings, Black teenagers beaten as they attempted to march for the right to vote, and Black college students spat upon during lunch counter sit-ins (Kowal, 2004).

In each of these instances, African American bodies-at-risk conveyed an urgent narrative to the world. Moreover, since Civil Rights Movement-era activists staged their nonviolent demonstrations to coincide with nightly news coverage, theirs is the earliest form of flesh witnessing that privileged embodied crisis communication over journalistic objectivity. For news audiences, the truth was in the trauma. Photography historian Raiford (2007) has explained: "For [Dr. Martin Luther] King, the visual media proved a crucial means of capturing 'fugitive' brutality, holding it still for scrutiny, and transmitting this 'naked truth' to watching and judging audiences."

In the 1990s, the visual paradigm advanced yet again when George Holliday captured officers from the Los Angeles Police Department beating Rodney King along a California highway. Holliday used a Handycam to record the incident, then sold it to a local television news outlet. The video went viral, playing on evening news broadcasts around the nation for more than a year. It was the first time that an ordinary bystander had recorded such a graphic act of police brutality. It would not be the last. On New Year's Day, 2009, Oscar Grant lay dying on a train platform in Oakland. More than six people used their cellphones to tell the story of how Officer Johannes Mehserle shot him in the back while handcuffed. It was a watershed moment in smartphone witnessing, which ushered in a new era of bearing visual witness (Antony and Thomas, 2010).

During the next decade, as the Black Lives Matter movement grew, the practice of cop-watching grew too. A tragic group of "celebrated cases" of fatal police encounters became major news events (Clark et al., 2017). The deaths of Eric Garner, Alton Sterling, Walter Scott, Philando Castile, George Floyd and so many others were recorded by Black witnesses who needed little more than a cellphone, a WIFI connection, and a Twitter or Facebook account, to amplify police misconduct. Journalists and media scholars have debated whether this form of impassioned witnessing could be classified rightfully as unbiased journalism. A normative tenet of journalism, after all, is objectivity (Schudson, 2001).

In 2000, David T.Z. Mindich wrote rather presciently:

> If American journalism were a religion, as it has been called, then its supreme deity would be "objectivity." …The iconoclasts—purveying advocacy journalism, "new" journalism, and the new, new journalism of the Internet and other media outlets—see "objectivity" as a golden calf (p. 1).

Mindich (2000) went on to say that the concept of objectivity is conflated often with notions of "detachment, fairness, accuracy, and inclusiveness." This has meant that citizen journalists—whom often spoke up from the margins—were not considered far enough away from the injustice at hand to report on it objectively. Muñoz-Torres (2012) has called this an "endless misunderstanding" that has dismissed many valuable testimonies from

informally trained storytellers. Moreover, Chouliaraki (2015) has written that citizen voice is too often portrayed through the lens of the "politics of pity," which "…foregrounds questions of death, victimhood, injury and displacement whilst it backgrounds questions of interest, alliance, rivalry, and power." In the context of Black Lives Matter, this looks like mainstream media looping a fatal police encounter with the casual air of a sports highlight, yet de-emphasizing the root causes of the killing. For these reasons, we need a new way of defining this kind of reportage.

The foundations of today's Black visual public sphere

Understanding how to situate the fresh iconography that Black Lives Matter activists create during times of crisis requires us to revisit Meenakshi Gigi Durham's concept of "standpoint epistemology." In an essay that predates ubiquitous smartphone use and social media, Durham argued in 1998 that journalism needed "strong objectivity" that was rooted in feminist standpoint theory. In the Durham model, journalists would acknowledge their partiality, rather than ignore it. She explained:

> Standpoint epistemology uses the socially situated nature of various knowledge claims as the basis for maximizing objectivity. This involves a reformulation of the term "objectivity," taking it away from any notion of eradicating bias toward a method of acknowledging and incorporating bias into the structure of the scientific method.

In the context of African American mobile journalism, strong objectivity can be informed by a smartphone witness' race, class, gender, and even sexual orientation. These identity markers often create a distinct, counterhegemonic worldview, Durham argued, that has made the oppressed a perfect articulator of their own oppression. Thus, instead of aspiring to a journalistic objectivity that is colorblind and apolitical, media scholars could begin instead to investigate how one's lived experiences of systemic injustice and disenfranchisement provide actually a keener vantage point from which to communicate crisis. Bock's (2018) cop-watcher ethnography seemed to advocate for this necessary turn. Bock found that a "war-like metaphor" colored societal discourse about police brutality, since the dedicated cop-watchers "draw from an overall anti-authoritarian impulse…that generally distrusts institutions and fuels an impulse to individually monitor government activity."

Similarly, in a 2016 study, Bock surmised that: "Using a camera to document events from a citizen's perspective creates a unique record, one that represents not only the camera's facticity but the body's reality." Said differently, smartphone videography of police brutality has required such a close proximity to danger, that one's willingness to insert themselves into the crisis—to embody the peril—has become akin to serving as an embedded professional journalist in a war zone, who would risk life and limb to deliver the narrative intimacy of combat.

Likewise, Black people who have witnessed fatal police shooting videos have reacted often by putting their bodies on the line too, in a kind of corporeal call-and-response. Herein lies the explosion of the new Black visual public sphere. African American

protesters who sought to stand in the gap for the slain—to pick up the baton of reportage from the cop-watchers—have created their own news images that augment the original bystander coverage. In this manner, the cop-watcher video is to the magazine cover as the protester imagery is to the inside feature well. The two forms of visual sense-making are in dialogue with each other.

In fact, the protester's embodied response to the witness' initial, violent video has indicated a level of trust for the videographer. The protester has demonstrated with their body because they have accepted the witness' strong objectivity. They have accepted the witness' biased standpoint and assumed marginality, which made them so close to the trauma in the first place. Lastly, they have accepted that the video alone is only a small part of communicating the long-standing, systemic nature of anti-Black racism in America. They have created, therefore, drastic and dynamic performative acts that are designed to be photographed and filmed—well beyond the initial police brutality victim's death. The activated distant witnesses have achieved this typically by creating two types of corporeal iconography: historic juxtapositions and symbolic deaths. The former visual device has mashed up images of contemporary Black Lives Matter protest with those of social movements past, in an effort to illustrate African Americans' lengthy fight for justice. The latter has involved taking up physical space for the slain, to embody protest on their behalf.

Historic juxtapositions as embodied timelines

Anti-police brutality activists tend to regard today's fatal police encounters not as isolated incidents of Black death captured serendipitously on camera, but as episodic proof of a pattern of abuse that is decades old (Richardson, 2017). Thus, Black Lives Matter activists depict temporal arcs between the various eras of police terror by using their bodies to enact historic juxtapositions. Distant witnesses either: (1) remix an old image in a new context or (2) mash-up an old image alongside a new one to compare and contrast timeframes. Two of the most well-known examples of this were inspired by the Gunpowder Plot of 1605 and the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s. Images of its two martyrs, Guido "Guy" Fawkes and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., respectively, serve as popular templates onto which distant Black witnesses map new meanings.

Remixing old images of resistance. The Gunpowder Plot of 1605 was a failed attempt to assassinate King James I of England and VI of Scotland. A group of nine Catholics, which included Guy Fawkes, planned to bomb the House of Lords during a State Opening of England's Parliament on November 5, 1605. They were protesting religious persecution. After an anonymous letter tipped off the heads of state, Fawkes was found guarding the explosives. At trial, Fawkes was convicted of high treason. He was hanged, drawn, and quartered (Sharpe, 2005). After Fawkes's death in 1606, Parliament designated November 5 as a day of "thanksgiving." Londoners were encouraged to burn effigies of Fawkes. Parades and fireworks eventually punctuated the holiday. Fawkes got a makeover when the film *V for Vendetta* (2005) became a cult classic. A superhero donning a Fawkes mask

took down a fascist regime set in a British dystopia. Thanks to the film, Fawkes's visage suddenly became synonymous with anarchy and rebellion for a new generation.

The Fawkes mask was a prominent fixture in both the global Occupy Movement and the Arab Spring Movement in 2011 (Kohns, 2013). When peaceful protests in Ferguson turned violent in August 2014, Fawkes emerged there too. The first time I saw a brown forehead and ears peeking from behind the white Fawkes mask was online, in an August 21, 2014 *TIME* magazine piece (Rogers, 2015). It was jarring. The person appeared to be African American. He was standing next to a black police officer. A sea of black protestors surrounded them. It was Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* come to life. By the end of the *TIME* article, I was thinking of the black poet Dunbar's (1896) famous lines: "We wear the mask that grins and lies/It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes/This debt we pay to human guile;/With torn and bleeding hearts we smile…" The Fawkes mask was grinning. I am almost certain that its wearer was not.

The masked protestor, however, remixed what was old to give it a new meaning. The presence of Fawkes's white face, rather than the protestor's black face, simultaneously called into question the paucity of white allies in the photograph; the irony of both Fawkes and Mike Brown as controversial martyrs; and the symbolic cloaking in whiteness to render oneself invisible and safe. These three layers of meaning created a complex visual iconography for Ferguson, beyond the burning buildings and clouds of tear gas. To don a plastic, white face amid a predominantly black demonstration would have seemed antithetical to the cause in past social movements for African American civil rights. However, its appropriation in a modern movement for Black lives—situated in a neoliberal era that pretended not to *see* color—makes the mask all the more powerful.

The mask functioned to create visual synecdoche also: to see one masked protestor there in Ferguson was to view a part of a virtual whole (Bry, 2014). While frontline Ferguson protestors were in the streets, a group of the so-called "hacktivists," called Anonymous, joined the Movement. Anonymous had been active in Occupy and in the Arab Spring, breaking into the world's top information systems to disrupt the flow of information from governments to the people. In Ferguson, the group vowed to protect all protestors by accessing the town's employee records. If any demonstrator was harmed, the group said in a YouTube video, addresses of Ferguson officials would be made public. Anonymous promised also to hack into the police department's databases to find the name of the officer who killed Mike Brown. The mask, therefore, served as a visual proxy for Anonymous activists who were working behind computers in clandestine places.

Mashing up the old and new. Images of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. commonly provide historical juxtapositions of past black social movements. Let us consider the kneeling Colin Kaepernick. It had been nearly a month-and-a-half after the back-to-back killings of Philando Castile and Alton Sterling in August 2016. A summer of nationwide protests was winding down. Football season was gearing up. Kaepernick, the quarterback for the San Francisco 49ers, did not stand for the playing of the national anthem in the third preseason game on August 26, 2016. He had gone unnoticed, in fact, when he remained seated for the first two preseason games on Aug. 14 and Aug. 20 (Sandritter, 2017). A

Tweet from Jennifer Lee Chan of Niners Nation changed that. In her post, he was pictured amid his teammates, sitting on the bench in uniform (Chan, 2016).

He explained after the game in a press conference: "I am not going to stand up to show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses black people and people of color. To me, this is bigger than football and it would be selfish on my part to look the other way. There are bodies in the street and people getting paid leave and getting away with murder" (Wyche, 2016).

By Sept. 1, Kaepernick's interview had gone viral. NFL fans tuned in to see if he would continue his silent protest. Instead of sitting this time, he kneeled. His teammate, Eric Reid, joined him. Reid later wrote in a *New York Times* editorial piece: "In early 2016, I began paying attention to reports about the incredible number of unarmed black people being killed by the police. The posts on social media deeply disturbed me, but one in particular brought me to tears: the killing of Alton Sterling in my hometown Baton Rouge, La. This could have happened to any of my family members who still live in the area. I felt furious, hurt and hopeless" (Reid, 2017).

Reid explained further how the symbolic protest evolved. He wrote: "After hours of careful consideration, and even a visit from Nate Boyer, a retired Green Beret and former N.F.L. player, we came to the conclusion that we should kneel, rather than sit, the next day during the anthem as a peaceful protest. We chose to kneel because it's a respectful gesture. I remember thinking our posture was like a flag flown at half-mast to mark a tragedy."

Professional and student athletes from various sports kneeled in solidarity with Kaepernick for more than a year. At the top of the 2017 football season, the silent protest showed no signs of stopping. President Trump said in a Sept. 22, 2017 political rally in Alabama, "Wouldn't you love to see one of these NFL owners, when somebody disrespects our flag, to say, 'Get that son of a bitch off the field right now. Out. He's fired. He's fired!'"

King (2017), who is Dr. King's youngest child, responded directly to the President on Twitter the next day. She wrote: "The real shame & disrespect is that, decades after the first photo, racism STILL kills people & corrupts systems. #America #TakeaKnee @POTUS." She punctuated her Tweet with a picture: a visual mashup of Civil Rights Movement protestors kneeling alongside a modern image of Kaepernick assuming the same position. King's tweet was "liked" more than 20,000 times. Within two days, Bernice King had set the narrative agenda, entering this mashed-up image into the Black visual public sphere. *TIME* magazine published a retrospective piece on Dr. King's kneeling as protest (Rhodan, 2017).

Bernice King's reaction to the NFL players' demonstrations (and the uproar it caused in some circles) inspired her to freeze frame a new visual symbol. The juxtaposition of the two kneeling men grounds the Black Lives Matter movement historically. It serves as a reminder that while this type of civil disobedience may have been practiced before, it is being made new by a fresh set of dissenters. The passing of several decades between the two pictures makes the cause all the more poignant, since even time has not healed these wounds.

Symbolic deaths as place-making

Media scholar Barbie Zelizer (2010) has written extensively about the news media's depiction of people who "are about to die—as a prism for addressing news images more broadly." While such images can be starting points for discussions about sweeping social ills, Zelizer has argued that a picture offers only "flashbulb memories" since the viewer cannot see the person dying in real time. Only the moments before and after one's expiration are visible with a still camera. Video is not limited in this way. The horror of seeing Eric Garner's body go limp; of watching Philando Castile take his last breath; of watching the bodies of Walter Scott and Tamir Rice fall to the earth below them, all were made possible by video. Some distant witnesses who were triggered by this footage have chosen to photograph or film symbolic Black deaths. These kinds of corporeal iconography take three contemporary forms: die-ins, human chains, and feigned resurrections.

Staging die-ins. Protestors from the Civil Rights Movement crafted part of its visual messaging around nonviolent lunch counter sit-ins. Today, anti-police brutality activists stage "die-ins," to enact symbolic deaths. A dozen clergy members fell "dead" to the ground, for example, at lunchtime in a Capitol Hill cafeteria in January 2015 after yelling, "Black lives matter!" (Bogado, 2015). Flash mobs of protestors have dropped dead in front of the world's largest Apple stores, at packed train stations, and during high-brow piano concerts (Miranda, 2016). Black bodies even have fallen to the ground in the Mall of America on Black Friday—the nation's largest retail center in the late Philando Castile's home state of Minnesota. In December 2014, *BBC News* asked, "When did die-ins become a form of protest?" The news outlet's investigation of the trend featured a picture of a person laying on the ground, face up. The person wore a Guy Fawkes mask. A cardboard box placard was placed over their chest. It read, "I am a human. Don't shoot."

Naima Keith, deputy director of the California African American Museum, explained to *Los Angeles Times*: "It [the die-in] forces people…to see and interact with the black body in a way that is very powerful. It's a way of claiming space" (Miranda, 2016).

Helen Molesworth, the chief curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art has surmised similarly: "…[T]hey understand that to occupy the public space isn't to only occupy the street — it's to occupy the Internet, the meme, the hashtag. … [S]treet activism was designed to be caught on a camera. Black Lives Matter has understood how to be received on the Internet, on social media" (Miranda, 2016).

The die-in, like the sit-in before it, is meant to capture the attention of media, certainly. But it is something more. The die-in embodies the full tragedy of the fatal police shooting. While the flash mob may rise again, the true victims never again will. Die-ins are jarring, therefore, because it suggests the scale of a problem figuratively, all while forcing a viewer to acknowledge the literal body in front of her. To step over a die-in participant becomes akin, then, to turning a blind eye to the problem. The die-in becomes a powerful form of social shaming that raises awareness.

Linking chains. Anti-police brutality activists use their bodies to form human chains in stunning displays of protest. The visual metaphor here is rich, insofar as African American subjugation has been held together literally by chains: shackled Africans at the auction block, black convicts leased to work on railroads in chain gangs; and chained school doors in states like Virginia, which refused to integrate even after the Supreme Court ordered it so. Moreover, every new victim of police brutality joins a long, mythical chain of previous martyrs.

"The idea of people linking arms and closing up the subway train in Oakland in response to the shooting of Oscar Grant—or using bodies to shut down a bridge—it's directly connected to dealing with state violence in our lives," Activist Nina Angela Mercer explained to *Los Angeles Times* (2016), adding: "It's the body being violated, so using the body as part of the movement, I think it's a direct response to that."

Anti-police brutality activists tend to form human chains in some of the world's busiest thoroughfares. They have used their bodies to block the 405 freeway in Los Angeles (Plevin, 2016 and Lakeshore Drive in Chicago while the city hosted NFL Draft Day Hayes, 2016).

"Researchers at the Rudin Center for Transportation at New York University, in a forthcoming study, counted more than 1400 protests in nearly 300 U.S. and international cities related to the Black Lives Matter movement from November 2014 through May 2015," according to *The Washington Post*. Half of these protests involved the formation of a human chain to disrupt traffic at a peak time, in a bustling place (Badger, 2016).

America's urban highways, journalist Badger (2016) explained, are "white men's roads through black men's homes." She added "People occupied these spaces long before they felt they had to occupy the roads we built on top of them." Protest at these sites, therefore, are as visually arresting as they are historically symbolic. As highways typically have been built through blighted neighborhoods—allowing the middle-class to zoom into a central business district for work and back out to the suburbs in time for dinner—its blockage calls attention to that which we have tried to ignore. Highways allow us *not* to see poverty and its persistent problems. Putting one's body on the line in such a contested space sends the strong message that activists are unwilling to be ignored any longer.

Feigning resurrection. The final kind of symbolic death that distant witnesses have produced for the black visual public sphere is that of the feigned resurrection. Perhaps the most famous examples are from two of black America's top crossover entertainers: the Pulitzer Prize-winning rapper, Kendrick Lamar, and the Grammy Award-winning songstress, Beyoncé Knowles-Carter. Both Lamar's and Beyoncé's artistic works provided a popular culture corollary to a nascent national dialogue. In Kendrick Lamar's *Alright* (2015), he spins a tale of triumph amid an urban backdrop. He famously exhorts in the song's refrain: "We gon' be alright!" The simplicity of the message—that despite the struggle black people would emerge victorious—proved to be a balm to anti-police brutality protestors. Journalists hailed the tune as the "new black national anthem" (Harris, 2015). Viral videos of protestors singing it at rallies flooded the Internet. And Lamar picked up another round of Grammy Awards in 2016.

What is more notable, perhaps, is that Lamar's music video for *Alright* is just as popular as the song; it has been viewed more than 140 million times on YouTube. The stark, black-and-white footage opens in the Bay Area of California, then progresses south, to Los Angeles. In a year where America viewed a succession of dead black bodies lying prostrate on the ground, *Alright* dared in 2015 to show Lamar floating high in the air like a black superhero—even standing on a light pole in one magnificent scene. As quickly as Lamar ascends, however, a white police officer appears in the bottom of the frame. The cop takes aim at the rapper and makes a shooting gesture with his hand. Lamar falls from the light pole, blood spraying from his wound during his descent. It is a jarring scene that does not seem to match the song's jubilance. Lamar hits the ground and lay silently for a beat. Then, he opens his eyes and smiles. Black liberation theologians have argued that Lamar's resurrection in *Alright* symbolizes the freedom that comes with fearing no one but God. "…[I]f God got us we then gon' be alright," Lamar indeed says when he opens the song. McLeod (2017) explained further:

> The rap artist Kendrick Lamar, in his masterful record *To Pimp a Butterfly*, seeks to elucidate the black experience in the United States by describing the manner in which the threat of death always affects the way African Americans view their lives. In addition, on the album, Lamar celebrates the ability of members of the African-American community to courageously face this danger while still declaring power and strength within their race.

Lamar's resurrection in *Alright* functions in the black visual public sphere to suggest immortality also. Frontline black witnesses who captured the deaths of victims of police brutality immortalize the slain. Distant witnesses who capture the movement's ongoing works immortalize the struggle. In both instances, neither the people nor the purpose truly ever dies.

Beyoncé's symbolic death in her music video, *Formation*, struck similar notes when it debuted in 2016. Throughout the work the singer pivots between several New Orleans-inspired scenes, such as laughing in a 19th century-style parlor with friends or channeling Voodoo vibes from a front porch. Perhaps the most memorable scene, however, arrives at the end. The New Orleans Police Department car that Beyoncé lays atop sinks slowly into Hurricane Katrina's rising flood waters. Her eyes close as she drowns. The camera performs a jump cut. Beyoncé reappears, resurrected, in the parlor. She is wearing all white and twirling a parasol like a Southern belle. Critics of the video claim that it appropriated news images of protest without making any sincere statements about police brutality. Wallace (2017), for example, seethed:

> The song lyrics and video content are profoundly divergent; they send two different messages, and lack sensitivity toward survivors of traumatic events. The song itself continues to center Beyoncé, alluding to haters, paparazzi, and designer clothing. She ultimately places her stamp of approval on the same capitalist system that has oppressed generations of the same black people the song is said to empower.

Bertens (2017) situated Beyoncé antithetically, stating that *Formation* worked to create a black visual public sphere for a discrete group of African Americans. She explained:

> The video strongly appeals to a sense of shared identity amongst the black community of New Orleans…and does so by invoking a sense of group memory, only directly and fully understandable, supposedly, for this specific community. … Beyoncé invites those who possess the cultural capital and memory to understand the images and lyrics to step in formation with her.

Somewhere between these two analyses of Beyoncé's video lies the true meaning of her rebirth at the end of the work. I believe that her reaction to the frontline black witnesses' videos, via *Formation*, was a rumination on black death en masse. Beyoncé visually connected police brutality to the federal government's brutality, of leaving poor, black New Orleans to fend for itself in the wake of one of the most catastrophic hurricanes in history. By exploring the deaths that both police brutality and Hurricane Katrina have wrought in the black community, Beyoncé drew historic ties between the various ways that racism has killed African Americans. Still, like Lamar, Beyoncé's resurrection suggested a transcendence from tragedy. Both artists' rebirths, in two different settings, suggest that the Movement for Black Lives will neither die with one person nor be confined to one American town.

The lasting impact of Black flesh witnessing

We are living in a visual paradigm. That paradigm is not a "read-write" only one; it is full of opportunities to create or mashup media to invent new symbolic meanings. Contemporary anti-police brutality activists have been masterful at using images to advance their cause. Today, the initial images that stir the public are videos of death in real-time. Those images galvanize protests. The protests then spawn its own corporeal iconography, in a form of embodied call-and-response that functions as an emergent form of visual journalism. This flesh witnessing need not pretend to be devoid of political motivation or passion. Instead, it must endeavor to articulate one's standpoint honestly and clearly before offering any form of reportage.

In this manner, historic juxtapositions and symbolic deaths have evolved the Black visual public sphere beyond the Civil Rights-era sit-ins and marches. Bree Newsome's undoing of the Confederate flag, Colin Kaepernick's kneeling, and human chains blocking urban freeways create a 21st-century visual grammar of Black protest. These images remind the viewer that the Black Lives Matter movement is not just about police brutality. It is about the freedom to live and thrive without harassment, or vigilante- or state-sponsored violence. Historic juxtapositions and symbolic deaths talk back to the victim and to the smartphone witness who put their body in harm's way to capture police misconduct. Their flesh witnessing says: I see you. I believe you. I stand in solidarity with you.

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