

CHAPTER 4.

TASER TROUBLE: RACE, VISUALITY, AND THE MEDIATION OF POLICE BRUTALITY IN PUBLIC DISCOURSE

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*Key Terms and Concepts: Countervisuality, Parrhesia, Surveillance,
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As I reflect on James Sanchez's rare, risky work of exposing personal and collective forms of repression, and as I recognize the urgency of Iris Ruiz's attempt to reframe disciplinary histories, I recognize my susceptibility to the critiques they level. Sanchez focuses on the history of Grand Saline, Texas, but the resulting chapter conjures more general scenes in U.S. history. For me, it summons memories of my teenage years in Shepherdsville, Kentucky while also mingling with stories that students told during my time at the University of Oklahoma (OU). Even more specifically, Sanchez's recounting of Clark's Ferry folklore calls to mind Shepherdsville's River Bottom, though such similarities point less to our shared idiosyncrasies than to the consistencies of life in the South. In pleading for truth about these consistencies, he delivers insights that often go missing in studies of ideological reproduction, and he reveals with uncommon precision how racism corrupts our early education, asserting its hold before we know how to fight back.

Like the writers Ruiz depicts as repressing those difficult histories, I have generally kept my positionality in the background, the unfortunate effect of which was to confuse whiteness with disembodied mind. There can be no escape from the body, and no refuge from the violence it witnesses. That violence has followed me across a considerable swath of the country, from my youth in Louisville and Shepherdsville to my early career in Norman, and now to my present position at the University of Cincinnati. I have heard racism express itself in offhand ways and I have felt its more deliberate heat. But to bring Sanchez's and Ruiz's experiences into conversation with my own, I reflect here on racism's visualization, its mediation through hand-held devices and body cameras. The

method I describe is antiracist in its effort to disentangle the creative, profoundly rhetorical act of looking from the hegemony of whiteness. This chapter offers more than an antiracist way of interpreting images, however; it makes a plea for critical recording and archiving, urging scholars, activists, and citizens to capture and itemize the ways racism shapes the standard procedures of law enforcement and juridical practice. It describes a cultural and intellectual practice that is fully multimodal, insisting on the enmeshment of visual politics with sound and movement, narrative and physical-theatrical performance. And the method arises from my horror at consistencies that often go unremarked, trends that demand an unflinching gaze at the same time that we acknowledge the dangers of objectification and spectacle.

Shortly after I left Norman for Cincinnati, news broke of OU's Sigma Alpha Epsilon (SAE) fraternity members singing racist chants on a charter bus, a clip of which appeared online with the comment "Racism is alive at the University of Oklahoma." Later reporting revealed that the singers learned the chant, with all its nauseating epithets and references to lynching, on a cruise ship to a fraternity leadership conference. Upon hearing the news, I realized I had passed that organization's house most every day for ten years, likely teaching writing to its members, without ever recognizing its history. Soon afterward, I spoke about the story with Alex Lockett, my former M.A. student and advisee at Oklahoma. During our conversation, I mentioned my frustration with the fact that SAE's bigotry could be so well hidden behind the prominent visibility of their conspicuous real estate on 730 College Avenue. She replied that the bigotry was more apparent to some people than others. Fraternity members were said to terrorize Black students who passed the house, she recalled, and she had personally encountered it—they accosted her with racial slurs several times during her years at OU—enough times for her to take a longer route to school just to avoid "frat row," located on the same block as her apartment. My lack of awareness was no accident but rather an effect of body privilege, one of the ordinary advantages of being White.

Those advantages provide a shield against violence, to be sure, but they also grant specific subjects the benefit of the doubt when violence occurs. Such biases are nothing new, but they announced themselves to me with novel force once I moved to Cincinnati. University of Cincinnati (UC) campus officer Ray Tensing killed motorist Samuel DuBose during a traffic stop in July 2015, claiming that DuBose dragged him with his car, and might have killed him had the officer not fired in self-defense. Body camera evidence contradicted the story, showing the vehicle move little if at all before Tensing delivered the head shot (Ferrell). Still, the video was not enough to convince a jury of the White officer's wrongdoing, as two different trials ended in deadlock. Not only did Tensing escape prison, he

received a wrongful termination settlement of approximately \$350,000 from the university (Murphy and Curnutte).

Although I attempt, in what follows, to establish the counterhegemonic potential of video, the Tensing trials demonstrate the strength of dominant cultural frames. White desire inhabits those frames in ways that escape notice, or worse yet, ways that viewers actively refuse to accept. Ruiz's "Curandera Methodology" suggests that people who fail to see the operation of whiteness are the same subjects who tend to benefit from it. At times, that benefit has immediate, life-and-death consequences; at others, it limits the contributions of certain cultures to knowledge making and thus threatens the durability of their histories. Ruiz does the double duty of relaying one such history and exposing the processes that aim to suppress her voice; she at once calls out and thwarts the would-be architects of disciplinary barriers. The work of refusing those walls will not be easy. It has not been easy so far.

NOTHING TO SEE HERE

From Geneva Smitherman's meditations on linguistic hegemony to Adam Banks' evocation of politically engaged, multimodal poetics, writing instructors have long debated ways to research and teach the racial politics of public discourse. Wendy Hesford and Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites contend that such discourse occurs not just through the spoken and written word but also through visual expression, whether photography, web imagery, television, or feature film. I endeavor to expand current methods of investigating civic dialogue by concentrating on the visual mediation of arrests in South Carolina and Oklahoma, laying emphasis on rhetorics of citizen videography and police camera footage. In an era that finds officers "mistaking" pistols for Tasers and regularly using deadly force against unarmed African American subjects, the question of how to study impromptu documentary appears an urgent methodological concern.

Nicholas Mirzoeff takes up similar concerns in *The Right to Look*, developing a theory of "visuality" that designates not merely the condition of visibility but the historical habits that distinguish publicly seeable events from the unrepresentable and the deliberately hidden. His emphasis on habitual behavior, and on the forms of socialization that distinguish focus from backdrop, center from periphery, locates the operation of hegemony not solely in verbal discourse or civic negotiations but the selective activity of the human senses.

Where visibility designates both the potential for and experience of optical perception, visuality signals the articulation of power relations that focus and limit those perceptions. It suggests that where sight figures into the range of multimodal resources involved in a communicative act, that act unfolds against

a backdrop of norms regulating the seer and the seen. Visuality “is an old word for an old project,” Mirzoeff explains. “It is not a trendy theory word meaning the totality of all visual images and devices, but is in fact an early nineteenth-century term meaning the visualization of history” (*Right* 2). It “must be imaginary, rather than perceptual, because what is being visualized is too substantial for any one person to see and is created from information, images, and ideas.” It requires “permanent renewal in order to win consent as the ‘normal,’ or everyday, because it is always already contested” (2). Those contested norms come to us permeated with histories of racism and policing, among which Mirzoeff features plantation economies (50–55), political prisons (288, 296), colonialism and fascism (233), and high-tech practices of counter-insurgency (293). We may hear centuries-old modes of subjection, he explains, in officers’ admonition to “move on, there’s nothing to see here.” “Only there is,” Mirzoeff remarks, “and we know it and so do they” (1). The return of the gaze, before any recording of specific events, already instantiates a rhetoric of resistance.

But too strict a methodological focus on resistance may inadvertently work to shore up the perspective of the overseer, the position to which others must respond. While such privileging neglects wide varieties of knowledge production, Vorris Nunley articulates its specific disregard for African American epistemologies. In *Keepin’ It Hushed: The Barbershop and African American Hush Harbor Rhetoric*, Nunley challenges ideas of public discourse that are “too concerned with and dependent upon Black life and culture as resistance and opposition,” and he accentuates instead the “productive, epistemic, and affirmative qualities” of rhetoric while validating the “terministic screens of African American life” (34). Those screens, while inflected by the histories of visibility Mirzoeff details, frame ways of knowing that nourish the collectivity from which they derive. Nunley’s rhetoric of affirmation may at first appear unsuited to Mirzoeff’s demand for “the right to look,” as Mirzoeff chronicles deliberate resistance to the totalizing aspirations of visibility. It may be productive, however, in a time of heightened media attention to the politics of policing, to consider Mirzoeff’s and Nunley’s positions as complementary rather than opposed. Claiming the right to look may counter the regime of visibility, but it also produces and extends ways of knowing while sustaining the lives and cultures of those doing the looking.

Such looking addresses visual rhetoric not merely as a mode of representation but as a process of epistemic mediation. Within that process, images convey information, condition subjectivity, participate in public discourse, and establish filters through which we make judgment.¹ Images thereby cohere with Nunley’s

1 In *No Caption Needed* and *The Public Image*, Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites explain how pictures help create contending publics through the event of address, rather than merely appealing to an undifferentiated mass of preexisting actors. Those images mediate issues

definition of rhetoric, which calls up the ideas of James Berlin by linking the term to “knowledge generation” and the circulation of ideology while resisting its historical conflation with “eloquence and deceptive speech” (6-7). Rhetoric may manifest as speech, image, or a range of modes that include the sonic, the haptic, and the kinetic, yet it denotes not just the consequences of those modes-in-action but the social, cognitive, and material fabric that enables communication. Positing a dynamic relationship between that fabric and public discourse, Nunley associates rhetoric with broadly distributed forms of pedagogy that proceed through “film, music, commercials, books, churches, newscasts, the Internet, and cable,” suggesting that each platform works with and sometimes against technologies of neoliberalism to cultivate “the very ground of human subjectivity” (158). He resists the trend wherein neoliberalism reduces the subject to “*homo economicus*,” concentrating his analysis on “forms of intelligibility that alter the terrain of meaning necessary for a messy, but vibrant, democracy” (13, 158). Adam Banks expresses similar interest in democratic interchange in *Digital Griots*, tracking how remix culture in musical, visual, academic, and popular forms works to generate knowledge and remediate longstanding habits of perception. As African-American rhetors perform acts of epistemic mediation, he conceives of them as “archivists” and “real-life documentarians” (79) engaged in the historical and political work of sustaining the collective self.

Insofar as the archive includes not just words but moving pictures and other images, we do well to investigate how images mediate perception and afford distinctive ways of framing experience. Such investigation might attend to the viral circulation of documentary footage that exposes links between violent arrests, racist ideology, and visibility. Citizen video and police body cameras clarify those links in ways that contest unidirectional models of surveillance. To track the politics of what Mirzoeff calls countervisuality, and the insights that flow from videography, I concentrate on two arrests occurring two days apart, each of whose disastrous circumstances involve a Taser gun.

In the first of the arrests, Tulsa deputy Robert Bates purportedly confuses his Taser with a revolver, resulting in the death of Eric Harris. In the second, Charleston officer Michael Slager shoots Walter Scott with a pistol from behind, claiming later that a struggle over his stun gun precipitated the slaying. Although the officers provide oral defenses of their actions, viral video reveals numerous details that either differ from or are not acknowledged by the official narrative. I dwell here on three of those areas: 1) neither Harris nor Scott poses an immediate threat to the officers; 2) police begin to construct a rationale for

of broad concern, whereupon varied audiences distinguish themselves as publics by interpreting the details, arguing over them, drafting them into ongoing political controversies, and even altering their details in critical or comical ways to advance specific principles and epistemologies.

the gunfire almost immediately after it occurs; and 3) attending officers continue to mistreat the subjects as they are dying or after they are dead, extending the practice of racist brutality well past the act of shooting.

By concentrating on those three tendencies, this chapter specifies patterns worth watching as public discourse about racism and policing plays out in the coming years. That method of seeing enacts the forms of resistant affect Mirzoeff associates with the right to look, but it also accentuates the knowledge-making practices of African American citizen videographers, itemizing trends that their communities have long understood. The method defines looking as a creative, life-affirming act, even in the most lethal of circumstances. While my argument attunes itself mainly to brutality cases in Oklahoma and South Carolina, it suggests that rhetorical topoi within the associated videos have nationwide significance; and although the argument highlights the visual mode of communication, visibility intersects with numerous other expressive channels while hinting at far-reaching, if at times deeply submerged, currents of U.S. political discourse.

VIOLENT ANTICIPATION

The videos support forms of knowledge construction that defy normative visibility insofar as such visibility codes African American suspects as posing an imminent danger to other civilians or police. The dissonance is especially prominent in the Harris case, for by the time Bates catches up to him, Harris lies mostly immobilized as officers hold him down. A voice calls “Taser!” as Bates arrives on the scene, pepper spray in hand, a stun gun and revolver at his sides. He then grabs the revolver instead of the Taser and shoots Harris in the back near his left shoulder. As the unarmed Harris sprawls facedown beneath the weight of the arresting officers, the bullet travels through his internal organs and stops near his right armpit (Schuppe). A deputy’s camera-equipped sunglasses capture the chase, the sound of the gunfire, and Bates blurting out, “I shot him! I’m sorry!” Harris begins to convulse, gasping, “Oh, my God. I’m losing my breath.” Another officer accuses Harris of precipitating the shots by running away, dismissing his cries of pain with “Fuck your breath” (Ortiz). The officers pin Harris down throughout the ordeal, one placing a knee atop the dying man’s head as he lies face down on the concrete.²

2 The scene holds uncanny similarities to the killing of Oscar Grant III in 2009. Camera phone footage of the Grant arrest formed the basis of Ryan Coogler’s *Fruitvale Station*, which dramatizes the day leading up to the event while incorporating the documentary video into the narrative. As with Harris, multiple officers hold Grant down as Johannes Mehserle draws his weapon. Like Bates, Mehserle grabs his gun instead of his Taser, and later frames the death as an accident.

Two days later, Officer Michael Slager kills Walter Scott in another arrest involving the purported mishandling of a Taser. As in the Harris case, the officer shoots the suspect from behind. But rather than firing one fatal shot with the wrong weapon, Slager knowingly discharges his handgun eight times, hitting Scott with five bullets (Lerner). No more a threat than the prone Harris, Scott shows no sign of being armed, and he attempts to escape the shooter rather than advancing toward him. The Taser trouble arises not during the killing itself but from the act that follows, as Slager drops his stun gun by Scott and accuses him of stealing it. Feidin Santana's cellphone video offers little to corroborate Slager's story but fully captures the shooting—an act of such cruelty that Slager's first lawyer renounces the case once he sees the footage (Graham).

Later lawyers, however, and a defensive sector of the U. S. populace would interpret the incident as yet another example of criminals bringing violence on themselves. That self-inflicted harm comes not just from running, it seems, but from the basic fault of being an African American man. Byron B. Craig and Stephen E. Rahko consider the problem at length in “Visual Profiling as Biopolitics: Or, Notes on Policing in Post-Racial #AmeriKKKa,” focusing especially on Darren Wilson's killing of Michael Brown in 2014 Ferguson, Missouri. Craig and Rahko dwell on Wilson's description of the confrontation, in which the officer regards himself as “like a five-year-old holding onto Hulk Hogan. . . . That's just how big he felt and how small I felt from grasping his arm” (291). Brown's size became even more terrifying when Wilson noticed his “most intense aggressive face. The only way I can describe it, it looks like a demon, that's how angry he looked” (291). For Craig and Rahko, that depiction recalls bell hooks' analysis of “neocolonial white supremacist patriarchy,” wherein “the black male body continues to be perceived as the embodiment of bestial and violent hypermasculine assertion.”³ In the cases of Harris and Scott, the threat of hypermasculine physicality became so apparent that Bates and Slager did not need to see their faces when firing. The policemen apparently sensed the unarmed suspects' capacity for violence despite them facing away, and, in one case, being held down, as the deadly exchanges transpired.

Those assumptions connote ways of seeing that are socially and historically conditioned, sometimes in overtly bigoted fashion, but often through the more subtle and pervasive operation of institutions like the family, school, news and social media, and popular entertainments. “No one approaches images with an innocent eye,” Sue Hum remarks in “‘Between the Eyes’: The Racialized Gaze as Design” (193). The routine character of the approach to visual objects makes

3 Craig and Rahko include hooks' language in “Visual Profiling as Biopolitics” (289). Her original wording appears in *Art On My Mind* (202).

the process feel innocent while its very banality helps reproduce ideology at both optical and affective levels. When Hum delineates a racialized gaze, she addresses not only ocular processing but an array of normalized habits grounded in dominant cultural epistemologies, belief systems, and orthodoxies of desire. Frameworks of knowledge, faith, and longing, she implies, converge in ways that direct and limit what subjects can see. Mirzoeff's idea of visibility invokes the smooth functioning of that social machine. To describe how the machine works, and to isolate the forms of racialization it undertakes, means attempting to see the hegemonic lens itself rather than peer through it. This meta-optics enacts one version of Mirzoeff's countervisuality, his theorization of an antiracist form of looking that confounds sensory habit. *The Right to Look* suggests that even if there exists no neutral gaze, we can look with eyes schooled in the history of race relations, and with senses keyed to the decentralization of power as well as the pursuit of just, intercultural dwelling.

Such a reflexive sensibility involves alertness to the dehumanizing topos that influenced Wilson's view of Brown as well as Bates' and Slager's attitudes toward their victims. Like Hum, Alexander G. Weheliye associates that topos with a racist epistemology that bars "non-white subjects from the category of the human" (3-4). That epistemology codes Brown as a hulk and a demon while enframing Harris and Scott as brutish, unreasoning threats in need of extreme restraint. This topos is so insidious that it even informs attitudes toward African American children, yielding what Alex S. Vitale terms the "superpredator myth" (51) while abetting the murders of Trayvon Martin and Tamir Rice. Those predispositions guide the actions of self-styled community servants like Bates and George Zimmerman—the so-called neighborhood watchman who killed Martin—while courting powerfully through the law enforcement cultures those men imitate.⁴ In *The End of Policing*, Vitale documents how officer training instills aggressively preemptive attitudes in its subjects, repeatedly exposing them to "scenarios in which seemingly innocuous interactions with the public, such as traffic stops, turn deadly" (9).

Even police check-ins at children's pool parties can end in disaster, as when White officer Eric Casebolt tackled Dajerria Becton, a 14-year-old African American girl, "repeatedly slamm[ing] her face on the ground, forcefully straddl[ing] her while thrusting his knees into her back and neck" (Ansari). Becton's lawyer, Kim T. Cole, argues, as I do in relation to Harris and Scott, that her client "was

4 The topos of blackness as a prodigious threat has attained what Fleetwood describes as "hypervisibility." In Black cultural studies, that term signals "the overrepresentation of certain images of [B]lacks and the visual currency of these images in public culture" (16). The poignant irony is that despite the overexposure of these myths, neither Wilson nor the jurors in the Brown case recognize how such clichéd formulas shape their decision-making, and how they reproduce the myths in legal contexts.

not a threat to the officer at any point throughout that event” (Ansari). No one at the party accused her of a crime, nor did local authorities charge her with one. Even as the city of McKinney, Texas rejects the charge that it improperly trains its police force, Casebolt’s chief, Greg Conley, describes the event as “indefensible” while depicting his trooper as “out of control” (Fantz et al.). Brandon Brooks, the 15-year-old boy who captured the attack on video, underscores its racist dimensions: “I was one of the only White people in the area when [the arrest] was happening. ... You can see in part of the video where [an officer] tells people to sit down and kind of skips over me and tells my African-American friends to go sit down” (Bellware). He also notes that the event verged on something much worse: “As soon as he pulled out his gun, I thought he was gonna shoot that kid. That was very scary” (Bellware). Even a bikini-clad 14-year-old, it seems, stumbles close enough to the superpredator mythos that a cop quickly adopts his battle posture.

The absurdity of that situation indicates how deeply the ideology of anticipatory aggression penetrates the collective consciousness of law enforcement. As we might anticipate, teaching people to expect life-or-death escalation often ends up triggering the very violence it aims to suppress.⁵ Worse yet, such pedagogy persistently sparks antagonism in the context of White-on-Black policing, establishing a cycle whereby the racialized interpellation of officers and citizens yields mutual suspicion and the realization of both groups’ fears. That pattern besieges African American people from across socioeconomic categories, as even Sterling Brown of the NBA’s Milwaukee Bucks found himself tased over a parking dispute in January 2018 (Smith and Hoffman).

The self-fulfilling projection of fierce and even lethal conflict produces a slippage between law enforcement and treating citizens as enemy combatants. Ideals of public service and peacekeeping give way to vigilant surveillance and heavily armed regulation of so-called problem areas. Radley Balko captures the dynamic in *Rise of the Warrior Cop: The Militarization of America’s Police Forces*, tracking the soldier ethos among officers to the nation-state’s putative wars on drugs and poverty and its emphasis on security in the post-9/11 world. Drawing on Michel Foucault’s critique of state security rhetorics, Craig and Rahko draw a direct line between police militancy and high-intensity patrolling:

The rising body count of unarmed Black and Brown citizens killed by police, under the auspices that they were deemed

⁵ The often fatal character of this violence reflects a peculiarly American problem, which comes in part from the mass circulation of firearms and the fantasy of guns as a means of maintaining social order. Vitale notes that “since 1900, the police in Great Britain have killed a total of fifty people. In March 2016 alone, U.S. police killed one hundred people” (25).

threatening and on the verge of aggressive violence, is indicative of the systematic permeation of pre-emptive postures in policing on the racialized body. (289)

Broken-windows policing, stop-and-frisk tactics, military-grade weaponry, trucks and aircraft, and the donning of riot gear all signal the overlap of civic and battlefield mentalities.⁶ Worse yet, the violence at times transpires in ways that fit neither police nor military profiles. In May 2018, for example, a Miami resident captured an officer handcuffing David Vladim Suazo as he lay prone in the grass. A second officer, Miguel Figueroa, takes a running start at Suazo and kicks him in the face. The videographer observes that the officer treated Suazo's head "like a football" (Jacobo), while reporters Charles Rabin and David Ovalle note that Figueroa kicked "so hard he almost fell over." Although the trooper received suspension for a "clear violation of protocol," the frequency of such violations casts doubt on the efficacy of law enforcement training while raising concern about the abuses that take place off-camera.⁷ Figueroa's action suggests a subject schooled in the spectacle of the ring or the cinematic bar brawl rather than in public safety. That visible malice, when combined with the suspicion of Black and Brown bodies as formidable adversaries, generates a toxic national affect along with overcrowded prisons and a steady toll of needless deaths.

Citizen videography helps clarify the needlessness, documenting the militaristic tactics that precipitate rather than diminish conflict. What Craig and Rahko call visual profiling coheres with a larger history of U. S. visibility by at once performing and reproducing the racist gaze as normative behavior. The camerawork of quick-thinking witnesses, and occasionally the lively functioning of officer bodycams, can establish friction within that process of normalization, raising questions about which mindsets fuel the violence and which institutions promote those modes of seeing. The camera thus serves as a technology for re-searching what Nicole R. Fleetwood calls the "rendering" of African American bodies. She attends to multiple meanings of "render," including "to deliver a verdict" and to produce an "image through computer software," while stressing its particular inflection as "to make or become somebody" (7). *Troubling Vision*:

6 For reflections on "broken windows" policing, see Rai. She recounts the view that broken windows, when left unrepaired, suggest that "this is a place where we tolerate crime...where we have given up, where no one cares, where bad things happen, where we are scared, where you, too, should be afraid" (154). The theory risks stoking public fears so as to authorize heightened police presence in certain areas. That presence may trigger the conflict it supposedly guards against. Herbert and Brown warn that "broken windows" policing may disguise its racist motivations with environmental ones (771).

7 Less than three weeks later, two troopers in Mississippi lost their jobs for repeatedly kicking a suspect in the face (Associated Press, "Man").

Performance, Visuality, and Blackness gives extensive attention to how technologies of visual production contribute to such making and becoming. The most incisive uses of those technologies to show how law enforcement frames blackness, and to simultaneously render a contrary vision, have typically not come from self-identifying scholars. But antiracist students of public rhetoric might nevertheless attend to what those citizen-cinematographers produce, and how it documents state-sponsored warfare on the populace.

As with most widely disseminated media, the images may be susceptible to appropriation by authoritarian interests; worse yet, their rampant circulation may further naturalize (by rendering too familiar) the warrior cop's actions. Armond R. Towns details that possibility in "That Camera Won't Save You! The Spectacular Consumption of Police Violence," observing how readily the practice of critical videography yields "the commodification of black death" while proving lucrative for White advertisers on Facebook and Twitter. Aided by trends in television and cinema, Internet memes "normalize something that should be abnormal: watching people die."⁸ The determined spread of critical interpretations thus becomes a political necessity, as does the meta-optical examination of what, how, and why we see. Whether reflexive analysis can alter the habits of self-satisfied, commercially driven viewers remains uncertain, and given the Trump administration's reactionary attitudes toward Civil Rights gains, the outlook appears dim. But insofar as video evidence led to the convictions of Bates and Slager, it holds a measure of material and juridical value for the anti-racist movement against police brutality.⁹ Moreover, it helps us enumerate the otherwise inconspicuous forms such brutality takes.

THE ARTFULNESS OF SELF-DEFENSE

In the Scott and Harris footage, the moving image instantiates visual rhetoric working to elude, however temporarily, the hold of visibility. In the Harris case, the sunglasses camera aligns with the perspective of police authority but ironically documents the abuse of that authority. The viewpoint and point of audition aim to conflate themselves with just and necessary action, but what unfolds in

8 In an incisive turn, Towns relates such commodification to Amy Louise Wood's scholarship on lynching souvenirs.

9 Critics might rightly question whether a 20-year prison sentence for Slager (Osunsami and Shapiro) and a four-year sentence for Bates (Associated Press, "Ex-Deputy") constitute just decisions given that their victims are both dead. To complicate matters further, Bates served less than half his sentence before being released. There may even exist legitimate questions as to whether the prison system serves in any appreciable way to mitigate structural racism, or mainly works to keep it in place. Still, it is unlikely that either man would have undergone trial at all if not for the video evidence.

the sensory field frustrates that smooth fusion. Soon after Bates apologizes, an attending policeman restores the order of authority by shifting the blame from Bates to Harris, screaming “You ran!” and disparaging Harris’s cries of pain. The process of faulting Harris suffuses the video and continues after it ends, as police later construe his running-gait as “consistent with trying to maintain control of a gun” (McGlaughlin and Brumfield). In another explanation that evokes the killing of Oscar Grant at Fruitvale Station in 2009, a policeman observes that Harris kept his left arm under his body throughout the arrest, producing suspicion of a hidden weapon. For those already ill-disposed toward Harris, the subsequent findings of methamphetamine in his system only strengthen their convictions.

When not reviling the dead, police defenders cite the stress of the situation as a reason for Bates’ action, claiming that he suffered a form of “inattentional blindness” that caused him to confuse one object with a more familiar one. Sgt. Jim Clark compares the phenomenon to a long-time driver of a manual-transmission vehicle reaching for the stick shift when driving an automatic (McGlaughlin and Brumfield). The clarity of Clark’s example undermines his rhetorical purpose, however, by casting Bates as someone whose muscle memory under stress compels him to draw his sidearm, or attempt to incapacitate someone who has already been subdued. His conflation of the gun and Taser, whether instinctive or not, accentuates the ways both weapons work to dominate the unruly body—not just to punish the subject for supposedly hiding his hand, but to exert total mastery over a perceived social and historical threat. As we have seen, that perception is so persuasive that the threat appears urgent even when the subject’s back is turned.

Subsequent narratives work to preserve the culture of visibility in response to disruptive acts of looking. While Feidin Santana makes his way to work at a North Charleston barbershop, he passes the confrontation between Slager and Scott and immediately raises his camera phone as an assertion of the right to look (Almasy). At once claiming and enacting that right, he documents the slippage from racist oversight to outright murder, and subsequently records an attempted cover-up. Neither the shooting nor the subterfuge constitutes a break with historical routine, but their circulation on digital video contributes to the ongoing process of epistemic mediation, especially among those communities who are most threatened by the forms of bodily and narrative violence Santana’s clip displays. That form of epistemic mediation hinders Slager’s effort to sustain the ethos of the overseer, who either wants us to observe him without engaging in the critical act of looking, or who attempts, as in Mirzoeff’s accounts of state-sponsored torture, to operate completely out of view (249). When the political practice of looking destabilizes that ethos, it triggers authoritarian efforts to reestablish longstanding power relations through narrative intervention: Slager insists that Scott tried to take his Taser and even posed a threat to the

officer's life; Slager's eventual attorney emphasizes the drugs found in Scott's system during autopsy and argues that an off-screen struggle preceded the gunshots (Melvin; Reuters). When confronted with the image of Slager planting the Taser, the lawyer blames the act's sinister appearance on suspicion aroused by other recent allegations of police brutality and reminds us that the officer quickly re-holstered the weapon (Melvin). In combination with Santana's footage, such narratives mediate public knowledge of the violence that both inhabits and follows encounters between White officers and African American citizens.

The attempt to locate exonerating evidence in the video footage indicates the malleability of audiovisual rhetoric. Impromptu documentary does not displace or obviate politics, but rather gives a kairotic boost to interpretive exchange. The video serves at once as a catalyst for political discourse and the evidence on which discourse proceeds. Such an appraisal of videography echoes Hariman and Lucaites' considerations of iconic or otherwise popular photography, which they see as participating in the formation of collective identity. Mass circulation permits the images to contribute to the production of interested publics, with the idea of "interest" connoting both sustained attention and value-laden conviction. Insofar as photography invites us to negotiate our interests, Hariman and Lucaites regard it as a democratic medium (*Public* 4). The meaning of the medium, they contend, is "radically plural" (48). Such are the risks as well as the advantages of public rhetoric, which thrusts us into wrangling with strangers.¹⁰ The same goes for videography. The damning image of an execution-style slaying might appear, from a differently interested perspective, to corroborate Scott's history as a drug-abuser and a fugitive. To recall Nunley's phrasing, such readings demonstrate the unruliness of democracy, with all its unpredictability and tendency toward irresolution.

But even with the prospects of recontextualization, appropriation, and outright misinterpretation, citizen videography generally does not constitute good news for authoritarian police officers. If it posed no threat, those officers would not so often attempt to obscure the view or intimidate people holding camera phones, nor would legislators try so persistently to criminalize the recording process.¹¹ Susan Buck-Morss may well be right in her contention that "meaning will

10 Hariman and Lucaites share Michael Warner's view of public discourse as grounded in stranger relationality, suggesting that such discourse invokes agents mostly unknown to each other, and that there can be no public without the attendant uncertainty.

11 See American Civil Liberties Union; Arsenault; Campbell; Kelly; Meyer; Woolf. The efforts to block videorecordings and confiscate cameras suggest that the stakes of the conflict between visibility and the right to look include "the form of the real, the realistic, and realism in all its senses" (Mirzoeff, *The Right* 8). The effort to channel the flow of circulation, and to establish the realm of legitimate interpretation, doubles as an attempt to regulate truth. In the Trump era, that often involves White authorities describing any emergence of unflattering information as fake news.

not stick to the image” (228-29); viewer perspective and the material situatedness of reception delegitimize assertions of pictures’ monolithic or unchanging significance. But Buck-Morss is also right that meaning depends on the “deployment” of images rather than their inherent qualities. And with any given text, some deployments are more plausible than others. It takes no acrobatic imagination, no convoluted logic or artfulness, to see the inhumanity in Santana’s video recording. Explaining the officer’s behavior away, however, takes work.

Whether Slager’s lawyer or one of the millions who identify with the strongman ethos that characterizes the Trump White House, people are clearly eager to perform that work. When the U.S. President can posit equivalence between the rhetorical tactics of white supremacists and those of Black Lives Matter activists, the capacity for contortionist interpretation of public images appears nearly limitless.¹² Those aggressive misinterpretations coexist with what Doreen St. Félix identifies as a troubling trend in national media, in which coverage of police killings of Black citizens “has dwindled in the Trump era compared to just a few years ago, even as the rate of these shootings remains as depressingly regular.”¹³ Border communities also report intensified violence against Brown people whose citizenship may be in question, though little of it draws nationwide attention (Haag). It thus becomes necessary for antiracist activists to insist on details that cynical interpreters willfully ignore. When it comes to violent arrests, this chapter has so far emphasized the lack of threat posed by the suspects, and officers’ strained attempts to explain their own actions even as they occur. Now, I turn to how police abuse and disrespect Black people once they are unconscious or already dead. Underscoring those details deploys the video for urgent political ends, instantiating what Ariella Azoulay depicts as a civic mode of seeing (95-97). Proceeding in materialist fashion, both Buck-Morss and Azoulay imply that images intervene in public debate in ways that human agents cannot anticipate or control. The contingent eventfulness of those images requires a similar liveliness on the part of viewers who are attentive

12 At a “Unite the Right” Rally in Charlottesville on April 12, 2017, white supremacist and alt-right activists gathered to protest the removal of a statue of Robert E. Lee from a plot in Emancipation Park. When counter-protesters gathered, James Alex Fields, Jr. plowed into them, killing 32-year-old Heather Heyer. When Trump addressed the violence, he deflected questions about the alt-right by excoriating the “alt-left,” and then attempted to reassure listeners that “You also had some very fine people on both sides” (Gray). His effort to distribute blame among the protesters and counter-protesters, and his insinuation that “Unite the Right” demonstrators included good, misunderstood people, feeds interpretation of the Trump White House as a bigoted operation. On the very day he announced his presidential campaign, he lashed out against Latinx immigrants as “bringing drugs. They’re bringing crime. They’re rapists.” As if briefly aware of the sweeping, overtly racist tenor of his comments, he followed with “Some, I assume, are good people” (Reilly).

13 St. Félix draws here on the work of Wesley Lowery.

to the interwoven histories of race and social power. In *The Public Image*, Hariman and Lucaites frame the exigency in this way:

What is needed are citizens who are willing to take responsibility for what they see. Spectators who are willing to be changed by seeing, to see themselves as part of the same community as the victims and as part of the same community as the perpetrators. (226)

Such seeing means not allowing the perpetrators to define the community, and refusing to stand by while the voices of its members are silenced forever.

That refusal constitutes an antiracist methodological precept. It means keeping a lookout for efforts to make police violence appear warranted and unrelated to race, when that violence is itself a phenomenon that works to reproduce racial categories. It also means questioning the idea of the stressful situation in which officers make deadly decisions based on general, work-related anxiety rather than fears grounded in racial animus. Such explanations extract violent arrests from long-established trends in U.S. history, positioning the officer as a victim of psychic turmoil instead of a subject hailed by the ideology of whiteness.¹⁴ To return to Hariman and Lucaites's phrasing, taking responsibility for what we see means working with images to protect certain obvious narratives from delegitimation. Such an approach does not construe the human agent as the heroic savior of the dumb image, but insists instead on the vital rhetorical work the image already does. It involves active participation in a techno-human assemblage that preserves material evidence of systemic racism against mystification and deceit.

STANDARD SAFETY PROCEDURE

The violence of systemic racism includes not just the self-protective invention of misleading narratives, but the mistreatment of people who have suffered potentially fatal wounds. Given the Scott and Harris cases, we should extend the rhetoric of police brutality to include forms of neglect as well as direct attacks. Santana's video shows a lengthy period of time elapsing before anyone attends to Scott, and it documents Slager taking the victim's pulse more than two minutes after he fired the shots (Laughland et al.). Police Chief Eddie Driggers claims that Clarence Hal-

14 Mirzoeff locates an influential condensation of that ideology in Thomas Carlyle's *The French Revolution*, which exemplifies the epistemology's trans-Atlantic range. "For Carlyle," Mirzoeff explains, "to be Black was always to be on the side of Anarchy and disorder, beyond the possibility of Reality and impossibly remote from heroism" (13). Reading Carlyle as a philosopher of visuality, he argues that the anterior right to look coevolves with the history of "blackness" and slavery.

bersham tried to save Scott's life, but the video suggests instead that the officer only ascertains the location of the bullet holes (Laughland et al.) and dresses the wounds. The footage shows no evidence of the officer trying to revive Scott, nor did Santana witness any such effort after turning off the camera (Almasy; Schmidt and Apuzzo). In the Harris video, we see policemen blaming the wounded where we might expect them to administer life-saving procedures—or at least call for them. And in the Scott arrest, Slager applies handcuffs after the deadly gunshots transpire.

In cuffing the mortally wounded, police call attention to the rhetorical distinction between standard safety procedure and brutality. Standard procedure treats shooting a suspect as a form of arrest, and it dictates that officers cuff arrested persons. So when Slager demands that the lifeless Scott “put [his] hands behind [his] back,” it conveys a confirmation of Scott's arrest (Neyfakh). Police defend the practice in two ways: it protects law enforcement from unexpected harms and keeps wounded subjects from further injuring themselves (Baker; Neyfakh). Reporter Al Baker uncovers a patrol guide imperative to place wounded suspects in leg restraints, though officers appear to spare Scott that indignity. A Justice Department research project called Preventing Violence Against Law Enforcement and Ensuring Officer Resilience and Survivability, or VALOR, features interviews with police who describe suspects “who appeared to be dead—for example, from multiple rifle rounds to the head—but who were still alive” (Singal). Law enforcement officials also find, on occasion, that apparently incapacitated subjects harbor weapons (Baker). Such instances purportedly justify the handcuff policy.

There exists no evidence in the report, however, that those who turn out to be alive ever harm officers or themselves (Singal). Unconvinced by the kind of logic VALOR advances, civil rights attorney Lawrence L. Kuby argues that “what you lose in public support and approval is far greater than any marginal, negligible fraction of safety that [police] may gain,” and he insists that cuffing a dead or dying person “is one of the ugliest, most barbaric, unnecessarily horrifying things that the police do, and they do it as a matter of course” (Baker). The act appears especially horrifying in the case of Scott, whose wounds rendered retaliatory violence highly implausible if not impossible.¹⁵

The further abuse of already violated bodies proceeds in tandem with the construction of rationalizing narratives and extends the logic that codes African American suspects as menacing even when subdued or facing away from police. While

15 A similarly disgraceful scene occurred in Brooklyn on April 4, 2018, when police cuffed Saheed Vassell after shooting him to death. Based on 911 calls, arresting troopers expected Vassell to have a gun, though the object turned out to be a metal pipe with a knob on it (St. Félix). According to St. Félix, Vassell had been diagnosed with bipolar disorder and the police department was aware of the condition. Interviewees from the neighborhood refused to give their real names for fear of retaliation by the authorities.

accentuating that insidious coding, the videos expose the assumptions that too frequently precipitate lethal arrests. The rhetorical tendencies noted thus far—the attribution of latent violence to African Americans, their subjection to extreme cruelty during and after arrest, and the effort to neutralize potentially damning scenarios through storytelling—exist as a dynamic rhetorical mesh rather than discrete phenomena. Slager neglects and dishonors Scott's body during those same moments that he lays blame on him; attending officers attribute Harris' suffering to his running, his gait, and the belligerent arm pinned beneath his body, expending the energies that might be used to save him to shame him instead.

Despite its shocking appearance, the police's behavior should not be understood as especially strange given the dense history of African American dehumanization in legal contexts. That history proceeds all the more readily under the presumption that we have left it behind. Nour S. Kteily and Emile Bruneau point out the phenomenon in "Darker Demons of Our Nature: The Need to (Re)Focus Attention on Blatant Forms of Dehumanization," noting that many U.S. citizens "tend to consider the overt dehumanization of other groups a relic of a distant past—far beyond the pale of our civilized modern societies"—even as White authority figures regularly participate in processes of Black de-individuation and stereotyping while constructing African Americans as an "undifferentiated mass" (487). The stark parallels of the Bates and Harris cases, along with the overt horrors and casual cruelties visited upon Black people across the lifespan of the republic, signal the range of the problem. With views similar to those of Kteily and Bruneau, Akwasi Owusu-Bempah laments that "despite gains made by the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s, contemporary evidence suggests that Blacks have not yet escaped the sub-human status bestowed upon them during the earliest period of American formation."¹⁶ The continued imposition of that sub-human status plays out in the cuffing of a mortally wounded body, the lack of immediate medical aid, the cursing of a dying man's breath.

Although Harris and Scott fit the profile of latent criminality and visually express their status as subjects-to-be-regulated, they otherwise fall outside what Owusu-Bempah terms the officers' "universe of obligation" (27). The contradiction catches African American subjects in a space of desperate vulnerability, as the agents of social order feel bound to regulate, restrain, and punish without any reciprocal responsibility to protect them from disciplinary excess. It is in part this paradox of obligation, with all that it implies about the definition and parameters of humanity, that produces predictably disastrous consequences during daily patrols.

16 See Owusu-Bempah (28). He traces the rhetoric of sub-humanity to "the earliest periods of American development," when "racial taxonomies emerged to justify the enslavement of Black people in which Whiteness became associated with freedom, civilization, and superiority, while Blackness was associated with bondage, social death, the uncivilized, and inferior" (26).

In methodological terms, studying those consequences involves tracing relationships between racism and dehumanization. As Santana shows, those relationships can be made visible and otherwise available to sensory investigation. And through those investigations, scholars and larger U.S. publics might recognize dehumanization as the current procedural norm, not happily remote but near at hand in both temporal and geographical senses. Documentary evidence of its immediacy is troubling both for what it makes manifest and for what it does not show. Being sensitive to the absences requires asking more than what exists outside the visual frame (though such questions have their own theoretical urgency) but looking stubbornly at what fails to reveal itself—namely, police efforts to save Black lives or give any assurance that they matter. Rather than viewing wounded suspects as needing help, law enforcement constructs them as bodies that still have the capacity to strike. Cuffing them unfolds as part of a preemptive logic that neither marshals precedent for offenders' last-gasp retaliation nor seems to need any. The preemptive approach indicates a contradictory practice that deems the subject at once subhuman and superhuman, unworthy of care or respect and yet capable of death-defying acts of aggression. The officers' universe of obligation, to recall Owusu-Bempah's terminology, requires protecting society against that contradiction, which implies that those who bear the contradiction in their bodies find themselves excluded from the social—and in the Scott and Harris cases, excluded once and for all.

From a broad view, the consequences of this thinking include U.S. police killing a Black person every 28 hours (Ifill). From a closer vantage, Officer Daniel Pantaleo continues to apply pressure to Eric Garner's throat as he pleads for air; "Officers 1 and 2" cuff Kajieme Powell after shooting him to death (Singal); Ray Tensing reaches into Samuel Dubose's vehicle so as to kill him with a head shot and later insists that Dubose attempted to run him over, even though Tensing's own body-camera contradicts the story. To claim the right to look is to claim critical access to such footage and thus permit the discernment of patterns that indicate systemic behaviors rather than anomalies. Locating those patterns constitutes an act of countervisuality, to return to Mirzoeff's terminology, and thereby represents a form of antiracist resistance to the ideology that poses as compulsory technique. But such critical looking involves not just resistance or negation. On the contrary, Mirzoeff contends that "the right to look came first, and we should not forget it" (*Right* 2). Visuality, or the imaginative practice that frames history as a transparent affirmation of "autocratic authority" (3), constantly strives to obscure its own secondary character, its belated attempt to appear disinterested and inevitable. Against such inevitability, the right to look affirms creativity and community, dignity and ethical sensitivity, constituting a necessary dimension of what Nunley lauds as vital, unruly democracy. It builds

knowledge for that democracy, which exists not as some perfected state but a virtual condition that both motivates and eludes public discourse.

ARCHIVING FOR ANTIRACIST RESEARCH

As researchers describe connections between countervisuality and the antiracist striving toward democracy, I encourage them to consider the following approaches to citizen videography:

1. Stay alert to impromptu video of officers and what it reveals about the ties between race and law enforcement. Catalog and preserve the digital images so as to track behavioral trends.
2. Examine the relationship between optical and aural rhetorics in documentary footage. Ask how people in the field of view attempt to frame that field with speech and narrative.
3. Record all physical actions that officers undertake at the crime scene. Such details could serve to disrupt (or support) their framing of events, which might involve “staging” the scene by placing affectively charged items in view. Also note any police efforts to shut down videography altogether (so as to prevent inhospitable frames from forming). Consider sharing recordings live or with a friend to document any seizure of your camera.
4. Uncover the rationale for officers approaching people or pulling them over. Consider whether the stated reason for the stop matches the details of the interrogation. If there appears to be a disconnect, ask how race or racism might explain it.
5. Isolate tensions between appeals to routine procedures, such as handcuffing wounded suspects, and the purported threat those suspects pose to officers, onlookers, or themselves. Locate overlaps between standard operating procedure in police and military contexts, and situate that convergence against the backdrop of institutionalized training procedures.
6. Watch and listen for the reproduction of myths about race and physical power, and how those myths mediate officer-community relations as well as the outcome of specific arrests.
7. Attend to how political intrigue in the White House steals media attention from deadly acts of racism and how that supports White dominance of the visual field.
8. Compare “official” media accounts of police violence with citizen footage uploaded to websites that advocate the “right to record.” For example, the living archives FatalEncounters.org, Free Thought Project (see <https://thefreethoughtproject.com/>; the Project has a Facebook page entitled “Police the Police 3.0” at <https://www.facebook.com/PoliceThePo->

lice3.o/), Copwatch.com, and PINAC (Photography is Not a Crime, see <http://photographyisnotacrime.com>) are among many active efforts to engage the problem of free speech and citizen journalism.

9. Research historical archives of citizens' surveillance of police to learn more about how citizen videography initiatives have been organized and supported. Information about relevant faculty, organizations, and funding sources regarding this issue could be discovered that could enable scholars to network with their communities to provide legal and social resources for antiracist action. Some examples of websites that offer a comprehensive archive, but are no longer active, include Harvard University's Berkman Center's Digital Media Law Project (2007-2014, see <https://www.dmlp.org>) and the Guardian's The Counted project which contains archives from 2015 and 2016 only (see <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/ng-interactive/2015/jun/01/the-counted-police-killings-us-database>).

Adopting those research techniques means examining how diverse rhetors contribute to dialogue, or attempt to suppress dialogue, through a range of modes and media. Drawing on the ideas of Cornel West, Nunley advocates for forms of dialogic action associated with "deep democracy," which features "the kind of African American *rhetorical membership* in the nation-state of the American imaginary that would broaden the range of the sayable and the intelligible" (164). The social activists who populate Black Lives Matter and the Black Youth Project embody that kind of rhetorical membership, intervening in politics-as-usual through argumentation that depends as much on visual as oral communication. Black Lives Matters led the North Charleston protests in the days after Scott's death, insisting that the broad U.S. populace continue to grapple with the historical implications of the Santana video (Holpuch and Laughland). The Black Youth Project highlights the legal value of such footage (Ifill), which helped ensure Slager's indictment and brought to light corruption in the Tulsa County Sheriff's Office.¹⁷ Such activism raises suspicion that the shooters' narratives would have prevailed if not for the circulation of the arrest videos, implying that crediting police stories has obscured a long history of abuses. As oppositional as such rhetorics may be, they also constitute ways of generating communal knowledge and infusing that knowledge into the courses of deep democracy.¹⁸

17 Vitale praises the Black Youth Project for its emphasis on economic development and reparations for structural racism, and he remarks how their program rejects the logic of policing and incarceration as solutions to racialized inequality. He gives particular notice to their efforts to raise the minimum wage while supporting unions and labor coalitions (225).

18 There exist certain risks, however, in accepting the idea of video and other images as contributors to democratic discourse on race and racism. Fleetwood shows concern that "visual

Democratic knowledge construction presumes an unsettled visual field in which looking constitutes a political act. Banks' invocation of African American "archivists and real life documentarians" underscores the political exigency of digital artistry, especially that which mixes eras of musical production, though we might also view Santana's work as an expression of archival agency. Impromptu videography manifests such agency insofar as it denaturalizes the operation of visibility, producing powerful anomalies in knowledge production. Philip Stinson suggests that in most historical cases where police shoot a suspect without cause, an officer eventually exposes the crime (Ifill). Impromptu videography has come to displace that scenario, generating marches and rallies, firings and indictments, and forms of public debate that are remarkable for their recent prevalence. Stinson notes that forensic evidence may have led to Slager's indictment, but the video sped the decision while bringing international attention to Scott's death. Santana's footage thus enacts an antiracist rhetoric of parrhesia, which Nunley describes as "speaking bluntly, speaking truth to power," and which he sees as key to deep democracy (1).

The same holds for the footage from the sunglass camera, suggesting that there need not always be an external videographer to expose brutality; a lens aligned with an officer's perspective does the work quite sufficiently. Both kinds of video contribute to a historical and political archive—a database that is now broadly distributed but that still needs powerful forms of organization and concentration—geared toward disclosing relations between race and rhetoric. That archive, both in its current and potential forms, exemplifies the strain of participatory culture that subtends what Mirzoeff describes as visibility in "crisis" (*Right* 34). Amid such crisis, he explains, it is "no longer possible to contain these images within the circle marked out by the police" (290). One methodological challenge with regard to viral circulation is to track the explosion of similar imagery onto the public scene, establishing articulations among the varied visual rhetorics so as to engineer antiracist critique that holds enduring political and juridical value. Douglas Kelly's *Accountability by Camera* and Charles R. Epp, Steven Maynard-Mooney, and Donald Haider-Markel's *Pulled Over* advance such critique in the mode of print. Much work remains if we are to formulate similarly powerful arguments in dynamic, multimodal format, though evidence for those arguments already abounds on digital browsers and social media.

The archive of images may provide analysts with critical purchase on the

representations of blacks" might come to "substitute for the real experiences of black subjects," and that mediation through a "technological apparatus" might appear equivalent to an "ontological account of black subjects" (13). Whereas the regime of visibility reifies, diminishes, and terrorizes those subjects, practices of countervisuality enact their own forms of oversimplification that require steady reconsideration and revision.

social and cultural work of stun guns, which figure prominently in the cases described thus far. In some instances, Tasers function as a less deadly alternative to handguns, but in others they serve to escalate tensions. Beyond the case of Oscar Grant, whom Johannes Mehserle shot to death in California after allegedly reaching for his stun gun (Van Derbeken), we have seen officers tase Philip Coleman into a motionless, catatonic state in his jail cell and drag him out by his handcuffs (Lighty and Mills). We have seen South Boston police shock Linwood Lambert so persistently that he would not recover (Pegues). In Prairie View, Texas, we have heard an officer threaten to “light up” Sandra Bland before manhandling her alongside the highway. She later died by hanging in a local jail, though the circumstances of the event remain obscure.¹⁹ In the same town of Prairie View, Michael Kelley later mercilessly shocked city councilman Jonathan Miller without provocation as Miller knelt on the ground—his crime an attempt to hinder racial profiling by intervening in the questioning of his houseguests, whom the officer suspected of drug possession (Goodwyn). As bystanders, body cameras, and surveillance systems record those events, they suggest that the Taser exacerbates the brutality its proponents aim to mitigate.

However suggestive the commonalities of those cases, analysts of police-community relations rightly probe the limitations of impromptu videography as a corrective technology. Anya Van Wagtendonk underscores those limitations by reminding readers that despite direct video of the chokehold administered to Eric Garner, the courts refused to issue an indictment. Vitale also cautions against overconfidence in police body cameras, which can “reinforce a false sense of police legitimacy and expand the reach of the police into private lives” (222). While the idea of police cameras as a panacea is unsound on its face, it also harbors the assumption that the technology is in working order. That assumption merits critique given that officers sometimes sabotage the equipment or turn off their audio during tense situations (Balko; Lillis and Chavez). Claiming the right to look, then, does not always subvert the operations of visuality, which proceed from centuries of routinized behavior. Kristie Fleckenstein shows in *Vision, Rhetoric, and Social Action in the Composition Classroom* how the act of seeing is an act of social and material conditioning, an experience wherein the learned attribution of significance to phenomena in the optical field dictates what we register, where

19 See Dart. Although the Sandra Bland case has already prompted a book-length study (Lewis), it deserves even greater attention as an indicator of racist arrest procedures. Fleetwood promotes such attention by arguing that “the black visual has been framed as masculine, which has positioned the black female visual as its excess” (9). The present chapter underscores the haunting similarities between two Black men’s deaths, which happened in rapid succession and involved the misuse of Taser guns. Bland’s death, though it did not take place at the time of arrest, also evokes a certain “Taser trouble” insofar as state trooper Brian Encinia threatened to punish her with a stun gun for purported noncompliance.

we focus, how we distinguish figure and ground, and what we ignore. To return once more to Nunley's favored term, seeing is epistemic: it creates knowledge, and in many cases, it does so by closely adhering to what already counts as knowledge. Little wonder, then, that a jury who inherits deeply ensconced patterns of perception views Garner's death throes as evidence of noncompliance.

A clip of police brutality, or even an archive of clips, will not automatically alter those habits of seeing. State and federal authorities will continue to frame what Jacques Rancière depicts as the "police-principle" as indistinct from history itself; that stealthy conflation inheres in the "now notorious slogan of the New York Police Department: 'If you see something, say something'" (Mirzoeff, *How* 162). The point is so fully to internalize the police-principle that citizens personify it. Transforming that epistemology, where possible, requires persistent circulation of information that fractures commonplace frameworks, and it requires demonstrating, tirelessly and with unfailing rigor, the systemic significance of that information. Vigilant expressions of public memory displace what Nunley names "social death," or the "normalizing surveillance" that impels African Americans to "domesticate, trivialize, or ignore knowledges, performances, and other practices and beliefs. . . grounded in specific ontological orientations to increase the likelihood of individual social and economic access and acceptance" (24).

Keepin' It Hushed laments the limitations on that access and acceptance, detailing how "African American ontology, rhetoric, and knowledge practices have always been and continue to be haunted by the terror of precariousness" (18). Santana's video helps secure Slager's indictment, but those who brutalize Sandra Bland go free.²⁰ Ray Tensing spends a brief time in jail after murdering Samuel Dubose; Dubose's family experiences irreparable loss, a grief radicalized by the unreachability of justice, no matter the legal outcome.²¹ The images capture public attention until the next instance of gun violence takes media precedence. And yet the surge of police brutality videos produces a sense of heightened alert among citizens, a readiness to raise their cameras despite the dangers and de-

20 Although the Bland case drew a good deal of national scrutiny, similar cases of officers beating and mistreating Black and Brown Women go under-reported. The lack of coverage holds lessons for activists and scholars insofar as those women prove just as vulnerable to the dehumanizing tropes of visibility as do African American men (Capehart).

21 The idea that camera phones and bodycams will support the just resolution of brutality cases is by no means a given. Despite its potential to support antiracist social movements, jurors and complacent publics find ways to interpret the visual evidence in favor of police. As an especially stark example, both Towns and Janet Vertesi point to the acquittal of the four officers whose merciless beating of Rodney King was captured on video. Towns describes how such videos make meaning within a discursive economy that prefigures the Black subject as criminal, thus specifying another instance of how Mirzoeff's visibility mediates perception in preliminary, unconscious fashion.

spite warnings from officers. These antiracist videographers endeavor to build knowledge despite the “terror” of its “precariousness,” showing faith that initially local forms of epistemic mediation might, in concert with a broadening range of documentary practices, have structural consequences. In the following chapter, Alexandria Lockett further explores the citizens’ critical gaze and how it becomes adopted (and appropriated) into journalistic and national intelligence discourses. She situates Black Twitter amid the varied forms of archival techne that hack the hegemony of whiteness. She analyzes #SayHerName and #BlackLivesMatter as innovations in movement praxis and media history alike; she interprets #CNNBeLike and #IfTheyGunnedMeDown as outcries against the racist standardization of information, the body politics of neoliberal news. As a White writer who wants to avoid essentializing communications platforms as well as the bodies they connect, I feel the critique in ways that extend past assent to a quiet tremor, a jolt of recognition.

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