INTERCHAPTER DIALOGUE
FOR CHAPTER 4

James: Chris, I really love your chapter on this issue of race and surveillance. How does your examination of surveillance affect our understanding of whiteness?

Chris: That's a great question. One of the things that I want to stress is the extent to which whiteness informs the reception of images of violence, images of controversy, and images where there may be a degree of urgency or exigency potentially surrounding the issue of race. Nicholas Mirzoeff's work informs my interpretation of the increasing reliance on digitally-mediated visuals for making "credible" arguments in legal and popular cultural forums. What counts as evidence, as Mirzoeff claims, represents and advances the dominance of White (supremacist) epistemologies. So the idea that the visual itself may be overlapping with the ideology of whiteness was something that was counterintuitive to me when I started reading him. But the more I engaged with his work in *The Right to Look*, the more I thought about the reception of images. What seemed very obvious to me was that blatant acts of police brutality, in which White officers were engaging in both acts of excessive violence and outright dehumanization of unarmed (Black) suspects, are clearly mediated by race and racism. When examining those instances, I can see how they were reframed, and that questions were posed that undermined the straightforwardness of those documents. And so it seems that even when the visual isn't immediately consonant with the interests of whiteness, that White juries and the hegemony of whiteness powerfully reinforce and recreate racial hierarchies.

A rather damning example that comes immediately to mind is the slaying of Samuel DuBose, right here in Cincinnati. He was pulled over for allegedly not having a front license plate. DuBose was questioned, but as soon as Officer Ray Tensing wasn't getting the answers he wanted, he reached to open DuBose's car door to conduct a search. DuBose began to resist. And before he knew it, Tensing had pulled out a gun and executed him on the spot. The entire incident was recorded on his body camera. The district attorney came on TV very shortly after the event, declaring DuBose's untimely death as "a horrific instance" of police work. This admission may have quelled some degree of citizen outrage since there wasn't an outright rebellion during the protests in downtown Cincinnati. This may have been because the district attorney made it clear that this was an instance that was obviously going to be taken to trial and that the police officer was going to serve time. But when the trial actually started, the evidence began

to serve a narrative advocated by Tensing and his lawyer, in which whiteness mediated the images and, thus, what counts as evidence.

James: I'm really connected to this issue of evidence because I teach about the contemporary meaning of surveillance in my Race, Rhetoric, and Protest class. For at least the past five years or so, many people have argued that body cams could be an effective solution to police brutality. They believe that if we had more cameras that could document police activity, we'd "really" know what happened and could "objectively" determine who's at fault when people are shot by an officer.

But as your chapter touches on, that isn't the case, right? The story about how the shootings are filmed affects how the footage is circulated and interpreted. I've seen so many different shootings, which in and of itself reflects the massive scope of America's race problem, and I'll watch the video and think, "Wow, this is damning evidence. How can the officer get away with this?" But then, the police officer uses that footage as justification for their actions during their defense in the courtroom proceedings. And usually they claim, "We're using this visual to justify what you didn't see. This testimony isn't in this footage."

Chris, could you further discuss how visual evidence is used to justify these narratives of "absence," or some story about we don't necessarily see.

Chris: Sure. What you referenced is readily apparent in the case of Michael Slager killing Walter Scott in South Carolina.

If you just look at the images that were produced by Feidin Santana, the barber who was on his way to work and happened to be passing by when he decided to record the slaying as it occurred, it clearly looks like an execution-style killing. However, the lawyers immediately started to suggest, "Well, there was a struggle beforehand. We don't know about that. We need to understand the extent to which Scott was resisting before the video camera was ever aimed at him." They also argued that Slager dropped his Taser gun at the site because Scott was trying to take it and use it against him. In that case, we don't see this narrative in Santana's footage. Nevertheless, the legal defense used by police officers like Slager certainly relies on the idea of "contextualization" to delegitimize what we see.

When teaching and theorizing rhetoric, we often think of context considerations as a very positive thing. We tend to assume that when you contextualize, you get a lot closer to the truth, which may presumably bring you closer to justice. But in fact, the simple question regarding whether the shooting of an unarmed (disproportionately Black, Brown, or Indigenous) person is ever justified challenges the legitimacy of any context that could lead to such an action. Here, racism and authoritarianism is absurd. This idea of backstory or contextualization only amplifies the lack of logic employed by the officer(s) very plainly killing someone who wasn't posing a threat to them in the footage. Fortunately, it didn't work for

Slater, but his story is the anomaly. Due to the politics of trials and laws like qualified immunity, most police officers aren't even fired for killing the unarmed, let alone being charged and indicted, much less going to prison for it.

Iris: One of the things that we've discussed throughout the process of doing this work is this idea of positionality. Of course, we talked about it with James' chapter since it's obviously the focus of an autoethnography. In your chapter, Chris, you briefly address your relationship to your research, but not necessarily as comprehensively as James does.

Chris: Right.

Iris: Being accountable to our personal relationship to race and racism is one of the major characteristics of how we are theorizing antiracism as a research methodology. Would you please elaborate on what it means for you to research and write about Black people, and specifically some of the instances that have contributed to the Black Lives Matter movement?

Chris: Absolutely. This was a key challenge during my chapter revision. Explicitly incorporating my personal experiences with race in my research writing is not something I have typically done. However, some of my work has featured my experiences with graduate and contingent labor in the university, such as my first book, *Rhetoric and Resistance in the Corporate Academy*, and editor of *Workplace: A Journal for Academic Labor*. In terms of this project, it was an interesting critical exercise to reflect on a variety of contexts of citizen videography of injustice. I thought about multiple instances of police violence toward African Americans in Louisville, my hometown. After doing my graduate work there, I moved to Norman, Oklahoma. The University of Oklahoma was pretty quiet about problems of racism on campus. But I knew people like Alex—my former advisee—who was an M.A. student at the same time as I came in as an assistant professor. She was vocal about experiencing it very directly.

As I considered that time of my career, I discovered that racism was probably much more prominent than I recalled seeing in my daily experience. That realization was unsettling, to say the least. To write about it, and to engage in conversation about it, and to publicly take a position about systemic racism are part of my attempt to take accountability for doing the labor of transforming how the discipline makes space for more research and professional engagement with antiracism. Working on sharing power and using collaborative multicultural writing to signal my solidarity with victims of racial violence opens up more opportunities for me to really think about and more fully grasp the severity of the consequences of racism.

Philosophical inquiry that centralizes the issues of race and racism syncs well with investigations about all kinds of oppression. I found myself asking, "What good is the work we do as teachers and researchers when people all over the

world are experiencing extreme and unnecessary suffering?"

Within a year of moving to Cincinnati from Norman, OK, I saw a horrific example of a campus police officer, not even a city police officer but someone from UC, traveling a mile off campus for the purposes of tracking someone down based on some vague hunches. His racially targeted search was simply "protocol" that he used to justify a murder. Clearly, the fact that he feels like he can do that to another human being as a matter of his job duties indicates the historical continuity of racism. Controlling Black people has been part of U.S. law enforcement's ideologies since the slave patrols of the 18th and 19th centuries. The idea that racism has diminished is a lie that we need to face head-on with an insistence on history.

Telling my story as part of the research starts a crucial conversation in our small, but influential disciplinary networks. Trump's racist vitriol seems to be normalizing a disturbing trend of overt racism, including an uptick in hate crimes. Certainly, the issue of race was getting more attention at the end of the Obama administration. But the Trump administration is perpetually involved in a scandal that sucks up so much of the air time in the broadcast media, distracting people. Unfortunately, racism gets much less attention than it deserves.

Iris: Thank you. I think it's really interesting to know about your own personal history and how this project has been part of your evolution as a researcher answering a call to social justice. I'm sure that you know that some of your colleagues will wonder about the direction of your research. But I do see you having a history of engagement with antiracist literature in the field. You mentioned Geneva Smitherman and Adam Banks at the beginning of your chapter, for example. Could you briefly describe your entryway into this tradition of racial literacy, considerations of race, especially as it relates to digital technology?

Chris: The issue of access was very much on my radar when I started my doctoral work at the University of Louisville. Many scholars were observing racial and economic disparities among internet users. Access to computers and the internet affects who is able to participate in computing and internet cultures.

But even as the internet became more globally widespread, the question of access became a more nuanced one. A person may have access to digital technology, but do they really have access to its literacies? To educational experiences that give them an opportunity to learn how to compose powerful narratives? To cultural authority and cultural capital? These questions have been part of the evolution of my thoughts about the relationship between race and technology. Banks' *Race, Rhetoric, and Technology*, which was one of the works that inspired the title of this book, was certainly part of this process. But I look to the ways in which African American ways of making meaning and communicating have been marginalized. In our own disciplinary history, vernacular is placed at the

periphery and understood as a form of error. Geneva Smitherman powerfully critiques the notion that Black American English (BAE) is underdeveloped. In *Talkin' and Testifyin',* she looks at its sophistication. By identifying linguistic characteristics of BAE and how it flows throughout the American experience, Smitherman disrupts the idea that standard White edited English (SWEE) ought to be the "default," or the standard for "professional" communication and in general. I think those conversations still matter when we think about how the internet is documenting and influencing our current language practices.

Iris: Awesome! Thank you.

Alex: I am particularly interested in your chapter's articulation of some of the challenges embedded in truth-telling today, as well as what it means to bear witness to injustice with these contemporary technologies. Bearing witness obviously comes with all kinds of responsibilities such as documenting, sharing, and defending one's testimony. Tell us a little bit more about the researcher's ethical duty to disclose how they are bearing witness to oppression throughout their processes of knowledge making.

What does it mean to bear witness to racial logics that inhibit the public's ability to value truth—as a guide, as a principle? And what role does trust play in antiracism and especially antiracism as a methodology?

Chris: To answer that question, we may need to insist on believing what our senses are telling us in the wake of the influence of postmodern theory. During the 1990s and early 2000s, the humanities and social sciences increasingly emphasized anti-foundationalism and the constructedness of truth. It's terrifying to see the extent to which that logic has now been adopted and appropriated by white nationalist and/or far right-wing groups who successfully troll. Fox News, for example, has mastered the art of "spin" by re-contextualizing its chosen facts to serve their political agenda.

When I researched the Trump administration's attitudes toward police body cameras, I figured that they would advocate doing away with the body cameras. Certainly, Trump doesn't want to imply that the police might be doing something criminal since they are part of his base. But the more I researched, the more that I saw him saying that the police departments can decide for themselves whether to use body cams. Trump would say that they were an asset to the police because when suspects end up getting killed or harmed, you can actually use the footage to exonerate the police officer. "We look at that footage, and then we discover, hey, the police officer wasn't doing anything wrong. He was provoked." This response suggests that Trump is so confident in the ethos that he has helped create that the police will be able to reorient those images to reinforce their authority to kill people. And that's really terrifying to me. As James and I were discussing earlier, even if a piece of evidence seems to clearly indicate

overkill and/or murderous intent, it can be manipulated to suit the interests of a certain voting constituency.

Alex: Right. I want to further discuss how you talk about racial logics in your article. The recent trial of Amber Guyger has been on my mind a lot these past several days. I'm wondering about that case because it connects so seamlessly with you and James' chapters. Here is this off-duty police officer, a young thin blonde White woman, who killed a Black man in his apartment. Botham Jean's family gave her so much compassion after she received that light (10-year) sentence. The news focused extensively on a photograph of Jean's younger brother, Brandt, hugging Guyger. She also received a long embrace from Judge Tammy Kemp. These images generated all kinds of public conversation about forgiveness, empathy, and reconciliation. And I just kept thinking about how Guyger appeared to receive more sympathy than the man she killed. White supremacy, in that case and so many others, demonstrates particular racial logics embedded in criminality, policing, victimhood, and truth.

How do researchers negotiate the problem of discovery and invention when the prevailing racial logics make it so clear that what's true isn't necessarily going to be persuasive?

We live in a culture where it's increasingly not persuasive to, say, call someone out for being racist (as you mentioned with Trump). Police occupy a militaristic role, ordering the public to submit to their absolute power. There's little to no accountability when law enforcement misuses force, fails to intervene on behalf of the public when they observe wrongdoing, improperly documents citizen complaints, etc. The culture of secrecy, of "(White) brotherhood," protects the "few bad apples," as do multimillion-dollar budgets for large city precincts that don't seem to require any oversight. Police killing unarmed persons is hardly a matter of "good" vs. "bad" cops; it is simply part of the design of policing: slaying Black people might just "happen," and if it does, the judicial system will be kind. But it probably won't even get that far.

Given that we must live and work in this culture of violence that is powered by the logics of white supremacy and authoritarianism, how is a researcher supposed to make knowledge? What do scholarly audiences expect from us, besides the most basic act of naming and verifying a problem or pointing out the obvious.

Chris: I have two responses, and they may be conflicting, but they illustrate my immediate thoughts.

First, I'm intrigued by the fact that people don't seem to know what to make of a person who wants to embrace a person who has killed their loved one. There is something like a sort of superhuman level of forgiveness on display there. And the mainstream news media doesn't know exactly what to make of it. But I'm

not sure I do either. To your point Alex, we don't really have a language for this social and emotional conflict.

This problem connects with James' analysis of reconciliation. Amber Guyger embracing Brandt Jean conveys an image of people engaging in some kind of gesture of reconciliation that is hard for me to identify with. The same culture of violence that made Botham Jean's murder possible is the same culture that has socialized me to desire harsh punishment for the criminal. Likewise, that same culture would have me "more naturally" envision criminals as Black (more than Whites) and tacitly consent to a double standard of accountability for citizens and police officers.

How should I talk about that as a researcher and as a citizen?

How should these issues be incorporated in graduate instruction, and K-16 education, more broadly? In philosophies of research design and methodologies for studying culture, language, rhetoric, etc.? In community building and organizing initiatives, and so on?

The other part of me worries that we move too quickly to justify and forgive people in power. How does this response fully acknowledge the dignity of a person who gets slain just for being an African American person sitting in his living room because a white woman was "confused and made a mistake"? The horror, of course, is that these incidents are not exceptions. They are numerous enough to be considered somewhat typical. I am worried about the extent to which we try to find ways to tell stories that make us feel better and distract us from pursuing hardcore reform, perhaps even abolition.

Alex: It really is a horror story to live with these realities, especially while Black or if bearing witness to abuses of power. One of the witnesses for the Guyger case was shot right outside the apartment complex. That, of course, has people wondering, "Why do all these horrible things happen to befall witnesses or critics of police brutality?" Several Black Lives Matter activists have been mysteriously killed or found dead. Ramsay Orta, who recorded Eric Garner's death by chokehold, seems to be facing a lot of legal issues. Feidin Santana was interrogated about his race and ethnicity during Slager's trial, as if his racial identity might make him automatically "anti-cop." I think that we have a major problem when it comes to claiming an antiracist positionality. Of course, people want to do what is "right." But I think that we still have to deal with these troubling politics of civility and the very real risks and dangers of bearing witness to injustice.

Chris: Absolutely.

Alex: The dominance of policing, and the notion that most cops are "good," is so embedded in American culture and discourse that the idea that they could *systematically* do wrong fundamentally threatens the fabric of a "good" society. And I think that even for antiracist researchers, there are probably many people who still

long for the good old days when the cops were good guys, even as they empathize with Black Lives Matter and countless instances of police misconduct. I can't help but wonder how film, entertainment, and social media contributes to that perception. Crime drama dominates TV. We literally consume it for entertainment. Researchers should further explore how they are socialized to perceive the police. Shows from *Law and Order SVU* to documentary style programs like *Snapped*, *See No Evil*, *Fatal Vows*, *For My Man*, etc. position police solely as champions, heroes, and servants of the public. Rarely do crime dramas, fictional or nonfiction, depict any cases involving police officers engaged in crimes or corruption. The sad reality is that the pervasiveness of the "real evil" of legal and criminal justice systems, which is racism, means that we want to escape into a world where law enforcement actually protests and serves us without racial prejudice. I think these are some reasons that we're entertained by cops in protagonist roles.

Chris: It does appear that, even if Guyger tells the story, "I thought I was in my own apartment and this was an intruder," it sounds too wrong to be believable. Clearly, the jury believed that she needed to serve some jail time . . . maybe it wasn't enough. Yet, there are still so few instances in which police end up on trial for murdering unarmed civilians.

Alex: In the Guyger case, I think what we're seeing is a fundamental conflict between the cultural value of police officers as public servants who might need you to comply with their policies (e.g., oblige a warrant) so they can "do their jobs," vs. the individual freedom we are supposed to be granted to protect our homes and other property like our vehicles. If we are conflicted about our relationship with the police, or if we notice that we have a hard time critiquing their actions without feeling as if we are taking a risk, we need to recognize how such a dilemma illustrates the challenges of doing research as Americans.

Chris: Thank you very much. I agree.

Alex: James, Iris—do you have any concluding remarks?

James: The last thing I want to say is that what bothered me about the Amber Guyger case was also the expectation of forgiving a White (woman) murderer. It was both the immediate response and assumed to be the Christian thing to do. Race clearly impacts the optics of forgiveness as much as it does the likelihood of being randomly, but disproportionately, killed by law enforcement. I know that, inherently, if the racial identities and professional roles were reversed that we would never, ever see anything like that.

Chris: That's right.

James: There is no way they would be sharing that video as well!

Alex: Black people are conflicted about it. You can find tons of conversations on Twitter where folks are vigorously debating how we, as a people, should be responding to these public displays of compassion for people who would clearly

rather have us dead than reason with the fact of our humanity. But this is a long conversation that goes back to the history of fugitive slaves and the slave revolts all over the world. In modern U.S. history, we could go back to the issue of non-violent protesting and revisit how Malcolm X and MLK Jr. debated about self-defense.

Iris, what are your thoughts?

Iris: I am thinking about the exoneration of police who kill Black and Brown people and media depictions of African Americans as criminals. I'm also thinking about the history of Civil Rights. In one interview of Angela Davis during her incarceration, she says, "You're asking me about violence?" And she reflects on her experience witnessing the devastation from racially motivated church bombings. Davis declared that, "Those were my neighbors, and there's limbs all over the place, and people were blown apart. You know, those were my friends. Those were my neighbors. So for you to talk about violence, it just doesn't make any sense to me that you would ask me that question."

And I have to ask the question: how does a society normalize racism to the point where there is a perception that only one group exhibits violence whereas the other group is completely immune from ever being violent? When mass murders happen, they are characterized as the efforts of a mentally ill "lone wolf," not a white nationalist domestic terrorist who is well connected to other groups of White people.

It's so illogical. And because it's illogical, its going to continue to produce "facts" and evidence that support absurdity. I think that's exactly where Chris is trying to intervene. He's pointing out that racism enables irrational explanations to prevail over clear right vs. wrong situations.

Alex: Given your last comment, Iris, it seems that racial violence is ultimately going to produce self-destruction. And self-destruction is going to assure mutual endings. And in so much as we notice the same racist state-sponsored violence over and over and over and over and over and over again, I think what will happen—and what has happened, let's be clear, is total collapse. Police brutality is so out of control that as more people utilize mobile technologies to document what they see, the less radical police reform and abolition efforts will seem to the general public. We must remain steadfast in our faith in sharing what we believe and know is true when so many lives are at stake.

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