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author:
Janice Marie Yu

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This article addresses the role of the collective Black gaze in media representations of anti-Black violence in the U.S. Studies and critiques of these images have traditionally centered on harmed victims at the cost of overlooking living witnesses. The author therefore turns to the African American communities pictured in media images surrounding the murders of Emmett Till (1955) and George Floyd (2020). Placing images of Black community at the center of analysis shifts the focus away from Black death and suffering, toward the lasting impact African Americans have had on the circulation and reception of anti-Black violence in the media. Till's funeral and Floyd's death are pinpointed as marking a departure from earlier incidents of racial violence. This article introduces the concept of the collective Black gaze – a mode of looking historically practiced by African American communities in response to the hypervisibility of anti-Black violence. The collective Black gaze not only offers a framework for reconfiguring racialized modes of looking, but it also functions as an act of care through which a community looks after their dead.

Janice Marie Yu - Postdoctoral Fellow and Visiting Lecturer at Amherst College. She works at the intersection of visual studies (nineteenth and twentieth century photography), cultural studies, and critical race studies. Her research focuses on visual representations of ethnic and racial violence.

Looking After the Dead: The Collective Gaze in Representations of Anti-Black Violence

The camera's relationship with anti-Blackness extends back to the mid-1800s in the U.S., when portraits of the enslaved were produced for both scientific and personal purposes.[1] Less than half a century later, photographs depicting lynchings spread throughout the country via family networks and the postal service. Now, cell phone video and CCTV footage of police brutality circulate at even faster rates, and the violent scenes reach exponentially more viewers. This enduring relationship between anti-Black violence and the camera has been critiqued by academics and the public alike for turning Black death and suffering into media spectacle.[2] Arguments against the circulation of such terrible images are not unwarranted. However, criticism of Black death's hypervisibility in the media has overshadowed a critical element of racial violence: witnesses have remained on the periphery of the frame, and consequently, of studies that examine anti-Black violence at length. As a result, images capturing moments of kinship and intimacy in representations of anti-Black violence are continually overlooked.

The historical exclusion of African American communities in images of anti-Blackness is, however, slowly shifting. To consider the significance of this change, the following study begins by theorizing the historical omission of Black communities in visual records of anti-Black violence. It then examines images surrounding the deaths of Emmett Till and George Floyd, to explore the impact that the inclusion of Black communities within the frame has had on contemporary responses to racial violence. Till's and Floyd's deaths are separated by nearly seven decades and are the result of distinct forms of violence. Yet, the highly publicized and documented nature of their murders provides rare opportunities for analysis. Unlike countless other

incidents of anti-Black violence, the images resulting from the deaths of Till and Floyd are unique in their inclusion of witnesses within the frame. Within those images, I identify the collective Black gaze as the catalyst for the broader socio-political impact that those deaths have had in the U.S.

The collective Black look is understood here as a mode of looking historically practiced by African American communities in response to the hypervisibility of anti-Black violence. Building on the concept of the Black gaze, the collective Black gaze can be defined as a communal practice of looking that aims to accomplish two things: first, it initiates an intimate exchange between viewers and places them alongside one another in a shared world; second, it functions as a form of care in which the public "looks after the dead." Looking after the dead is an opportunity for the broader African American community to act on behalf of those who have lost their lives to racially motivated violence. The collective Black gaze, as a "productive disruption,"[3] is a public act of looking that refuses efforts to align Blackness with otherness. In this refusal, the collective Black gaze disrupts attempts to isolate and exclude African Americans from the body politic. Examining the role of the collective Black gaze – as a response to the simultaneous hypervisibility of Black death and invisibility of Black community – reveals how it has been used to concomitantly locate those who see and those who return their gaze in a shared world.

Formations of the Collective Black Gaze

The use of photography to communicate kinship in the U.S. finds its origins in the popularization of group portraiture during the mid-nineteenth century. Group portraits were primarily produced as personal mementos, but documenting kinship ties also allowed Americans to reconfigure the boundaries between self and other. Americans relied on

representations of collectivity to delineate how racialized selves belonged in a nation where race was a central factor in determining citizenship. Unsurprisingly, then, group portraits of African Americans were uncommon prior to Emancipation (1865), with a large majority being commissioned by enslavers.[4] The omission of Black communities in visual archives is not only a formal decision or logistical consequence but also an epistemological one. Invisibility has a vital function here: it obscures the visual rhetoric necessary to historicize the Black community and its practices of looking. The rarity of group portraits produced by enslavers hints at the prohibitions against looking and collectivity enforced upon the enslaved. However, such restrictions did not keep enslaved African Americans from looking – on the contrary, looking necessarily became a critical endeavor.

Visual theorists bell hooks and Tina Campt have conceptualized this "practice of critical spectatorship" as the Black gaze.[5] For hooks, the Black gaze is "one that is oppositional" and seeks to disrupt racialized dynamics of looking.[6] Campt has more recently extended hooks's notion of critical spectatorship by introducing intimacy into the equation. She asserts that, "When we participate as active witnesses in this confrontation, the Black gaze we encounter creates complex and contradictory forms of intimacy."[7] Thus, the Black gaze is not only a mode of critical spectatorship, but also a means for initiating an intimate encounter between viewers. The Black gaze, as Campt argues, is distinct from the gaze of film studies,[8] for it does not assume that the subject shown will be passively "consumed by its viewers."[9] Instead, the Black gaze has the capacity to structure the act of looking as a relational encounter shaped by histories of racialized kinship. As a historically embedded practice, the Black gaze demands that those in the exchange reckon with the

longstanding entanglement of race, kinship, and visuality.

Lynching has been interpreted primarily as violent spectacle – an interpretation that prioritizes the white gaze as the object of analysis. The focus on white spectatorship, however crucial for understanding the phenomenon of lynching, has overshadowed the Black gaze's significance. As I explore further below, elision of the Black gaze frequently coincides with a visual absence of Black communities. The Black gaze and Black kinship cannot be disentangled, as the absence of one commonly suggests the nonexistence of the other. In a Fanonian refrain, philosopher Charles W. Mills maintains:

> [T]he denial of Black existence is not individual, a refusal or recognition to one particular Black for idiosyncratic reasons, but collective. It is not that Blacks as a group do not exist because individual Blacks do not exist, but rather that individual Blacks do not exist because Blacks as a group do not exist: the nonexistence is racial. Hence the defiant, reactive 'non-Cartesian *sum*' has a collective dimension even when expressed by individuals, because it is a result of this imputed collective property, this propensity to disappear in white eyes, that the *sum* is denied in the first place.[10]

Here, Mills argues that the refusal to recognize individual Black being is predicated on the denial of Black collectivity. One ontological claim that lynching photographs then appear to make is that the (Black) subject does not and cannot exist without the presence of a communal body. But given the tendency to "disappear in white eyes," the Black communal body does not *appear* as a communal body despite its being there; that is, the Black communal body is not perceived to have political autonomy or authority. Lynching photographs actively engage in this logic by producing a visual rhetoric in which Black communities are excluded from the frame and white mobs take center stage as the arbiters of justice. The photographs reiterate the claim

that the victim does not exist as a citizen without the presence of its communal body, while simultaneously barring that community from appearing within the frame.

In this light, Black kinship takes on added significance. The violent nature of lynchings made witnessing difficult, but it also restricted rituals of death and care of the dying. Such barriers to communal care were preventive measures that limited African Americans' newfound allowance for the celebration and ritualization of family life.[11] The victim's singularity in lynching photographs thus signified the inability to engage in rituals indicating citizenry, such as due process, as well as the intimate rituals of dying.

As lynching photographs worked to obscure Black community, they also aided in the formation and sustaining of communities that were sympathetic to white supremacist efforts. The reproducible photograph, and later the photographic postcard, facilitated the circulation and distribution of lynching photographs across the country. Commenting on the spectacle of whiteness that lynching postcards illustrate, photographic historian Shawn Michelle Smith notes the community-building function of the postcards: "Individuals perform community by sending postcards, and they enlarge community in the same act, for these images symbolically expand a community's claim on time and space by connecting static individuals to distant places."[12]

Indeed, the circulation of the images reinforces a network of those who would sympathize with the lynch mob.

Such networks are supported by a scopic regime that relies on mediated viewing. In Christian Metz's formulation, a (cinematic) scopic regime is determined by three factors: the absence of the seen object, the voyeurism inherent to the cinematic experience, and the segregation of spaces.[13] Images of anti-Black violence appear to fall neatly in line with these provisos. However, such characterizations of mediated viewing have narrowed the scope

of inquiry into the visual culture of anti-Black violence. What is elided in this traditional understanding of photographic and filmic media is the historical practice of African American communities utilizing their gaze as a means for complicating the voyeuristic and segregating functions that visuality has played in the hypervisibility of Black death and suffering.

Much of the critique aimed at the production, circulation, and reception of atrocity photographs and media assumes a position similar to Metz's.[14] Shawn Michelle Smith has, for instance, characterized white spectatorship of lynchings as operating in such a scopic regime of alienated voyeurism: "[R]epresentation and reproduction of the violated Black body can function as a kind of fetish, obscuring from view the white torturers who also inhabit these images."[15] Smith's interpretation frames the white gaze as one-directional, with the spectator necessarily in a position of privileged viewing. In *Black Looks*, bell hooks similarly writes, "In white supremacist society, white people can 'safely' imagine they are invisible to Black people since the power they have historically asserted, and even now collectively assert over Black people, accorded them the right to control the Black gaze."[16] In both formulations, the distance between those who gaze and those gazed upon is irreconcilable.

Contrary to the fundamental alienation that defines Metz's scopic regime, Vivian Sobchack offers an alternate formulation of the relationships between the cinematic object and the audience in her exploration of death in documentary film.[17] Sobchack's seventh proposition in "Inscribing Ethical Space: Ten Propositions On Death, Representation, and Documentary" introduces the notion of the ethical bond, complicating the "unauthorized scopophilia"[18] that results from the separation of cinematic object and viewing subject. She proposes that death, due to its rarity in documentary footage, has a unique capacity for creating an "ethical bond" that bridges the cinematic world to that of the

viewer: "it is a space also 'pointed to' the viewer who recognizes and grasps that space as, in some way, contiguous with his or her own. There is an existential – and thus particularly ethical – bond between documentary space and the space inhabited by the viewer."[19] The documentary footage capturing the massive crowd in attendance at Emmett Till's funeral is one such instance, in which his mother, Mamie Till-Mobley, created ethical spaces by employing the collective Black gaze.

In tandem with the concept of a Black gaze, Sobchack's notion of an ethical space offers a theoretical framework for thinking about Black death and suffering in the media. Together, the Black gaze and ethical spaces make for a critical spectatorship that interrogates, resists, and disrupts dominant ways of looking. While hooks still thinks of the gaze as a binary dynamic, she nevertheless begins to move away from the idea that the Black gaze is necessarily subject to control. By characterizing the Black gaze as one of opposition, she challenges the privileging of the white gaze.[20] When hooks writes that she wants her look to "change reality,"[21] she does not simply intend for the Black gaze to reverse the dynamics of looking; rather, she imagines the Black gaze as having the capacity to undo racialized, hierarchical modes of seeing. In Campt's characterization, the Black gaze has the capacity to transform viewers from passive spectators to active watchers, who can testify on behalf of those they see. The Black gaze in an ethical space of viewing "transforms viewers into witnesses."[22] In this revised dynamic, spectators are no longer alienated viewers but observers who develop a personal relationship with those they see.

The Black gaze, especially in the context of anti-Blackness in the U.S., is distinct from other practices of looking in that it is precipitated by a centuries-long history of prohibited looking[23] and regulated by ongoing surveillance of African American communities.[24] Testimonial accounts by fugitive writers such as

Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs are prominent examples of how eye-witnessing effectively exposed the horrors of slavery to the larger public in antebellum America.[25] Their testimonies were put to the "court of public opinion" at a time when African Americans, enslaved or not, were largely restricted from testifying in formal courts of law.[26] While the historical import of individual witnessing is unmistakable, examining collective modes of looking reveals how it has been used to concomitantly locate those who see and those who return their gaze in a shared world. If anti-Black violence can sever a victim's communal ties, then collective action becomes a means for returning the dead to their communities. The collective gaze, in other words, shifts public attention away from the spectacle of Black death while bringing attention to the vitality of Black life.

The intervention that I propose – the *collective* Black gaze – builds on the definitions offered by hooks and Campt by placing the entanglement of visuality and kinship at the center of analysis. While both theorists consider the Black gaze as a distinct mode of looking, they only hint at the collective Black gaze. Like the Black gaze, the collective Black gaze is a form of witnessing that demands viewers engage with histories of racial violence and injustice. Furthermore, it also asks viewers to reckon with another facet of Black life that has historically been rendered invisible – Black kinship. In a scopic regime where Black kinship (dis)appears in tandem with the Black gaze, the collective Black gaze also functions as a form of communal care. If anti-Black violence has been used to extract victims from their worlds, it is specifically collective witnessing that returns the dead to their communities.

"It Would Be Important for People to Look"

Emmett Till was a fourteen-year-old boy from Chicago who was lynched in 1955 while visiting family in Mississippi. He had purportedly whistled at and flirted with a white woman, Carolyn Bryant.[27] The tragic murder of Till gained nationwide attention once his mother chose to publicly circulate photographs of Till's disfigured face and hold an open-casket funeral. Mamie Till-Mobley's act of publicizing her son's death and the image of his corpse was indeed remarkable for the keen insight she had regarding the role of visuality and photography in anti-Black violence in the U.S.[28] It is due to the longer trajectory of Black witnessing in raising awareness about racial injustice that Till-Mobley's actions could bring the history of anti-Black violence to the fore for viewers. Karla FC Holloway's study of death and mourning in African American communities observes the merging of personal grief and collective mourning through W. E. B. Du Bois's reflection on his own son's passing:

> When Du Bois wrote of his son's passing as "liberation" and that his child was "Not dead, not dead, but escaped; not bond, but free," he made a critical and essential association between his individual, familial loss and the experience of a collective community of Blacks in the Americas. In creating the nexus between a Black family's grief and African America's national experience, he revealed the cultural dimension of Black America's experience with death and dying.[29]

In addition to the convergence of the individual, the familial, and the national that Holloway observes, it is the language of liberation that Du Bois engages that allows him to think of a life for his son apart from the experience of racism. Preceding the excerpt provided by Holloway is a cruel encounter on the morning of the son's burial, during which a passing stranger glances at Du Bois and remarks, "Niggers!" This scathing and

unrelenting racism contrasted with the tragedy of his loss is what prompts Du Bois's simultaneous grief and relief. He concludes that death is better than "a sea of sorrow" that awaits the child in the world of the living.[30] It is through the event of his son's death that Du Bois is able to imagine the possibility of a different world for future children and the larger African American community. Du Bois's parallel experience underscores the broader import of Till-Mobley's own use of the collective Black gaze to reject the limitations that Black communities had historically faced when looking after the dead.

Mamie Till-Mobley's decision to mobilize images of her son's disfigured face was a public demand for the country to reckon with the brutal treatment of African Americans in the South. Her deployment of photography to demand social justice was by no means unique – most notably, activist and journalist Ida B. Wells utilized photographs to bring awareness to lynching in the 1890s. And during the American Civil Rights Movement, shortly after Till's death, photographs documenting the violent response to nonviolent resistance publicized the cruel reply to anti-segregation efforts.[31] These instances and more demonstrate how Black Americans have employed photography to expose the material consequences of anti-Black racism.

However, Till-Mobley's reliance on visuality is distinct in that she centers the act of looking itself as a form of social justice. In a memoir detailing the experiences surrounding her son's death, she writes:

> It would be important for people to look at what had happened on a late Mississippi night when nobody was looking, to consider what might happen again if we didn't look out. This would not be like so many other lynching cases, the hundreds, the thousands of cases where families would be forced to walk away and quietly bury their dead and their grief and their humiliation.[32]

In associating the death of her son with a longer trajectory of anti-Black violence and the families who have had to endure it, Till-Mobley demands two specific responses from viewers of her son's body. First, looking could become a means not only for acknowledgment but for accountability. It was a national reckoning that Till's mother sought. Courtney Baker quotes Till-Mobley to note, "Her belief was that, in fronting the disfigured body of Emmett Till, 'people also had to face themselves. They would have to see their own responsibility in pushing for an end to this evil'."[33] Second was a call for collective mourning. If collective grief, as Holloway comments in regard to Du Bois's experience of losing a child, is a response to familial loss common to "African America's national experience,"[34] then collective mourning is a public display of grief over lives lost as well as continuing occurrence of anti-Black violence. In the case of Emmett Till, his mother sought to have the broader public acknowledge that her son's death was not simply a personal loss but a national tragedy. Till-Mobley in effect called on the larger public to place her son within a community by having them acknowledge their shared history of anti-Black violence.

If lynching disrupted the "rituals of respectable citizenship"[35] such as burial, then it must also be acknowledged that the call for looking after the dead is also a demand for reckoning with the history of anti-Black violence in the U.S. All too often obscured by official or local efforts, racial violence in the U.S. limits not only public outcry but also public rites such as burials and funerals. Mamie Till-Mobley was no stranger to such aims, as her request to have her son's body sent back to her in Chicago was met by resistant officials, who obscured details about the events surrounding the murder and attempted to accelerate bodily decomposition with lime so that her son might not be recognizable.[36]

In addition to circulating the photographs via media outlets, Till-Mobley countered officials' efforts by refusing to have the mortician touch-up her son's face before the funeral. Ensuring the visibility of the wounds prevented "narrative erasure,"[37] but it also functioned as a form of care. As Baker writes, "The act of mourning violent death operates in a figurative sense like the mortician's retouching, covering up the mistreatment of the body with its own articulate compassion. In its refusal to admit any covering up of the wounds or their source – racist violence – the Till funeral represents a radical departure from the standard."[38]

Looking After the Dead

Mamie Till-Mobley's decision to circulate images of her son in the media indeed marks a turning point for the collective Black gaze. Lynching-related photographs were primarily produced, distributed, and kept by white spectators in the first half of the twentieth century. These photographs functioned as personal mementos, but they also allowed spectators to share the scene with others who might have been sympathetic to anti-Black ideologies. The material photograph made it possible for participants to share the image with those nearby but also send them across the country,[39] forming what visual theorist Courtney Baker calls a "virtual community."[40] The white gaze, in this instance, gave rise to the possibility of a nationally dispersed virtual community, in which images of Black death and suffering bonded spectators near and far.

Figure 1. Stanley Nelson Jr., still from *The Murder of Emmett Till* (28:43), 2003. Video. PBS

Till-Mobley's publicization of her son's death was a direct response to this practice. She relied on the American media's propensity for circulating images of Black death to mobilize photographs of her son. Similar to the role of lynching

photography in the early twentieth century, Till-Mobley's insertion of photographs into the media forged a virtual community of spectators who might contribute to the national outcry against Till's death and the practice of lynching. Though viewers may have been far removed from the Mississippi Delta, the region in which Till was murdered, they could contest the longstanding history of violence against African Americans by participating in the public mourning of his death.

Contemporary responses to the death of Emmett Till demonstrate the lasting impact of the critical Black gaze. *The Murder of Emmett Till* (2003), a documentary by Stanley Nelson Jr., tells of the events surrounding the death and funeral. Notably, the director traces the impact of a single death on the broader African American community through interviews and archival footage. I focus here on a specific series of scenes that capture attendees of Till's funeral. The camera pans to capture individual attendees waiting in line to presumably enter the church.

Figure 2. Stanley Nelson Jr., still from *The Murder of Emmett Till* (29:23), 2003. Video. PBS

Before transitioning to another segment of the line there is a cut scene of mortician Harry Caise, the funeral home worker who received the body of Emmett Till, in the present day. He comments on the attendees: "They were mad. They were angry" (0:39–0:40), before the documentary returns to the archival footage to illustrate the indignation felt by attendees. The camera pans right across a different segment of the line to show adults gazing at the camera recording them [Figures 1–3]. This scene is preceded by an interview with Mamie Till-Mobley, whose off-screen voice accompanies the well-known still photographs of Emmett Till. The moving images show a startlingly lively crowd gathering in front of Roberts Temple church in Chicago. This temporal disjuncture mirrors the tension

between "remembrance and disavowal, individual and collective memory, and the plural coextensive subjectivities of those who share memories."[41]

The scenes exhibit collective mourning as a refusal of the looking practices surrounding violent deaths such as lynchings, which were subject to both spectacle and secrecy.[42] Furthermore, the attendees at the funeral exemplify how collective mourning makes present the community of which Till was a part. Unlike earlier representations of lynchings, those that document Till's death cannot be thought of without acknowledging the community that supported him and his mother. The attendees' collective gaze materializes and publicizes the awareness of America's violent patterns of racism. The attendees practice the right to look – the right to claim both "political subjectivity and collectivity."[43]

Figure 3. Stanley Nelson Jr., still from *The Murder of Emmett Till* (29:25), 2003. Video. PBS

The collective Black gaze calls into question the viewer's own gaze and their relationship to what is seen, and, in turn, the viewer's own relationship to the history of anti-Black racism in the U.S. As such, viewers' gazes are not the decorporealized, autonomous sort so heralded by Western humanism,[44] and are instead characterized by their capacity to destabilize the idea that looking is an entirely individuated and disembodied experience. Rather, the collective Black gaze in this instance cannot be anything but an encounter that brings the viewer into relation with both those pictured and the event of Till's death. Like Sobchack's ethical space, recognition of this relationality places the attendees, Till, and remote viewers within the same body politic – one in which Till's right to a proper burial and communal mourning is upheld by those who populated

his world, and who could each offer a distinct relationality to Emmett Till that brings a picture of the teen to life.

Within a World

After the murder of George Floyd at the hands of Minneapolis police in May 2020, journalists and others commonly referred to lynching in the U.S. as the progenitor of modern-day police brutality.[45] Floyd's own brother, Philonise Floyd, expressed at a congressional hearing that, "They lynched my brother. That was a modern-day lynching in broad daylight."[46] Indeed, there were and are many parallels. Both lynchings and police brutality occur with the complicity or full participation of law enforcement, and are commonly documented and then circulated for others to see. Yet, despite their similarities and differences, conversations about the images themselves were limited. Few discussed the recording specifically as the continuation of a long history of documenting anti-Black violence in this country; even less questioned the significant role of spectators – including those not directly involved – in representations of the violent events. Centering on the collective Black gaze offers an entry into thinking about the shared visual language and historical practices in the media coverage of Till and Floyd.

Nonetheless, the circulation of the recording contributed to the instigation of historic political action and social change. But what was it specifically about the images that incited such a response? The recording was not the sole factor in the national response to Floyd's death, but the influence of its existence cannot be dismissed. Though the medium of digital recordings and contemporary images of racial violence are distinct from filmic mediums such as photography, conversations surrounding Floyd's death in the media point to the importance of situating the recording within the historical practice of documenting the death and suffering of Black people in the U.S.

In an episode of the podcast *Still Processing*, *New York Times* reporters Wesley Morris and Jenna Wortham discuss the role of the bystanders who witnessed Floyd's murder. Specifically, Morris considers the visibility of a "community announcing itself or being formed in the presence of this awfulness" during the Derek Chauvin trial. Preceding this description, he comments, "Once it was clear that I was seeing a thing that I'd never seen before, I just – I couldn't not watch it."[47] The shift in how the recording was not only perceived by the public but also utilized in the court proceedings was indeed remarkable. Rarely had we, as a nation, seen the courts acknowledge the presence of the collective Black gaze during acts of racial violence, and made space for the nuances of that community's response to the violence.

Morris, however, notes his reluctance to use the word "community," and remarks that it feels "incredibly reductive to have to use these shorthands to describe complicated things that aren't entirely representative of the individual people or communities within these communities."[48] His reluctance is understandable, but perhaps it is the Western fixation on wholeness and unity that detracts from the notion of community as a nondifferentiated mass. My attention to the collective gaze is not to argue in favor of a cohesive, homogenous body politic; rather, it is to propose that humanity is not designated by the recognition of a "whole" in the psychoanalytic sense.[49] That is to say, the disparate individuals making up the body politic in fact further accentuate humanity, for in their own ways, each demonstrates the diverse relations that they have had with Floyd and their other neighbors. To understand the collective as a nuanced and differentiated entity is what allows for a depth of personhood, as it reveals the diverse possibilities and relationships that Floyd had within his community.

The various recordings capturing the murder of Floyd attest to the multiple viewpoints that contemporary media generates.

Here, I focus on the cell phone footage taken by Darnella Frazier, the seventeen-year-old girl who first recorded the video of Floyd's murder, and the footage captured by CCTV. Frazier's recording is distinct from that produced by the CCTV, which serves as an eternal, indifferent witness. Its impersonal gaze is countered by Frazier and other bystanders, who produce recordings that reflect their individual points of view. As the witnesses capture their own perspectives, the CCTV and police body cameras record the same witnesses utilizing their capacity to look and document. While those other cameras documented the crowd, recordings may have gone unseen by the public if the circulation of personal cell phone recordings had not instigated further investigation.

The video reveals police brutality as a common American phenomenon, but it also demonstrates the socio-political impact of the collective Black gaze. In asserting the right to look, the Black gaze gives shape to "invisible" acts of violence. As Nicholas Mirzoeff writes, "The right to look confronts the police who say to us, 'Move on there's nothing to see here'."[50] Those who protested and recorded the killing of Floyd not only respond, "Yes, there *is* something to see"; they also demand that their collective act of looking be seen. It is our witnessing of their looking that makes what was once invisible, visible to the broader public. The regularity of police brutality causes the resulting deaths to become "both shocking and ordinary, unexpected and predictable, fantastic and normal, horrifying and banal."[51] Banality offers cover for what Floyd's brother called "a modern-day lynching" to happen in broad daylight. The collective Black gaze, however, refuses any attempt to obstruct its view.

Frazier's testimony during Chauvin's trial is notable in that the collective gaze cannot be separated from the embeddedness of the witnesses in the neighborhood.[52] Throughout the trial, Frazier is asked how frequently she visited Cup Foods (the convenience store in front of which Floyd was killed), about her relationship to

the other witnesses (some were acquaintances from school, one was her nine-year-old cousin, others were strangers), and her general knowledge of the area.[53]

While Frazier is on the witness stand, Jerry Blackwell, the prosecutor, shows Exhibit 016, a CCTV clip recording Frazier and her cousin walking toward the entrance of Cup Foods. What the CCTV captures that Frazier's cell phone does not is her act of care and sense of responsibility. She can be seen turning her head toward the cops surrounding Floyd as she continues to walk her cousin to the door of Cup Foods [Figure 4]. She promptly turns around and heads toward the police vehicle, the policemen, and Floyd, to record the scene. At this point, Blackwell requests the video be paused and asks a series of questions about the scene: "Was there anything about the scene that you didn't want your cousin to see? [...] Is that why you directed your cousin to go on into Cup Foods? [...] What was it about the scene that caused you to come back?" Easily overlooked considering the gravity of what we are witnessing as remote viewers of the trial is Frazier's acknowledgment of both her responsibility to others and the import of looking.

Figure 4. MN v. Derek Chauvin Trial, Day 2 (1:17:36), 2021. Video. *Law & Crime*

While gesturing with his hands, Blackwell also asks, "Amongst the bystanders who were there, did any of them make an effort to actually offer care for Mr. Floyd?" Frazier seems to hesitate as she pauses before saying, "Physically? [...] I seen, I heard them say, 'Get off of him, you're hurting him, he can't breathe, he's not moving.' But any time someone tried to get close [the police] were defensive, so we couldn't even get close." Her pause contrasts with her usual quick, single-word responses to Blackwell's questioning. In asking "Physically?" Frazier makes a distinction between the physical offer of care and the act of witnessing. As Frazier herself laments during the

trial, looking in and of itself is too often insufficient for saving the life of another.

Yet, it is thanks to the witnessing of Frazier and other bystanders that those who were not present at the scene of the crime can mourn and protest the violent circumstances of Floyd's death. In the conclusion to "The People in the Neighborhood," Wortham ends by similarly reflecting, "[W]hat the [Chauvin] trial did was recenter the survivors, recenter the victims, recenter all the people who got waylaid, as that murder just touched off this protest, right? All these things were done in George Floyd's name, but also, the trial was a reminder of who this person was within a community and within a world."[54] And it was Darnella Frazier's recording of Floyd's death that allowed those who were not at the scene of the crime to witness the placement of Floyd "within a community and within a world." Like Mamie Till-Mobley, Frazier invokes the right to look as a form of care.

Conclusion

The notion of a collective Black gaze highlights the historical parallel between restrictions against collectivity and prohibitions against looking faced by African Americans. The lasting impact of the media in regard to the deaths of Till and Floyd illustrates the collective Black gaze as a means for creating an ethical bond between witnesses. In doing so, the gaze challenges traditional roles of viewership. The roles of seer and seen become unfixed, as witnesses come to an awareness about how those positionalities have contributed to media representations of racial violence. Thus, the capacity of the collective Black gaze to redefine viewing roles is to also rearrange "the relations of the visible."[55]

Placing the collective Black gaze at the center of analysis shifts the line of inquiry. Focus on the collective act of Black witnessing asks: where do we find ourselves in relation to that person,

that community, in this world? Courtney Baker, a film theorist, reflects on her own engagement with photographs of Emmett Till:

> The encounter with human beings and embeddedness in the world are what educates us in the humanity of ourselves and of others. [...] The visual encounter with the image of death and suffering, it appeared, brought on the crucial education about the self and of what it means to be human. It is an education founded upon hubris and vulnerability. The current study identifies in the visual encounter a collapsing, a falling of the self into the reality of the other.[56]

It is not that the collective Black gaze alone might curtail the protracted history of anti-Black violence, but that it has the capacity to expose the entanglement of self and other, and visible and invisible. Acknowledgment of these intersecting dynamics creates the possibility for viewers to develop an ethical bond with the dead. Images of those who look after the dead illustrate how the collective Black gaze aids the living in maintaining vital connections with the dead in spite of any material, political, or social deaths.

1 See: Brian Wallis, "Black Bodies, White Science: The Slave Daguerreotypes of Louis Agassiz," *American Art* vol. 9, no. 2 (Summer 1995); Matthew Fox-Amato, *Exposing Slavery: Photography, Human Bondage, and the Birth of Modern Visual Politics in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

2 For example, see Grace Elizabeth Hale's review of a contemporary showing of lynching photographs, "'Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America' Exhibition Review," *Journal of American History* vol. 89, no. 3 (December 2002), in which she comments that the images were "transformed by photography into secondhand spectacles" (992).

3 Simone Browne, *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 9.

4 See Matthew Fox-Amato regarding the intersection of photography and slavery in the U.S. Photographs of free African Americans were rarer, but some do remain with us today. For more on African American photographic practices prior to Emancipation,

see: Jasmine Nichole Cobb, *Picture Freedom: Remaking Black Visuality in the Early Nineteenth Century* (New York: NYU Press, 2015); and Mary Shelley Trent, "Visualizing Freedom: The Family Photograph Album of the Formerly Enslaved Ellen Craft," *American Art* vol. 37, no. 1 (2023), 58–81.

5 Tina Campt, *A Black Gaze: Artists Changing How We See* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2021), 38.

6 bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 116.

7 Campt, *A Black Gaze,* 39.

8 Ibid., 37.

9 Ibid., 39.

10 Charles W. Mills, *Blackness Visible: Essays on Philosophy and Race* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015), 11.

11 Brenda E. Stevenson, "'Us never had no big funerals or weddin's on de place': Ritualizing Black Marriage in the Wake of Freedom," in: *Beyond Freedom: Disrupting the History of Emancipation*, eds. David W. Blight and Jim Downs (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2018), 40–42.

12 Shawn Michelle Smith, *Photography on the Color Line: W. E. B. Du Bois, Race, and Visual Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 122.

13 Christian Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1977), 61–64.

14 For more on atrocity photographs, see: Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Picador, 1977) and Susan A. Crane, "Choosing Not to Look," *History & Theory* vol. 47, no. 3 (October 2008). For more on the lynching spectator as voyeuristic, alienated viewer, see: David Marriott, "Photography and Lynching," in: idem, *On Black Men* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000); Shawn Michelle Smith, "Spectacles of Whiteness," in: *Photography on the Color Line*, op. cit.; and Amy Louise Wood, *Lynching and Spectacle* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009).

15 Smith, *Photography on the Color Line*, 118.

16 hooks, *Black Looks*, 168.

17 Vivian Sobchack. "Inscribing Ethical Space: Ten Propositions On Death, Representation, and Documentary," *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* (Fall 1984).

18 Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier*, 63.

19 Sobchack, "Inscribing Ethical Space," 294.

20 hooks, *Black Looks*, 116.

21 Ibid.

22 Campt, *A Black Gaze*, 39.

23 Brigitte Fielder, *Relative Races: Genealogies of Interracial Kinship in Nineteenth-Century America* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020), 58.

24 Browne, *Dark Matters*.

25 I am referring here primarily to Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) and Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845).

26 Jeannine DeLombard, "'Eye-Witness to the Cruelty': Southern Violence and Northern Testimony in Frederick Douglass's 1845 *Narrative*," *American Literature* vol. 73, no. 2 (2001), 249.

27 In a televised interview, historian Timothy Tyson claimed that Bryant had recanted her accusation. There has since been debate over whether or not Till had actually whistled at Bryant. See: Soledad O'Brien, "Full Interview with Timothy Tyson, Author of the Blood of Emmett Till," *Matter of Fact*, February 11, 2017, video, 14:32, https://www.matteroffact.tv/full-interview-timothy-tyson-author-blood-emmett-till/.

28 Courtney Baker, *Humane Insight: Looking at Images of African American Suffering and Death* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2015).

29 Karla FC Holloway, *Passed On: African American Mourning Stories* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 5–6.

30 W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Chicago: A. C. McClurg & Co., 1904), 212–213.

31 Leigh Raiford, *Imprisoned in a Luminous Glare: Photography and the African American Freedom Struggle* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011).

32 Mamie Till-Mobley, *Death of Innocence: The Story of the Hate Crimes That Changed America* (New York: Random House Publishing, 2003), 139.

33 Baker, *Humane Insight*, 77.

34 Holloway, *Passed On*, 5–6.

35 Stevenson, "'Us never had no big funerals or weddin's on de place'," 40.

36 Till-Mobley, *Death of Innocence*, 133–134.

37 Nicole Fleetwood, *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 9.

38 Baker, *Humane Insight*, 83. Baker comments here on Till-Mobley's refusal to have the mortician touch up Till's face for the funeral.

39 Smith, *Photography on the Color Line*, 122.

40 Baker, *Humane Insight*, 38.

41 Jean Ma, "Photography's Absent Times," in: *Still Moving: Between Cinema and Photography*, eds. Karen Beckman and Jean Ma (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008). See this anthology for more on the distinctions between still and moving images as well as their intersections.

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

43 Nicholas Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visuality* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 1.

44 Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992), 39.

45 Ed Pilkington, "UN experts condemn modern-day 'racial terror' lynchings in US," *The Guardian*, June 2020; Deneen L. Brown, "Violent deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor reflect a brutal American legacy," *National Geographic*, June 2020; and Will Schwarz, "Police killings of black people: the legacy of lynching writ large," *The Baltimore Sun*, May 2020, are a few examples among many that trace police brutality back to lynching.

46 Richard Cowan and David Morgan, "George Floyd's brother decries 'a modern-day lynching' in testimony to Congress," *Reuters*, June 10, 2020, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-minneapolis-police-protests-idUSKBN23H1NB.

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48 Ibid.

49 Jacques Lacan, "Some Reflections on the Ego," *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* no. 34 (1953), 15.

50 Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look*, 1.

51 Goldsby, *A Spectacular Secret*, 27.

52 Derek Chauvin, the Minnesota police officer and field training officer primarily responsible for the murder of George Floyd, was put on trial from March–April 2021 and found guilty on April 20, 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/20/us/chauvin-guilty-murder-george-floyd.html.

53 "MN v. Derek Chauvin Trial Day 2 – Continuing with Donald Williams – Darnella, Filmed encounter," *Law & Crime*, March 30, 2021, video, 1:34:57, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HZBDYxb1qCc.

54 Morris and Wortham, "The People in the Neighborhood."

55 Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look*, 1.

56 Baker, *Humane Insight*, x.

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