

Can I Get A Witness?—Living While Black Death is Trending

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## **Abstract**

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It is common for graphic scenes of violence and death to infiltrate our timelines from retweets, reposts, and shares. I often question how much control we really have over the images that enter our feed. In what ways are we affected and influenced by these images? How do we relate to these images and video clips that are played and replayed before us? In what ways are these images evoking or related to past scenes of racist violence? In what ways are these racially violent moments captured in photos and videos and shared online speaking to a Black consciousness? This project comparatively researches and examines the relationship between past modes and methods of Black trauma curation in the past to contemporary modes of dissemination on social media in order to argue that contemporary uses of spaces such as Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter serve as an extension of previous scrapbooking methods. By comparing the Emmett Till Generation and their curation of trauma via scrapbooks that were used to galvanize social movements and impact youth organizing efforts. The Trayvon Generation today uses social media in a similar fashion; to bear witness, organize, and curate digital memorials for the dead. Witnessing is further extended and complicated on digital platforms, providing an abundance of visual evidence that has proven to be vital in leading to prosecutions and arrests of violent state officials and perpetrators of extrajudicial violence. These live or recorded moments of witnessing are used not only as evidence but to inform the public. However, we have always known that it is



always happening somewhere, even if we are not around to witness it. What are the effects of having the duty and responsibility to bear witness?

Paying particular attention to Black youth, this project examines their presence and usage of social media spaces. By analyzing young Black people's use of social media platforms in relation to Darnella Frazier's strategic use of Facebook, this project examines how Black youth and witnessing is currently driving a cultural shift in entertainment media that highlights witnessing death as a significant milestone for Black youth that marks the transition between childhood and adulthood. It is also impacting entertainment media that is not marketed towards Black people, further highlighting Black witnessing of racialized violence at the intersection of technology as both a contemporary and future issue through its inclusion in contemporary media. Witnessing, for Black people, is framed as being both necessary and traumatic. This project concludes with an in-depth examination of speculative media to reveal the implications of both the present and the future intersections of race relations, state violence, and technology. Through analyses of interviews, image circulation and dissemination, magazine articles, social media platforms, visual and speculative media, this dissertation works to address and attempts to answer the aforementioned questions.

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# Introduction

## A Reckoning-Witnessing via Technology, the New Normal

Photography (specifically, daguerreotypes) was once described by inventor Oliver Wendell Holmes as a "mirror with a memory."<sup>1</sup> As daguerreotypes were developed on the metal plate, one would catch a momentary glimpse at their own reflection on the silver panel as the image of a soon-to-be-memory materializes. Our interactions with images/imagery today are further complicated and even more intimate as we interact with digital platforms and technology. This project seeks to examine the dissemination of racially violent imagery and how witnessing is magnified via technology by examining the demographic that interacts with social media the most: Black youth. It also highlights the role and the importance of Black postmemory surrounding the past/present/future trauma of lynching and its representation in entertainment media, further highlighting tensions at the intersection of race and technology.

I will also examine Black aesthetic responses to this postmemory of anti-Black violence while discussing the new ways that trauma and postmemory are extended with our technological advancements, obfuscating the intent behind the reproduction of these images. Photography is not simply a reproduction of an image, but it also functions as a site of contemporary memory for those of us looking at these images in the present. "To remember slavery is to imagine the past as the fabric of our own experience,"<sup>2</sup> which shapes the way that we see and engage with imagery that invokes that past. But how do we grapple with the

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<sup>1</sup> Oliver Wendell Holmes, "The Stereoscope and the Stereograph," *Atlantic Monthly*, 1859.

<sup>2</sup> Saidiya Hartman, "The Time of Slavery," in *Enchantments of Modernity* (Mumbai: Routledge India, 2012), 448.

trauma and history of violence that is still happening? This question is central to the development of this project as it seeks to:

1. Examine the multiple ways in which a collective Black consciousness is constructed as postmemory.<sup>3</sup>
2. Define viral Black death as a practice rooted in lynching and a disregard for Black life.
3. Analyze the artistic responses to the proliferation of Black death and how these responses are "talking back"<sup>4</sup> to white supremacy.

The existing literature on the dissemination of anti-Black violence in digital spaces has not connected our current methods of witnessing and circulation, which are mediated via technology as being an extension of past African American traditions. Scholar Alissa Richardson places citizen journalism in conversation with the history of African-Americans in social movements,<sup>5</sup> and Elizabeth Alexander's *The Trayvon Generation* examines the influences of racism on American culture.

My work is similar, but it also diverges from their scholarly contributions. We differ in how this project articulates and traces the role that Black people have played in their strategic use of media/technology as a mode of witnessing. Social media platforms have permanently changed witnessing, and when Black people's deaths become trending topics in digital spaces,

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<sup>3</sup> Marianne Hirsch, "The Generation of Postmemory," *Poetics Today* 29, no. 1 (2008): 103-128.

Hirsch discusses the Holocaust and how the next generation "remembers" traumatic experiences through the way they are passed down and felt so "deeply as to seem to constitute memories in their own right."

<sup>4</sup> Bell Hooks, "Talking Back," *Discourse* 125 (1986). "To speak then when one was not spoken to was a courageous act— an act of risk and daring." To speak out in times of racial justice and turmoil is also a courageous act, and so many of us speak out it in different ways. My analyses of media responses to racist violence is comes from hooks' theory of talking back to authority.

<sup>5</sup> Allissa Richardson, *Bearing Witness While Black: African Americans, Smartphones, and the New Protest# Journalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).



the impact has been difficult to quantify. In this project, the quantification of this impact is measured in the way that visual media has also shifted to include the topics of Black witnessing and state violence at the intersection of technology in media which is marketed to Black audiences and beyond. Through archival research and analyses of interviews, this project connects the Emmett Till Generation to the Trayvon Generation to mark the progression and the development of Black witnessing and postmemory through technological advancement.

This project also posits digital culture as an extension of these traditions, examining it through the impact of Black witnessing and postmemory. This was done through an in-depth examination of the scholarship on Black digital culture and surveillance. By interpreting the dissemination of anti-Black violence and its effects on Black youth, I demonstrate that its impact has shaped entertainment media and the difference in the way that media is perceived by Black and non-Black audiences. Mainstream media plays a crucial role in the way that Black life is perceived. It is through their selective dissemination of harmful stereotypes and anti-black violence that contributes to a culture in which anti-Black violence is not only tolerated but is part of the process in which white American social identity and solidarity formed.<sup>6</sup> This can be seen in the contemporary circulation of scenes of violence today, where the consideration for Black life and the Black psyche is rarely considered in mainstream media.

On the morning of August 26, 2015, news reporter Alison Parker and photojournalist Adam Ward, who were both employees of WDBJ in Roanoke, Virginia, were murdered on

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<sup>6</sup> Monica McDermott and Frank L. Samson, "White Racial and Ethnic Identity in the United States," *Annual Review of Sociology* 248 (2005).

live television, fatally shot as they conducted an interview. What is significant about this shooting is both the year that it took place and the way that it was presented in the media. Both Ward and Parker were white journalists, and the media made a conscious decision not to air their murders or the scenes that preceded their deaths.<sup>7</sup> They thought that it was unethical, and they wanted to be sensitive to both the viewers and the families of the deceased. The purpose of highlighting this story is not to analyze the use of smartphone footage in their murders<sup>8</sup> (despite the fact that this body of work will analyze media shared on smartphones and social media platforms) but to highlight a stark disregard for Black viewers and Black life by mainstream media.

That same year, just four months earlier, on April 4, 2015, Walter Scott was shot and killed while running away from his arresting officer.<sup>9</sup> After footage of his arrest was released to the public, NBC aired a play-by-play freeze-frame analysis of his death on the air,<sup>10</sup> with casual commentary on each frame, as if his death were a football game. The dissection of each scene was discussed and analyzed on the nightly news before a national audience. This marked a contemporary difference in the way that Black people's suffering, pain, and death are televised and in alignment with America's tradition of Black dehumanization. These events ultimately led to the genesis of this project. How are Black people able to grapple with

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<sup>7</sup> Jenn Burtleson Mackay, "Making Ethical Choices in the News Media," in *The Rowman & Littlefield Handbook of Media Management and Business* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2020), 157.

<sup>8</sup> Stuart Marshall Bender, "Performing Murder on Live Television and Social Media," in *Legacies of the Degraded Image in Violent Digital Media* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, 2017), 44.

<sup>9</sup> Katheryn Russell-Brown, "Body Cameras, Police Violence, and Racial Credibility," *Florida Law Review Forum* 67 (2015).

<sup>10</sup> William Welburn, "# ButHowLongWillTheyMatter? Preserving Digital Artifacts of Acts of Remembrance and Resistance," *Innovation: Journal of Appropriate Librarianship and Information Work in Southern Africa* 60: 2016.

these painful moments being aired, dissected, and replayed for the world to see? *Can I Get a Witness?—Living While Black Death is Trending* speaks to this phenomenon through analyses of historical media and the dissemination of Black death by tracing the differences between mainstream and Black circulation. This project also specifically addresses Black youth's significant contributions to digital spaces as witnesses and victims of state/racially motivated violence, as well as the nature and intricacies of digital racial trauma and its impact on Black youth. Walter Scott's death, like so many others, was aired and continues to air repeatedly on the news and was shared throughout social media platforms, ensuring that the whole world was watching, whether they wanted to or not.<sup>11</sup>

While the circulation of Black people being killed is not new, this contemporary mode of sharing is now the new normal.<sup>12</sup> However, there is a historical difference in the way that Black media publications circulate death in comparison to mainstream media. The circulation of violent imagery via Black publications marks the intent. However, on digital platforms today, where these scenes are disseminated on timelines and Twitter feeds without captions or context, the intent is often lost or unclear, but the impact is still cogent.<sup>13</sup> Despite our constant engagement with digital spaces, the average person doesn't understand how the content that they view and even their search results are affected by the algorithms that dictate and shape

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<sup>11</sup> Denetra Walker, "'There's a Camera Everywhere'": How Citizen Journalists, Cellphones, and Technology Shape Coverage of Police Shootings," *Journalism Practice* 12 (2021).

<sup>12</sup> Michael Bowman, "TV, Cell Phones and Social Justice: A Historical Analysis of How Video Creates Social Change," *Race, Gender & Class* 24, no. 1-2 (2017): 19.

<sup>13</sup> Vanessa Williamson, Kris-Stella Trump, and Katherine Levine Einstein, "Black Lives Matter: Evidence That Police-Caused Deaths Predict Protest Activity," *Perspectives on Politics* 16, no. 2 (2018): 412.

our digital experiences.<sup>14</sup> By mining our data and quickly processing our information on these platforms, algorithms make quick decisions about our interests, the content we might want to see, and the people we may want to "follow" (on Instagram, Twitter, etc.). While those of us who record these instances and share these events do not do so with voyeuristic intent, we must acknowledge that the experiences and traumas we witness and disseminate can become our own.<sup>15</sup>

To engage is to negotiate racial trauma. The experiences of others become a tangible possibility, a continued reminder of what is (or what will) come. What is "recorded in memory as knowledge" via witnessing is what ultimately functions as postmemory.<sup>16</sup> Hirsch defines the term "as a structure of inter- and trans-generational transmission of traumatic knowledge and experience. It is a consequence of traumatic recall but (unlike post-traumatic stress disorder) at a generational remove."<sup>17</sup> What Black people experience when Black death trends is an extension and a reiteration of trauma. While they are not *directly* experiencing the events that precede them, the reach of racial trauma transcends time. Hirsch continues, "postmemory is the term I came to on the basis of my autobiographical readings of works by second-generation writers and visual artists. The "post" in "postmemory" signals more than a temporal delay and more than a location in an aftermath."<sup>18</sup> This is relative to what Alexander

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<sup>14</sup> Rodney H. Jones, "The Text is Reading You: Teaching Language in The Age of The Algorithm," *Linguistics and Education* 62 (2021): 75.

<sup>15</sup> Elizabeth Alexander, "Can you be BLACK and Look at This?": Reading the Rodney King Video(s)," *Public Culture* 7, no. 1 (1994): 82.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

<sup>17</sup> Hirsch, "The Generation of Postmemory."

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

has written extensively on and has defined as the concept of Postmemory when it comes to witnessing, specifically in viewing the body of Emmett Till and the Rodney King beating in her explanation of how these moments serve a mental reminder of the type of violence that Black people have been and continue to be subjected to. Black people relate other similar moments of racial and/or state violence to the previous instances that they have "witnessed," even when they are one, two, or multiple generations removed from the original event. Postmemory implies that the trauma from these events proliferates along with the trauma they experience and witness during their lifetimes.

A cultural memory of these painful events is activated when witnessing new but similar moments of violence. Postmemory has been necessary because Black people were not always afforded the opportunity to document the intricacies of their culture. In fact, Black culture and anything celebrating it has been viewed as a diversion from or even an affront to American culture at large. The fact that the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture (which only opened in 2016) has been continually defaced with nooses is indicative of this. The museum houses an exhibit dedicated to Trayvon Martin and Emmett Till. I know that, unfortunately, another exhibit memorializing another Black person's death will be added to the museum at some point. To witness these events is to carry them with you always, as well as the trauma that these moments invoke. Critical Black memory, as defined by Raiford, is "a mode of historical interpretation and political critique that has functioned as an important resource for framing and mobilizing African American social and political identities and movements."<sup>19</sup> In order to examine the practice of

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<sup>19</sup> Leigh Raiford, "Photography and the Practices of Critical Black Memory," *History and Theory* 48, no. 4 (2009), 113.

postmemory, or Black critical memory in the present, I comparatively examine the relationship between two separate generations grappling with racial/state violence to discuss how postmemory is invoked and how past Black traditions are reimagined on digital platforms such as Instagram. This project also examines invocations of postmemory as experienced by Black people, being referenced in contemporary media, tweets, music, etc., in order to highlight Black resistance. This project also examines moments of state/racialized/gendered violence that expose the limitations of digital spaces and technology due to the pervasiveness of anti-Blackness.

Digital spaces are part of everyday memorialization and curation, which means they are also spaces of proliferating racial trauma as well. Algorithms are responsible for our experiences on the internet by gathering info about our race, our finances, our locations, etc. While we read tweets, the AI is reading us, and adapting faster than we realize.<sup>20</sup> Can the algorithm be responsible for the proliferation of Black death that enters the timelines of Black users in digital spaces? How can we address the assumption or the problem of supposedly "neutral" algorithms?<sup>21</sup> These are some of the questions addressed in Chapter 1.

Black people have to contend with the consequences of racism from both digital and actual policing in their day-to-day lives, and this must be considered in our analyses of how racial trauma is something that builds and continually proliferates in the minds and bodies of Black people everywhere. An example that captures the way that witnessing has altered Black life is The Studio Museum's installation by British sculptor Thomas J. Price entitled *Witness*.

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<sup>20</sup> Joon Soo Lim and Jun Zhang, "Adoption of AI-driven Personalization in Digital News Platforms: An Integrative Model of Technology Acceptance and Perceived Contingency," *Technology in Society* 69 (2022).

<sup>21</sup> Duncan Purves, "Fairness in Algorithmic Policing," *Journal of the American Philosophical Association* (2022): 1-21.

The installation includes a nine-foot-tall statue that stands in the middle of Marcus Garvey Park in Harlem. The bronze statue is entitled *The Distance Within* (2021), implying that the man in the sculpture is not "present" where he stands, but through his engagement with technology and what he is able to access, he is transported elsewhere, to the statue of a casually dressed Black man with a low cropped haircut, a smartphone in his hands, and his eyes locked on the screen. As an observer of the sculpture, one can't help but wonder, "What is he looking at?" All we know is that whatever it is has his full attention. He has stopped his stride, and he cannot look away. I recognize that Price is a British artist, and the man represented in the sculpture could be standing anywhere, and while this is by no means a diasporic project, I invite diasporic interpretations and connections.

*The Distance Within* (2021) is an artistic body of work that perfectly captures what it means to be Black, what it means to witness, and how anti-blackness reaches Black people, not just in the way that their bodies are perceived in public space, but in the way that technology keeps us connected to every death, every time it occurs. Regardless, I believe that even if it is not my intention, due to the ubiquitous nature of anti-Blackness, the diaspora will slip through. The protests that erupted in Britain in the aftermath of the murder of George Floyd<sup>22</sup> demonstrate that diaspora is, in fact, a practice, an action,<sup>23</sup> and we inadvertently practice it. Witnessing aids in the way that Black people connect across geographical and cultural boundaries, and in the words of Mamie Till, "What happens to any of us, anywhere in

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<sup>22</sup> Ben Okri, "'I Can't Breathe': Why George Floyd's Words Reverberate Around the World," *Journal of Transnational American Studies* 12, no. 1 (2021).

<sup>23</sup> Brent Hayes Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2021).

the world, had better be the business of all of us."<sup>24</sup> W.E.B. DuBois's shock and horror at seeing the knuckles of a lynched Black man (Sam Holt) on display in an Atlanta grocery store<sup>25</sup> mirrors the way that so many of us are transfixed when witnessing these grotesque scenes of violence on our devices. It stops you in your tracks.

The way that Price's sculpture stands in Marcus Garvey Park, commanding the attention of onlookers with its presence, its stature, the pensive look across the face, the head tilted downward, immobilized by what he sees, is a reminder that for Black people in the community this is a scene that is all too familiar, regardless of where they might be from. Maybe he is in Brixton, Harlem, or even Port au Prince; what connects us is that we have all been witnesses, whether via our smartphones or personally, we have all been witnesses in one way or another. Price's sculpture highlights that even if witnessing is mediated by our devices, we are *moved* and present with the victims of racialized violence when we bear witness.

It is evident that technology has altered the way that Black people experience and cope with Black death. By examining the proliferation of Black murders via state violence and extrajudicial violence, along with their distribution on digital platforms such as social media, I want to discuss in greater detail how:

1. Postmemory, for Black people, emerges as a response to anti-Black terrorism. It assists in marking a relative Black experience (via the constant threat of racist violence), but it is also used as a tool to critique, respond and challenge the official documentation of this violence as well. What does it mean, and what does it *do* to

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<sup>24</sup> Angela Onwuachi-Willig, "The Trauma of the Routine: Lessons on Cultural Trauma from the Emmett Till Verdict," *Sociological Theory* 34, no. 4 (2016): 335-357.

<sup>25</sup> W. E. B. DuBois, *Dusk of Dawn! An Essay Toward an Autobiography of Race Concept* (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2017).



the Black psyche, which is continually reminded and subjected to the possibility and imminence of death via state/racist violence?

2. How technology alters the way we experience death. Features such as Facebook Live allow the user to share a live feed (as Diamond Reynolds live-streamed the murder of Philando Castille) as it occurs, placing the viewer at the scene and allowing us to witness the murder in near-real-time.
3. The effects of witnessing among Black youth as the dominant force in digital spaces. Black youths are also fully aware of the fact that their psyches are not considered when it comes to the dissemination of racialized violence. In what way does witnessing affect them?
4. Black death in digital spaces has impacted the themes and content within speculative visual media. What are they trying to tell or teach us? What can be said about the future of technology at the intersection of race?

Black life has always been precarious under white supremacy, but contemporary access to technology heightens our awareness and proximity to viewing racial violence.<sup>26</sup>

Death has always been a very present, very real threat that has forced us to think with and respond to the violence that we are subjected to.<sup>27</sup> While technology provides new terrain for exposing us to different kinds—or further developed—modes of terror, it has also provided us with the opportunity to "talk back" to those who have immense power over our lives, including those who exercise the power to end it.<sup>28</sup> Talking back is how we live, how we endure despite the constant threat of death. Talking back is the "expression of our movement

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<sup>26</sup> David Van Dijcke and Austin L. Wright, "Using Mobile Device Traces to Improve Near-Real Time Data Collection During the George Floyd Protests," *SSRN Electronic Journal* (Jan. 2021).

<sup>27</sup> Gabriel O. Apata, "'I Can't Breathe': The Suffocating Nature of Racism," *Theory, Culture & Society* 37, no. 7-8 (2020): 241-254.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.* THE ç of the phrase "talking back" is described by hooks: "In the world of southern Black community I grew up in 'back talk' and 'talking back' meant speaking as an equal to an authority figure. It meant daring to disagree and sometimes it just meant having an opinion. In the 'old school' children were meant to be seen and not heard. My great-grandparents, grandparents, and parents were all from the old school. To make yourself heard, if you were a child, was to invite punishment, the backhand lick, the slap across the face that would catch you unaware, or the feel of switches stinging your arms and legs. To speak then when one was not spoken to was a courageous act—an act of risk and daring."

from object to subject" as well as a "gesture of defiance that heals, that makes new growth possible." These are the ways in which we refuse and reject the notion of Black criminalization. We take control of the narrative by appropriating the good/bad dichotomy of Black citizens created by the media, exposing that surveillance and the imagery used to depict Black people are part of the justification of Black murder. We use technology, the space of social media, and hashtags to talk back. To change the associations that we have to the images (of ourselves) that have been used to project a fallacy of intrinsic Black criminality. Tina Campt argues that refusal is:

Embracing a state of black fugitivity, albeit not as a "fugitive" on the run or seeking escape, is not a simple act of opposition or resistance. It is neither a relinquishing of possibility nor a capitulation to negation. It is a fundamental renunciation of the terms imposed upon Black subjects that reduce black life to always already suspect by refusing to accept or deny these terms as their truth. It is a quotidian practice of refusing the terms of impossibility that define the Black subject in the twenty-first century logic of racial subordination.<sup>29</sup>

Talking back takes shape on digital platforms in the form of counter-narratives. It rejects racial subordination by giving Black people a space to bear witness. Andre Brock states that "Black Twitter came to online prominence through the creative use of Twitter's hashtag function and subsequent domination of Twitter's trending topics." He states,

Twitter's discourse conventions, ubiquity, and social features encouraged Black participation; Black Twitter is Twitter's mediation of Black cultural discourse, or 'signifyin.' In particular, the Black hashtag signifyin revealed alternate Twitter discourses to the mainstream and encourages a formulation of Black Twitter as a "social public"; a community constructed through the use of social media by outsiders and insiders alike.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Tina M. Campt, *A Black Gaze: Artists Changing How We See* (Boston: MIT Press, 2021).

<sup>30</sup> André Brock, "From the Blackhand Side: Twitter as a Cultural Conversation," *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 56, no. 4 (2012): 529-549.

It is clear that Black digital spaces such as Black Twitter have come into existence because of the content and the number of Black users on digital platforms, which is significant (26 percent of all Black internet users are on Twitter in comparison to only 14 percent of whites).<sup>31</sup> It is clear that Black people on digital platforms possess both influence and power with the construction of a counter-discourse when it comes to issues of police brutality. The social movements that erupted from the murders of Michael Brown<sup>32</sup> and George Floyd<sup>33</sup> have also functioned as a catalyst to bring about concrete results (in the form of arrests) and conduct further investigations into these instances of state and extrajudicial violence. Black Twitter is so powerful that, at times, it has become the mainstream voice for these issues.<sup>34</sup> Black Twitter is a necessary space that highlights the importance of digital platforms, especially when used by Black youth to combat the narratives put forth by police. This will be examined further in Chapter 3's exploration of Black youth digital culture and the consequences of witnessing. Digital platforms, while necessary, also reproduce the visual trauma of witnessing. When viewing a singular event, for Black people, there is a cultural knowledge that is activated via postmemory, which references America's long-standing issues with race and anti-Blackness.

### **Postmemory: Reliving Past Racial Trauma in The Present**

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<sup>31</sup> Maeve Duggan and Joanna Brenner, "The Demographics of Social Media Users—2012," Pew Research Center: Internet, Science & Tech, May 30, 2020, [www.pewresearch.org/internet/2013/02/14/the-demographics-of-social-media-users-2012/](http://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2013/02/14/the-demographics-of-social-media-users-2012/).

<sup>32</sup> Ray Rashawn, "Ferguson and the Death of Michael Brown on Twitter: #BlackLivesMatter, #TCOT, and the Evolution of Collective Identities," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 40, no. 11 (2017): 1797-1813.

<sup>33</sup> Aisha Powell, "Two-step Flow and Protesters: Understanding what Influenced Participation in George Floyd Protests," *Communication Quarterly* (2022): 1-22.

<sup>34</sup> Lauren Grimes, "The Value of Black Lives: The Effect of the Digital Age on African American Identity and Political Participation," *The Journal of Traditions & Beliefs* 5, no. 1 (2017): 8.

Katherine McKittrick's essay "Mathematics Black Life" discusses her ethics and the ethics that she hopes the field of Black Studies will adopt when recapitulating and researching graphic scenes of violence. In my discussions of postmemory, I keep the following words in mind:

In what follows, I move with the numbers and begin to work out how the uncomfortable mathematics of black life can inform current and future formations of black studies. I suggest that black studies not only name and posit the violent arithmetics of the archive, but that this citation of violence also can and should no longer ethically repeat this violence.<sup>35</sup>

In my interpretation of violence, I maintain these ethics by ensuring that the descriptions of violence are referenced, but the intricate details of violence are not restated. McKittrick presents a differentiation between calling out and naming this violence instead of recounting these scenes. Postmemory is how we bear witness to violence without reinscribing harm. The origins of postmemory for African Americans begin with the trauma of slavery, which is clearly an institution whose ramifications are still felt today. Patterson discusses the psychological impact of witnessing on plantations and demonstrates the impact of witnessing as a disruption to the Black family structure (specifically Black children witnessing the powerlessness of their parents).<sup>36</sup>

Later generations that did not directly experience slavery preserved the memory of it through art, literature, and word of mouth. For subsequent generations of intellectuals, like those that contributed to the formation of the NAACP, it was important that this history was preserved for both recollection and reflection. Their dedication to the curation and

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<sup>35</sup> Katherine McKittrick, "Mathematics Black Life," *The Black Scholar* 16, no. 16 (2014).

<sup>36</sup> Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018).

preservation of materials and artifacts from that period is evidence of how the concept of postmemory, as it pertains to Black culture, works to both preserve the past and inform future generations. However, slavery is not the sole site of cultural trauma for Black people and this project examines multiple sites of cultural trauma in order to reveal how postmemory functions in digital spaces and in visual/speculative media. As a reflexive process (via digital platforms or media), trauma connects the past to the present through representations and imagination.

It is important to note that the past is collectively shaped, even if it is not collectively experienced. An example of Black postmemory<sup>37</sup> is the way in which we come in contact with the histories that precede us through word of mouth. These traumas were shared generationally, passed on by our elders, and no matter how temporally distant they might seem, the possibility that it could (or that at some point in time, it would) happen to you made it all the more palpable. Using the word "story-telling" might imply that these tales are fictional, but not at all. Story-telling, or "word-of-mouth," is one of the first technologies that were used to pass/share these cautionary tales of violence to the next generation.<sup>38</sup> My own mother told me stories about the past to frame my understanding of Blackness and how others might perceive me. She always told me, "No one is safe, young or old." She said this about

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<sup>37</sup> Arlene R. Keizer, "Gone Astray in the Flesh: Kara Walker, Black Women Writers, and African American Postmemory," *PMLA* 123, no. 5 (2008): 1649-1672.

<sup>38</sup> Chanee D. Fabius, "Toward an Integration of Narrative Identity, Generativity, and Storytelling in African American Elders," *Journal of Black Studies* 47, no. 5 (2016): 423-434.

Eleanor Bumpurs<sup>39</sup> and Yusef Hawkins,<sup>40</sup> who were not discussed or even mentioned as I grew up, because additional deaths/murders were always proliferating, so a new name would always come in and replace the former. These stories were shared because my mother wanted me to always keep the names "in the front" of my memory because that "could have been your brother or your grandmother." By sharing these stories, I do not believe that it was my mother's (or any family member/elder's) intention to traumatize me but to show how I am connected to a history of violence that precedes my existence (a cultural violence), so it was imperative that she provided a cultural education. This history at play is what Spillers names as "telegraphic coding,"<sup>41</sup> which she describes as being "inscribed in the flesh," it is a history that connects present scenes of violent racial terror to the American archive of anti-Black violence.

The Spike Lee-directed film *BlacKkKlansman* (2018) builds off of this familiar experience of transferring trauma to previous generations. The film follows the investigation of a Black officer (Ron Stallworth), who infiltrates the Ku Klux Klan in order to stop their domestic terrorism plots. The character of Jerome Turner (played by Harry Belafonte), a survivor of the Jim Crow south, shares the story of his lynched friend, Jessie Washington. Turner, as the elder of the group, is passing this story down to the next generation, which happens to be the radical undergraduates enrolled in the film's fictional HBCU. This exchange

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<sup>39</sup> Eleanor Bumpurs was an elderly Black Woman killed in 1984, her name wasn't mentioned for quite some time until the shooting of Deborah Danner in 2016, who like Bumpurs was mentally ill and murdered by the NYPD

<sup>40</sup> Yusef Hawkins was murdered on my mother's birthday, August 23rd in 1989. He was chased by an angry mob of Italian white men in Bensonhurst, Brooklyn.

<sup>41</sup> Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (1987): 65.

places emphasis on the necessity for change and the responsibility that future generations have when it comes to reckoning with a tumultuous and violent past, even as that past informs the violence that they face in the present. Jerome sits at the center of the room, and all of the Black college students gather around as he shares the brutality of the scene, the smell, and the violent dismembering of the body of Jessie Washington.<sup>42</sup> As he painfully divulges this memory to the students, he charges them with the responsibility of sharing this story and memorializing Washington by keeping his story alive by repeating it and sharing it with the next generation. Jerome's story-telling scene is intercut with Ron Stallworth's 1978 induction into the Ku Klux Klan. This also places Jessie Washington's lynching within the postmemory/history that is attached to Black bodies. The threat of violence is never a singular threat. It is always connected to other historical/present moments of anti-Black violence:

How this is possible is, first, by being, literally, several in a single body. We are twelve in my body. We are packed like sardines. In other words, the being that I am exists each time in several modes—or, let us say, several beings, which, although sometimes mutually exclusive, are nevertheless inside one another.<sup>43</sup>

Mbembe encapsulates almost poetically how postmemory functions for Black people and how trauma is transmitted. There are multiple stories living within us. Whether these stories are

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<sup>42</sup> Patricia Bernstein, *The First Waco Horror: The Lynching of Jesse Washington and the Rise of the NAACP* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 2006).

<sup>43</sup> Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001), 202.

witnessed firsthand, as in the case of Feidin Santana<sup>44</sup> or Darnella Frazier,<sup>45</sup> or we witness them via digital platforms,<sup>46</sup> they are always a part of us.

The film reenacts the tradition of "passing on"<sup>47</sup> when the fictional character, Turner, relays the lynching that he witnessed to the young undergrads. He ends his testimony by revealing a photo of Jessie Washington's corpse. The students (and some of the audience members in the theater watching the film) looked away. Whether these tales are transferred between mother and daughter, or even if they come into focus through fictional depictions (such as this film), they all contribute to the extensive and traumatic postmemory that Black people carry with them. The film also demonstrates how these events always exist within a genealogy of violence of which we are constantly reminded. The film's closing scene, in which the KKK's acts of domestic terrorism are ultimately thwarted, concludes with the infamous 2017 march in Charlottesville.<sup>48</sup>

The postmemory of anti-Black violence is always present and informs the way we react to violence that is no longer history but still occurring. The fate of Jessie Washington in 1916 is transformed into a visceral possibility in 2018 as the audience watches the scene of angry mobs of white men with torches storming the streets. Jerome Turner's fear, which he

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<sup>44</sup> Patrick G Watson, "Gestalt Contexture and Contested Motives: Understanding Video Evidence in the Murder Trial of Officer Michael Slager," *Theoretical Criminology* (2022): 13624806211073696.

<sup>45</sup> Kevin K Gaines, "Reflections on 2020," *Peace & Change* 46, no. 4 (2021): 323-329.

<sup>46</sup> Alisha Jean-Denis, "Performative Witnessing as an Act of Agency: What we can learn from Black Gen Z Disruptors," *Journal of Language & Literature Education*, [http://jolle.coe.uga.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Sso\\_December\\_2020.pdf](http://jolle.coe.uga.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Sso_December_2020.pdf).

<sup>47</sup> Fabius, "Toward an Integration of Narrative Identity."

<sup>48</sup> Michael A. Peters and Tina Besley, "White Supremacism: The Tragedy of Charlottesville," *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 49, no. 14 (2017): 1309-1312.



described in his account of witnessing the murder of Jessie Washington, reveals not only how Black postmemory comes into existence but how postmemory makes space for collective mourning. As college students listened to graphic details of Washington's lynching in Waco, Texas, as described by Turner, the camera zoomed into the faces of multiple students as he spoke. The audience is invited, challenged, to see and feel with them. The trauma of the Black past is relived and reconnected to the present not only on digital platforms but through entertainment media as well. The film correctly posits that lynching is not simply Black history; it is American history.

America has never truly reckoned with the past violence that it has inflicted and continues to inflict upon its Black citizens. After the release of Allen's *Without Sanctuary* (1994)<sup>49</sup> that the United States finally took it upon themselves to apologize to the families of the lynching victims featured in the aforementioned text. It wasn't until 2018 that anti-lynching legislation was revised on February 4, 2020.<sup>50</sup> It can not be denied the way in which America's history shapes and informs the present state of race relations. A long history of anti-Black violence gave white men license to torture and murder James Byrd Junior.<sup>51</sup> It is

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<sup>49</sup> James Allen, *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America* (Santa Fe, NM: Twin Palms, 2000).

<sup>50</sup> Boyd-Johnson, "The Political Obstruction of Anti-Lynching Policy," Eastern Illinois University, [https://thekeep.eiu.edu/lib\\_awards\\_2022\\_docs/1/](https://thekeep.eiu.edu/lib_awards_2022_docs/1/).

<sup>51</sup> William Brian Piper, *You Just Had that Gut Feeling': Film, Memory, and the Lynching of James Byrd, Jr.*, Dissertation, William and Mary, 2006. James Byrd Junior was tied behind a pickup truck as it drove off dismembering his body on June 7, 1998 in Jasper, Texas.

the 1963 16th Street Church bombing<sup>52</sup> that made Dylan Roof<sup>53</sup> possible. This history of violence isn't something that just exists but is the direct result of racist actions, policies, and a long, complicated history that is still happening. Historically, the United States has an intimate relationship with Blackness due to its complicated relationship with slavery, and thus it also has an intimate relationship with Black death.

Barnor Hesse argues that race is defined by a repetition of violence that privileges white life over and against that of Black life<sup>54</sup>. White violence and white sovereignty (and thus, white supremacy) is contingent upon acts of violence against Black life. Black artists are aware of this legacy, which is why those like Kerry James Marshall work to "protect the dead"<sup>55</sup> in their art by highlighting the perpetrators and protecting the victims. Drawing from this legacy of violence, Marshall performs this act of care and protection for the dead via his exhibit *Heirlooms and Accessories* (2002):

There is a famous photograph of a double lynching in Indiana . . . this is an image that circulated that was made into a postcard. What is most striking about the image is not the brutality of the incident; it's the casualness in which the audience is there as a witness. How little regard for the rule of law, how immune they felt from prosecution . . . that's the thing that struck me the most. Just how ordinary this all seemed like spectacle . . . everybody who is there is an accessory to a double murder. Heirlooms are things that are passed down from one generation to the next. So between these three women [the accomplices in the lynching photo], you can see them passing down the

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<sup>52</sup> Donald Q. Cochran, "Ghosts of Alabama: The Prosecution of Bobby Frank Cherry for the Bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church," *Michigan Journal of Race & Law* 12 (2006): 1.

<sup>53</sup> E. Chebrolu, "The Racial Lens of Dylann Roof: Racial Anxiety and White Nationalist Rhetoric on new Media," *Review of Communication* 20, no. 1 (2020): 47-68.

<sup>54</sup> Barnor Hesse, "White Sovereignty (...), Black Life Politics: 'The N\*\*\*\*r They Couldnt Kill,'" *South Atlantic Quarterly* 116, no. 3 (2017): 581-604. Hesse states that "race as repetition involves a commitment to the reproduction of white forms of life over, above, and against black forms of life."

<sup>55</sup> Marlene Philip NourbeSe and Setaey AdamuBoateng, *Zong!* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2011). This phrase stuck out to me, almost as if it is a diasporic mantra.

value that has been accrued to them from being part of a regime that can perpetrate that kind of violence.<sup>56</sup>



**Figure 1: Kerry James Marshall exhibit: Heirlooms and Accessories (2002).**

His art focuses on the guilty white bodies at the scene of the crime, and most importantly, he focuses on what is not readily apparent at the scene of the lynching; the casualness of the attendees. Marshall offers commentary into whiteness as valuable social capital that has accrued over time, much like valuable heirlooms passed on to later generations. His work highlights the difference between witnessing and spectatorship by highlighting the casualness of the white audience during the lynching. To bear witness is to acknowledge that there is a responsibility that we have to the dead. When moments of racialized/state violence are shared by Black people on social media, it is with the intention of bearing witness to the victims.

### **The Origins of Black Witnessing**

The circulation and curation of violent images and the history/proximity to this violence contribute to how we are able to bear witness. Black literature, like visual art and film, also invokes witnessing, postmemory, and the responsibility that it entails. We must

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<sup>56</sup> Vimeo. Smart Museum of Art (Kerry James Marshall Heirlooms & Accessories), 28 Apr. 2012. Web. 25 Apr. 2017. Kerry James Marshall's words were transcribed by me.

*protect and honor the dead*. Playwright August Wilson describes postmemory as blood memory, "When your back is pressed to the wall, you go to the deepest part of yourself, and there's a response—It's your great ancestors talking. It's blood memory."<sup>57</sup> What Wilson describes as "blood memory" speaks to the responsibility that we have for each other in the present, but also to those that came before us. Memorialization, prior to the use of digital spaces, often took place within physical sites as well as in literature and art.<sup>58</sup> *Zong!* is an example of a site of textual memorialization.<sup>59</sup> M. NourbeSe Philip examines and manipulates the text with tenacity to see beyond what is written in regards to the dehumanizing legalities that animated the case<sup>60</sup> and acts like a detective seeking the words, the songs, the feelings, and the possible languages to bring their final moments to life. Even the arrangement of the words draws its inspiration from the ocean. The words float across the page like waves, often crashing into each other. She gifts us with the possibility of life in a moment that seems intent on stopping it before it even begins. *Zong! #6* has the words "the age" and "eighteen weeks" drifting on the page as it bleeds into the words of *Zong #7*; "the throwing," "overboard," and the final words on the page, "exist did not." M. NourbeSe Philip's textual arrangement forces the reader to imagine the loss of people thrown overboard, as the words themselves are

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<sup>57</sup> "Blood memory" is a term used by playwright August Wilson to reference the act of "connecting yourself to something larger than your self" (PBS Interview).

<sup>58</sup> Holloway, Karla FC. *Passed On: African American Mourning Stories, a Memorial* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002).

<sup>59</sup> Philip Marlene NourbeSe and Setaey Adamu Boateng, *Zong!* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2011).

<sup>60</sup> The *Zong* massacre was the mass murder of over 130 enslaved Africans by the crew of the British slave ship *Zong* on and in the days that came after November 29, 1781. It was common business practice to take out insurance on the lives of the enslaved as cargo. According to the crew, when the ship ran low on drinking water following navigational mistakes, the decided to murder them to offset the cost, and the crew threw slaves overboard.

references to being onboard a ship, and imagine the (possibility) of life: children unborn within the womb existing in multiple in-betweens. The in-between of humanity and property, of life and death, all before they're (un)born. Not only does M. NourbeSe Philip provide those who were murdered with a voice, but she also provides a textual example of memorialization to demonstrate how we bear witness. Part of bearing witness is making sure that history is passed on to future generations and that it is not forgotten.

Digital sites of memorialization include spaces such as Twitter and Facebook, which are spaces where Black people can assert the humanity of victims of racial violence.<sup>61</sup> Mainstream media often manipulates the reputations of those who are killed by racial/state violence, while digital spaces provide Black people with the opportunity to publicly mourn and memorialize to counter mainstream media's narratives. Memorialization is a Black cultural practice that is an extension of prior modes of memorialization that take place, which are either site-based<sup>62</sup> or artistic.<sup>63</sup> Digital memorialization encompasses these modes of memorializing and making them globally accessible.<sup>64</sup> The chapters that follow will also examine the relationship between past and present modes of memorialization and how they have developed out of Black cultural practices.

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<sup>61</sup> Tonia Sutherland, "Making a Killing: On Race, Ritual, and (re)membering in digital culture," *Preservation, Digital Technology & Culture* 46, no. 1 (2017): 32-40.

<sup>62</sup> Alex A. Moulton, "Black Monument Matters: Place-based Commemoration and Abolitionist Memory Work," *Sociology Compass* 15, no. 12 (2021): e12944.

<sup>63</sup> Artistic modes of memorialization refers to visual art, sculpture, music, poetry, etc.

<sup>64</sup> Joji Mori, Steve Howard, and Martin Gibbs, "Poets and Blacksmiths: Implications for Global Memorialization Using Digital Technology," *interactions* 18, no. 5 (2011): 48-54.

Witnessing is a Black cultural practice discussed throughout this project. While digital witnessing is given the bulk of attention throughout the majority of the chapters in this dissertation, it is important to discuss the origins of witnessing and its roots in the Black church.<sup>65</sup> Theological scholar Rosetta E. Ross highlights the role that faith played in the civil rights movement.<sup>66</sup> To self-identify as a witness in the religious sense is to have experienced the fulfillment of an expectation in an encounter with God.<sup>67</sup> Witnessing in the religious sense developed into bearing witness because of what the Civil Rights Movement required of Black people. Black people were giving testimonies of their unjust treatment, and Black women like Ella Baker and Fanny Lou Hammer used their faith to give their testimonies in their speeches.<sup>68</sup> "Black women engaged in civil rights activism as a presentation of their spiritual identity, situating their justice-centered actions as performative testimony."<sup>69</sup> Bearing witness was always tied to the Black church in the same way that the Black church was connected to racial uplift efforts.<sup>70</sup> Bearing witness in everyday interactions also consists of telling one's story—giving a testimony—and it has always been essential when it comes to social justice efforts.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Brian K. Blount, *Can I Get a Witness? Reading Revelation Through African American Culture* (Westminster: John Knox Press, 2005).

<sup>66</sup> Rosetta E. Ross, *Witnessing and Testifying: Black Women, Religion, and Civil Rights* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2003).

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

In Black religious testifying, witnessing is a "complementary way of naming the believer's ordinary moral practice as a way of living as religious practice."<sup>72</sup> It enables people to read the everyday events of life through interacting with the divine. This ultimately leads to the assertion of daily life as sacred, and testifying then functions as "an intellectual exercise between the teller and listener, as the listener is asked to engage with the testimony and critically reflect on old ideas."<sup>73</sup> The act of witnessing in the church and beyond "occurs in how one persistently lives in relation to others," and it is how one uses their social life, "including how one uses one's agency to help those in greatest need."<sup>74</sup> Witnessing today on digital platforms was created out of giving agency to those who need it, especially when there is a possibility that they might not live to give their own testimony. Through the necessity and the popularity of citizen journalism,<sup>75</sup> evidence that comes from digital witnessing is now expected.<sup>76</sup> We have reached a point where most people trust citizen journalism over mainstream media, but that does not mean that mainstream media has lost its influence.<sup>77</sup> Witnessing in the Black community has been aided by technology, and this project reveals how, but not without acknowledging the ways in which technology harms Black people as

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Allissa V. Richardson, "Bearing Witness While Black."

<sup>76</sup> Walker, "'There's a Camera Everywhere.'"

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

well.<sup>78</sup> Emerging technologies often reinforce white supremacy in a myriad of ways,<sup>79</sup> which will be addressed throughout this project.

Witnessing also speaks to the way(s) that we attend to, experience, and discuss cultural trauma. In "My First Black Nature Poem" above, poet LaTasha Nevada Diggs connects and subverts stereotypes surrounding Black people not being able to swim to the trauma that is presently lurking in the ocean:

black folk don't swim. we splash and cool off.

we a ways forward from Splenda hint of Sengalese manliness diving off a ferry  
off shore from Goreé. that water got too much memory.

we much prefer chlorine. that salt and fresh water our hypertension.

and that ocean is curiously scary.

and this lake is charmed and churning with tales from the deep<sup>80</sup>.

Cultural trauma is represented in the poem as something that can be physically felt when our bodies enter the water. While most Christian religious experiences consider water to be a new beginning via baptism, a cleansing, or a rebirth, Diggs views natural bodies of water as being haunted by the traumatic experiences that enslaved Black people endured during the Middle Passage. She implies that centuries beyond slavery, the trauma that Black people endured during slavery can still be felt today. This poem is a direct example of how postmemory

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<sup>78</sup> Simone Browne, *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness* (Durham, C: Duke University Press, 2015).

<sup>79</sup> Ruha Benjamin, "Race after Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code," *Social Forces* 8, no. 4 (2019): 1-3.

<sup>80</sup> LaTasha N. Diggs, *Twerk* (New York: Belladonna, 2013). The text is presented as closely as it appears in the book.



functions and shapes Black interpretations of the contemporary world by showing readers that it is something that you can still *feel* today. Black studies scholar Christina Sharpe provides a scientific term to describe the presence of trauma in the water by describing the properties of water mixed with blood and what happens when they are combined:

But even if those Africans who were in the holds who left something of their prior selves in those rooms as a trace to be discovered and who passed through the doors of no return did not survive the holding and the sea, they, like us, are alive in hydrogen, in oxygen; in carbon in phosphorus, and iron; in sodium and chlorine. Thesis what we know about those Africans, thrown, jumped, dumped overboard in the Middle Passage; they are with us still, the in the time of the wake, known as residence time.<sup>81</sup>

Sharpe's introduction of residence time reveals that the bodies of those who were "thrown, jumped, dumped" are still "alive" in the chemical composition of the ocean. They are still present due to resident time. The ocean is posited by both Sharpe and Diggs to be a site of memorialization and postmemory. Both Diggs and Phillip's texts serve as an example of the way that postmemory functions. The example provided by Sharpe demonstrates how trauma can still be felt generations later. Black survival in an anti-Black world is dependent upon being aware of previous anti-Black violence and trauma.

While Diggs and Phillips explore racial trauma and the ways in which it can be relived and felt in the water, this project examines racial trauma and how it is experienced and relived in digital spaces. This project also analyzes speculative media that centers on Black trauma to examine the implications that it has for Black futures. Black people collectively don't have the same experience within digital platforms, so the experiences of Black youth and Black women are analyzed separately in order to highlight differences in digital community building and

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<sup>81</sup> Christina Elizabeth Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016). Residence Time is mentioned by Sharpe on page nineteen and it is defined as the average length of time during which a substance, a portion of material, or an object is in a given location or condition, such as adsorption or suspension.

how racial trauma manifests in different ways. The proliferation of death on social and mainstream media has heavily impacted Black youth culture, and this project examines media that centers on the experiences of Black youth.

The limitations of this project come from the instability of racism within digital platforms and the inadequate way that racist language is managed.<sup>82</sup> The codification of race and racism on digital platforms is constantly changing, furthermore making it difficult to track.<sup>83</sup> It becomes even more difficult when non-black digital users are constantly shifting their racist language and commentary to outsmart the AI and algorithms tasked with banning and limiting this language.<sup>84</sup> Furthermore, digital spaces have been proven to be areas where racist language and imagery flourish, and the mode of dissemination constantly changes.<sup>85</sup> These changes make it difficult for a researcher whose source material exists on a fluctuating digital landscape. The structure of digital spaces also makes it difficult to understand and correctly interpret the intent behind these shared images, especially with the increase of Black people being impersonated on Twitter and Instagram.<sup>86</sup> Race, unfortunately, can be hard to identify in digital spaces due to the impossibility of knowing who is behind the avatars that

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<sup>82</sup> Eugenia Siapera, Elena Moreo, and Jiang Zhou, *Hate Track: Tracking and Monitoring Online Racist Speech* (Dublin: Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission, 2018).

<sup>83</sup> Jessie Daniels, "Race and Racism in Internet Studies: A Review and Critique," *New Media & Society* 15, no. 5 (2013): 695-719.

<sup>84</sup> Alexander Brown, "What is so Special about Online (as Compared to Offline) Hate Speech?," *Ethnicities* 18, no. 3 (2018): 297-326.

<sup>85</sup> Paige Chu, "Technology and Racism: An Environment for Violence?," *The Journal of Intelligence, Conflict, and Warfare* 4, no. 1 (2021): 166-170.

<sup>86</sup> Francesca Sobande, "Spectacularized and Branded Digital (Re)presentations of Black People and Blackness," *Television & New Media* 22, no. 2 (2021): 131-146.

people represent in digital spaces.<sup>87</sup> This issue limited my digital source material, and in order to circumvent this, I could only cite information circulated in digital spaces from public figures whose racial identities have already been established. In my discussions of Black death throughout the dissertation, I focused on key moments of circulation and Black witnessing: the murders of Emmett Till, Trayvon Martin, Sandra Bland, Korryn Gaines, Laquan McDonald, and George Floyd.

Unfortunately, part of Black culture is living with the reality that there will always be a proliferation of Black death in an anti-Black world. However, this trauma and the imagery it produces stays with us, and it galvanizes us into action. "Racial icons, especially in the realm of social and political movements, make us want to do something. These images can impact with such emotional force that we are compelled to do, to feel, to see."<sup>88</sup> As technology progresses, different methods and modes of trauma are being introduced, forcing us to collide with racial terror in the past and the present simultaneously.

The constant exposure to Black death on digital platforms has impacted the way that Black people are exposed to and grappling with death in close proximity. When Black death trends on digital platforms, it is built upon past systems of terror and oppression that are repackaged and advanced via technological advancements. Today, an extension of the state carries out its murders—the police force. The historical racial tensions and dynamics reinscribe this past social order. The social structure of race has been "grandfathered" into our present. In my examination of historical events, Black peoples' engagement with social media

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<sup>87</sup> Lisa Nakamura, *Cybertypes: Race, Ethnicity, and Identity on the Internet* (New York: Routledge, 2013).

<sup>88</sup> Nicole R Fleetwood, *On Racial Icons: Blackness and the Public Imagination* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2015).

and witnessing, I determine that Black people's experiences with racism, state violence, and witnessing on digital platforms are emerging as the driving forces informing, speaking, and shaping entertainment media.

## Chapter 1: Postmemory & Why We Bear Witness

Each year, multiple names enter the zeitgeist, each new name seemingly eclipsing the one that came before it: Daunte Wright, Andre Hill, Manuel Ellis, Rayshard Brooks, Daniel Prude, Philando Castille, Breyona Taylor, George Floyd, Alton Sterling, Walter Scott, Tamir Rice, Rekia Boyd, and Aiyanna Stanley Jones. All of their names have been printed in numerous papers and think pieces. Their faces and stories circulated throughout social media, as each of them became trending topics on Twitter, Instagram, and other social media platforms. Social media users shared and reshared their stories with added captions or no captions at all, doing their best to contextualize, organize, mourn, and even galvanize the public. This project seeks to examine digital platforms and the phenomena of *what* is happening on these platforms when Black death trends.

By analyzing digital media and the dissemination of Black death, this project seeks to make connections between the past and present modes of witnessing. The indescribable moment when Black users engage with social media and are transformed into captive witnesses of racialized violence<sup>89</sup> mirrors past modes of witnessing. Both capture moments of violence that forces witnesses to act on behalf of the victims. Whether it appears in our notifications or through autoplay on Facebook and Instagram, Black people are transformed into captive witnesses of Black death because these scenes seem to be inescapable. This project comparatively analyzes two distinct generations—The Emmett Till Generation and The Trayvon Generation—to compare how witnessing differs between the two. Is there a

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<sup>89</sup> Captive Witness: an escapable mode of witnessing racialized violence on digital platforms. Black users engage with social media differently from their non-Black counterparts because of the structure of social media platforms. For example, on Instagram there is no "pause" or "play" button. These moments of violence can play without any intervention from the user.

difference for our contemporary generation that has grown up witnessing death on social media platforms? Are there similarities between these two distinct generations? What were their practices for coping with witnessing racialized violence in the past? *Can I Get A Witness?—Living While Black Death is Trending* speaks to the ways in which Black people must cope with the experience of racism in the material world and a constant feed of both extrajudicial and state violence on smartphones, tablets, laptops, or other devices. Through our everyday engagement with technology, we are almost physically present at the scene, despite our geographical distance. Through our interactions with digital spaces, the proximity of death feels as if it is always present. Although witnessing affects us all, it is significantly harrowing for Black people engaging with social media platforms. We are captive witnesses because it becomes our duty to share these images, despite their deeply traumatic content.

Before Black people engaged racialized violence on digital platforms, it circulated within the controlled context of Black journalism. Black people were witnesses to racialized violence through their engagement with written forms of media, specifically within Black print media. The function of witnessing is to provide a counter-narrative to the dominant discourse, where white media often presents Black people as perpetual transgressors (and never the transgressed). There is a historical bifurcation between what it means to be a witness, as opposed to a spectator, when interacting with scenes of racialized violence. In the past, Black people have used media<sup>90</sup> as a means of revealing the callous and dehumanizing nature of anti-Black violence. Digital platforms today provide potentialities for a different kind of circulation of violence, but one that is intercepted by the structure of digital platforms.

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<sup>90</sup> In this section I am specifically referring to Black print Journalism as media, due to the fact that citing past Black journalism

The resharing, retweeting, and reblogging functions across different digital platforms can obfuscate the intent and give individuals the power to remove the context and alter the intent of these shared traumatic scenes of violence.

While the act of digital witnessing/media witnessing has gained prominence during our contemporary moment, the act of "media witnessing" is not new. Scholars Paul Frosh and Amit Pinchevski define media witnessing as "witnesses in the media, witnessing by the media, and witnessing through the media."<sup>91</sup> Their definition of media witnessing is separated into two categories: the first is the Holocaust authoritative witness who experienced and/or saw atrocities first hand and lived to tell about them; the second witness is the distant witness. A distant witness is defined as someone seeing something traumatic on television. An example of a distant witness would be someone watching the Twin Towers fall on September 11th. While this "distant witness," as defined by Frosh and Pinchevski, was not at Ground Zero when the planes flew directly into the towers, they share the same kind of authority as the Holocaust witnesses. This definition has been contested by other scholars who believe that being present at the scene bears a special type of significance.

In John Durham Peter's hierarchy of witnessing, being present takes precedence, and historic witnessing is second. The latter refers to witnessing via visiting a museum or a site where something horrific took place. The weakest mode of witnessing in this hierarchy is a recording since one does not have to present, and they aren't sharing the same space and time

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<sup>91</sup> Paul Frosh and Amit Pinchevski, "Media and Events after Media Events," *Media, Culture & Society* 40, no. 1 (Jan. 2018): 135-138. They both contend that there is similar kind of trauma that is transferred via media witnessing, which is similar to being present at the scene.

as the original event.<sup>92</sup> However, today, recording is far from the weakest mode of witnessing. These definitions and frameworks are vital to describing witnessing that takes place during an unfortunate event such as the 2007 Virginia Tech shooting.<sup>93</sup> Media witnessing has been helpful when it comes to understanding firsthand accounts of natural disasters (such as the devastating tsunami that took place in South-East Asia in 2004).<sup>94</sup> The definition of media witnessing reaches its limits when it comes to understanding witnessing in the Black community because it does not include nor engage with the cultural history of witnessing for Black people. These prior definitions that apply specifically to media studies in one context do not acknowledge the importance of the gaze, nor does it fit when discussing the legacy of racialized violence in America and how that impacts the gaze. Who is behind the camera matters when we discuss witnessing and racialized violence?

This project focused specifically on the act of witnessing, dissemination, and circulation of violent scenes as it pertains to the Black community to further discuss and develop how this curation of violence is also informing Black postmemory.<sup>95</sup> I turn to the Black press during two specific moments of historically unsettling violence that were documented and circulated by the Black press and further disseminated within the Black

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<sup>92</sup> John Durham Peters, *Media Witnessing* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009): 23-48. Peters believes that "being there" at the scene is the strongest mode of witnessing, and that other modes are inferior to actually being at the original scene, at original moment that something took place.

<sup>93</sup> Stuart Allan and Chris Peters, "Visual Truths of Citizen Reportage: Four Research Problematics," *Information, Communication & Society* 18, no. 11 (2015): 1348–1361.

<sup>94</sup> Haluk Mert Bal and Lemi Baruh, "Citizen Involvement in Emergency Reporting: A Study on Witnessing and Citizen Journalism," *Interactions: Studies in Communication & Culture* 6, no. 2 (2015): 213–231.

<sup>95</sup> Scholars such as Alyssa V. Richardson and Ruha Benjamin have been important in researching the digital nature of this project since their work most closely aligns with my research. However, my intervention differs in that I am examining and comparing crucial moments of anti-Black violence and dissemination via the Black press, and how that has aided, impacted, and galvanized Black communities.



community; DuBois's *The Crisis* and his coverage of the lynching in Waco, Texas of Jesse Washington, and *The Chicago Defender* and *Jet* magazine during the kidnapping and murder of Emmett Till. I am building upon these past modes of dissemination in order to examine digital dissemination on social media as an extension of journalism built off of Black communal processes. While media scholars focus on the multiple modes of witnessing (from print journalism to television and the early web to smartphones) from a historical lens examining documentation, this project differs in that it is focused on Black communities' dissemination and circulation of this information, and it is adding that cultural and historical context into the analyses. I am mapping out how Black people made *use* of the Black press and how digital spaces today are an extension of Black communities not only making use of the press but acting as the press themselves. Transforming digital platforms into spaces where they are functioning as individual and collaborative citizen journalists, but also inevitably contributing to Black death as a site of spectacle due to the structure of digital platforms.

### **1.1 Black Journalism, Postmemory, and Bearing Witness**

In the July 1916 issue of *The Crisis*, WEB DuBois included an additional supplement to the newspaper that included graphic photos of the lynching of Jessie Washington.<sup>96</sup> DuBois refrained from immediately critiquing the lynching and instead walked the readers through the history and landmarks of Waco, Texas, where the lynching took place. DuBois intentionally juxtaposes the historical landmarks of Waco with the lynched body of Jessie Washington In the same way that Black people have forged a collective memory that connects us and the violence that we are prone to experiencing across a timeline that obfuscates past, present, and future on the other side of that is a nation that has never reckoned with the violence in which

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<sup>96</sup> W.E.B. DuBois, "The Waco Horror," *The Crisis*, July 1916, 1-8.

they were (and still are) active participants. The first image that DuBois uses is a black and white photo of a massive crowd forming in the streets of Waco on May 15, 1916. The people in the image attentively and excitedly await the lynching of Jesse Washington. The photos that follow are historic landmarks of Waco, Texas: Baylor University, The Riggins Hotel, The First Baptist Church, The Courthouse, the City Hall, a photo of the waiting crowd, another photo of the angry mob, and, finally, multiple photos of the mutilated body of Jesse Washington cut into the final portions of the text. By physically placing images of the violent abuse and murder of Jesse Washington alongside these significant institutions, DuBois intentionally aligns the anti-Black racism present in the former with that present in the latter (the courts, City Hall, and, ultimately, the people of Waco, TX), indicating that these are the structures that produce Black death. Black death is presented by DuBois as a monument in and of itself that is simultaneously visible and invisible in the corpus of American monuments. DuBois succinctly shows us the spectators in the crowd excitedly waiting for the lynching while he is performing an act of witnessing, simultaneously transforming his readers into witnesses in the process. DuBois is an example of how Black people have used media in the past to reveal the atrocities of racism and America's complicity.

Social media and digital platforms have modernized and intensified, increasing our access and proximity to images of anti-Black violence, but this culture of dissemination is not new, but digital platforms, their structure and increased accessibility are. The consumption and dissemination of anti-Black violence is, in fact, tradition; it is Americana. This tradition's origins are rooted in the circulation of lynching photography and memorabilia.<sup>97</sup> Lynching

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<sup>97</sup> Harvey Young, "The Black Body as Souvenir in American Lynching," *Theatre Journal* 57, no. 4 (2005): 639-57

photos were used to celebrate anti-Black violence/death. The images were often accompanied by racist text consisting of short poems or other captions that would accompany images of the event. It was America's curation of their own domestic terror. Lynching postcards were supposedly banned in 1908 as part of an amendment to the 1873 Comstock act, which banned "obscene matter as well as its circulation in the mail," was adjusted to include materials that "incited, arson, murder, or assassination."<sup>98</sup> This did not function as a means of banning lynching photography. Rather, it banned the poems/captions that were printed with the photos, which explicitly described the lynching.<sup>99 100</sup>

DuBois' portrayal and written narrative of the lynching of Jesse Washington in *The Crisis* reveals the responsibility that Black journalism has for the Black community, which ultimately marks the difference between spectatorship and witnessing. DuBois's intervention was demonstrative of the importance of Black print publications and how they performed the act of Black witnessing.<sup>101</sup> DuBois used *The Crisis* as a platform to shed light on the brutality and casual frequency of racial violence while simultaneously drawing attention to and critiquing the state's refusal to protect Black life. This arrangement contributes to a historical and collective memory of anti-Black violence while highlighting the failures of the American

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<sup>98</sup> L. Kim, "A Law of Unintended Consequences: United States Postal Censorship of Lynching Photographs," *Visual Resources* 28, no. 2 (2012): 171-193.

<sup>99</sup> Allen, *Without Sanctuary*. James Allen, an American antique collector was able to purchase some lynching postcards recently at a secret market place that he describes in his book.

<sup>100</sup> A. H. A. Rushdy, *The End of American Lynching* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2012). <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1bqzmzg>. Rushdy contends that lynching photograph has never stopped circulating, people simply put them in envelopes or covered them.

<sup>101</sup> See Allissa Richardson's chapter 3, "The New Protest #Journalism" Bearing Witness While Black: African Americans, Smartphones, and the New Protest #journalism, 2020.

government.<sup>102</sup> DuBois exposes the nation's intentional neglect and refusal to protect Black life. Black media outlets, specifically Black journalism, gave Black people the space to show the public the lived reality of racism.

Black journalism directed toward Black readers was a crucial part of Ida B. Wells' writing. She is a key figure in the discussion of Black journalism, its directive, and its popularization amongst Black readers specifically. She wanted her writing to be accessible to Black audiences: "I wrote in a plain common-sense way on the things which concerned our people. Knowing that their education was limited, I never used a word of two syllables where one would serve the purpose."<sup>103</sup> Her writing was widely circulated and read by Black audiences because the white press (mainstream press) didn't see Black people as an audience. So, for the most part, the "white press ignored Black people unless they were committing crimes or being lynched," which further demonstrates how the press continued to shape the narrative around lynching and manipulate the public's perception of anti-black violence, contributing to its normalization.<sup>104</sup> Ida B. Wells's investigative journalism was a vital part of documenting lynching in an era when government officials were not only complicit in lynching but also the fact that the practice was severely under-reported. Her journalism also worked with modern innovations, especially the use of statistics. Wells, in her own

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<sup>102</sup> Collective memory is defined as the summation of trauma that Black people draw from when an individual moment of racialized violence occurs. These events are not solely viewed as individual occurrences as part of a historic chain of proliferating events.

<sup>103</sup> Ida B. Wells, Alfreda M. Duster, Michelle Duster, and Eve L. Ewing, *Crusade for Justice: The Autobiography of Ida B. Wells*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2020). Ida B. Wells specifically mentions the work that she did for the Black newspaper *The Evening Star*.

<sup>104</sup> Michelle Duster, *Ida B. the Queen: The Extraordinary Life and Legacy of Ida B. Wells* (New York: Atria Books, 2021).

investigation, created what we would refer to today as spreadsheets to document lynchings. She would then "aggregate all the cases of lynchings that she could find in the newspapers" and compare that to the data that she collected.<sup>105</sup> Her research ultimately showed that the narrative of Black men as predators of white women, which circulated in white newspapers, was a false justification for lynching. Wells' personal experience with lynching also revealed that this was a lie, that lynching was white terrorism.<sup>106</sup>

*Southern Horrors* investigated 728 lynchings in the South. Through her investigative research, Wells found that only a third of lynching victims had been charged with rape, "to say nothing of those of that one-third who were innocent of the charge."<sup>107</sup> *Southern horrors* also revealed the refusal of white people to hold white rapists accountable for the crimes that she investigated related to the rapes, murders, and lynchings of Black women and girls. Ida B. Wells broke boundaries with her journalism because she was the only person discussing rape and interracial sexuality during this period.<sup>108</sup> Ida B. Wells was a controversial investigative journalist because of the subject matter, but ultimately a pioneer that must be included in discussions of the circulation of Black journalism. In her newspaper articles, she would often call for Black people to boycott racist institutions and stores, and after the lynchings of her

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<sup>105</sup> Paula J. Giddings, *Ida: a Sword Among Lions: Ida B. Wells and Campaign against Lynching* (New York: Amistad, 2008). This documentation of lynchings ultimately led to the 1892 pamphlet that she published *Southern Horrors*, which she described as "a true unvarnished account of the causes of lynch law in the South."

<sup>106</sup> "History: Ida B. Wells. The Lynching Sites Project of Memphis," December 6, 2016, Retrieved May 1, 2020, from <https://lynchingsitesmem.org/news/history-ida-b-wells>. Thomas Moss, Calvin McDowell, and Henry Stewart. These three men were owners of People's Grocery Company, and their small grocery had taken away customers from competing white businesses

<sup>107</sup> Ida B Wells-Barnett and Trudier Harris, *Selected Works of Ida B. Wells-Barnett* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

<sup>108</sup> Giddings, *Ida: a Sword Among Lions*.

friends, for Black people to abandon the city of Memphis. She was further determined to abandon Memphis after a white mob destroyed her newspaper office and threatened to kill her.<sup>109</sup> Ida B. Wells relocated to Chicago for her own safety, but she continued to protest injustice and write. She published *A Red Record. Tabulated Statistics and Alleged Causes of Lynchings in the United States, 1892-1893-1894* making the argument that the resurgence of white mob violence was directly related to Black people gaining positions of power. Black press for Black people has always been a site of protest and activism, and as we move into digital modes of journalism in the present, we can begin to articulate a connection between the two while also observing the limitations of agency in Black digital enclaves.

The Black press is also connected to postmemory, both emerging as a response to white supremacist violence and terrorism. It is an unfortunate reality of the Black experience to live under the constant threat of racial violence, which has been carefully documented and committed to memory by Black people. Postmemory is crucial in navigating and interpreting these moments of violence, while it also functions as a tool to critique and respond to that violence. It "makes visible what has been obscured, what has been forgotten by white media and their specific renderings of history"<sup>110</sup>:

Critical black memory emerges out of and is motivated by both survival—the continued ability to struggle and the faith that such struggle will secure a brighter future—and failure—the persistence of peril and renewed forms of racial inequity and

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<sup>109</sup> Not only was Ida B. Wells a teacher but she also editor and co-owner of *The Headlight* and *The Free Speech* newspapers.

<sup>110</sup> David Scott, "Introduction: On the Archaeologies of Black Memory," *Small Axe* 26 (June 2008): vi.

subjugation. On the one hand, memory offers a space to organize for the future while making a critical assessment of the past and present.<sup>111</sup>

For African Americans, in particular, who have traditionally been denied access to formal historical institutions, memory has been more than a mere repository of experience. Postmemory has challenged official stories and given voice to historical silences. It has attempted to suture continuity in the face of rupture and fragmentation. It has proffered futurity woven out of the ineffable terror of the past.<sup>112</sup> The importance of postmemory is that it also provides a space for the Black community to organize and learn from these inevitable and connected instances of violence. Despite the shared reality that Black life exists under the continued threat of racially inflicted violence, it has also produced a culture of communal mourning for Black people. A pivotal moment within postmemory that marks a moment of communal mourning is the murder and public funeral of Emmett Till. Images from that funeral were printed and circulated around the world, revealing what white men did to Black children in the American south.

In 1955 both John H. Johnson's *Jet* magazine and Robert Abbot's *The Chicago Defender* printed the infamous image of Emmett Till's brutalized face in his casket.<sup>113</sup> Black journalism was essential in informing critical masses of Black people about the violence that Till had succumbed to, the pain that led Mamie Till Mobley to "let the people see what they had done . . ." and, ultimately, the not guilty verdict.<sup>114</sup> While white media outlets did a report

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<sup>111</sup> I refer to "critical Black memory" as described by Raiford as "postmemory" because the term collective memory has gained more prominence in discussions of group trauma and how these groups engage with and remember the past.

<sup>112</sup> Raiford, "Photography and the Practices of Critical Black Memory."

<sup>113</sup> Moses Newson and Simeon Booker photographed Emmett Till.

<sup>114</sup> The entire quote reads as follows; "Let the people see what they did to my boy."

on the trial of Emmett Till's murderers, it was solely the Black press at the time that printed and circulated the photos of Emmett Till from his public funeral in Chicago. Emmett Till's murder marks a crucial moment in the history of image circulation. It was the first issue of *Jet* magazine that had necessitated a reprint, marking a moment in which Till's photo and story had gone proto-viral.<sup>115</sup> The historian Elliot J. Gorn discusses censorship in mainstream media and their refusal to show the image in newspapers and on the news.<sup>116</sup>

*The Chicago Defender* and *Jet* shared the images because they presented the painful reality of American racism. They were fulfilling their duty to the Black community and respecting the wishes of Mamie Till Mobley to bear witness and to transform their readers into witnesses as well. Black journalism was how the Black community accessed the truth.<sup>117</sup> While seventy-seven percent of American households owned a television at the time, Black journalism was the primary mode of dissemination of Emmett Till's story and primarily aided in the circulation of the image of his face. Print media was accessible, affordable, and easily shared. It could be read aloud in schools, and it could be further shared and spread via word of mouth. The news of Emmett Till's death spread throughout Black communities, and his story ultimately galvanized Black people to take action and join the Civil Rights Movement. His

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<sup>115</sup> To go viral in our contemporary moment is to reach a rapid level dissemination through, retweets (via Twitter), reshares via Instagram/Facebook, reblogging (via Tumblr), or reposting (via TikTok). The story of Emmett Till's kidnapping and murder combined with the image of his face that Mamie Till Mobley shared with the world, led to the increased circulation of *Jet* magazine, which led their first reprint ever. Emmett Till's story went "viral" before that language existed to describe that increased digital mode of circulation which is why I use proto-viral to describe it.

<sup>116</sup> Elliott J. Gorn, *Let the People See: The Story of Emmett Till* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

<sup>117</sup> While Elliot J. Gorn provides a detailed history of Emmett Till's death, and in-depth analyses of the legal proceedings, he doesn't comment on the reason behind white censorship of the media. It is my belief that white media wasn't concerned with censorship for the sake of Black people, but they were concerned for themselves. They did not want the world to see what unchecked white racism was and still is capable of.



story made their worst fears tangible; that this could happen to their children, to their loved ones, and they would be powerless. However, the refusal of the press to share the images (within the South specifically) was in response to Mamie Till Mobley's decision to share these images of her son. The white south was infuriated, and they lashed out using the press.

Communications scholar Davis Houck mapped out the crucial role of the press in the exoneration of Till's murderers. The first five days after the trial, the local press was sympathetic, and a local paper stated that Emmett Till's murder "dealt the reputation of the South and Mississippi a savage blow."<sup>118</sup> The press was strategic in its representation of the defendants and of Carolyn Bryant, who was pictured in a beauty pageant photo. Her husband, Roy Bryant, and his accomplice, J.W. Millam, were pictured in their military uniforms, further pushing a visual narrative that they were upstanding, law-abiding citizens and incapable of committing such a crime. In contradistinction, Emmett Till was represented as a "large" and "husky" arrogant young man from the North.<sup>119</sup> *The Delta Democratic Times* chastised the NAACP, as well as the "friends" and family of Emmett Till.

*The Democratic Times* was considered a moderate paper, and their journalism heavily influenced the local white population, so much so that three key witnesses in the trial fled the state of Mississippi.<sup>120</sup> The press had immense power when it came to shaping public perception of the trial, but it wasn't simply their words that wielded all of the power. The

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<sup>118</sup> Davis W. Houck, "Killing Emmett," *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 8, no. 2 (2005): 225–62, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41939981>.

<sup>119</sup> This portrayal of Till definitely invoked the historic misrepresentation of Black men and boys and sexual deviants in the presence of white women, which contributed to the defense of Millam and Bryant, as well as the shifting the public's perception of Till's kidnapping.

<sup>120</sup> *Greenville Delta Democrat Times Archives*, Aug 28, 1955, p. 11, NewspaperArchive.com.

optics of Bryant and Millam as men who had served America and the dissemination of this narrative were used to manipulate and distort the public's perception of Emmett Till.<sup>121</sup> The process by which the white press invoked a historic myth speaks to the convoluted path that Black people have too often faced in instances of state and extrajudicial violence. At first appearance, these racialized myths are presented as "natural," as having always existed, despite the fact that they are used to present a historical intention as a natural justification or "making contingency appear eternal."<sup>122</sup> This justification for Till's death in the Southern press further contributes to the distorted perception of Black people and, in this context, Black men (and boys). The white press created a reactionary backlash against the photo of Emmett Till as an attempt to neutralize the truth that Emmett Till's photo told. This separation in the way that the press decided to report on Emmett Till's kidnapping/murder and the subsequent trial and acquittal further positioned Black journalism as a site of *real* truth by and for the Black community.

## **1.2 The Emmett Till Generation and the Circulation of Black Print Media**

Black children were deeply impacted by the photos of Emmett Till, which many had first witnessed in the pages of *Jet* magazine.<sup>123</sup> Sisters Dorie and Joyce Lander were children at the time of Till's kidnapping and murder. They grew up in Mississippi, curating a scrapbook by collecting every newspaper and magazine article related to the Emmett Till case.

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<sup>121</sup> Owens P. Tracey and Snyder-Yuly Julie, "Any Four Black Men Will Do : Rape, Race, and the Ultimate Scapegoat," *Journal of Black Studies* 37, no 6 (2007): 859-895.

<sup>122</sup> Roland Barthes and Annette Lavers, *Mythologies* (London: Paladin, 1973).

<sup>123</sup> Library of Congress Archive of Folk Culture & The National Museum of African American History and Culture, American Folklife Center, <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.afc/folklife.home>.

Dorie Ladner coined the term the "Emmett Till Generation" to name the generation of Black baby boomers in the South who were angered by the acquittal, attending marches, sit-ins, and mass meetings to demand that the law treated all citizens equally.<sup>124</sup> Emmett Till's death moved Dorie and Joyce into action; "That's where the light bulb went off: Why aren't they being punished? And that's when I went on my quest to try to understand the whole legal system and equal rights and justice under the law."<sup>125</sup> Before the development of social media, Black people were still curating, collecting, and sharing information as it pertained to issues of race and social justice. Black youth were also an integral part of this process of collective organizing and communal mourning that took place as well.

At eleven years old, Dr. Cleveland Sellers first encountered the Emmett Till case in *Jet* magazine while he was growing up in Denmark, South Carolina. He describes the emotional effect that the Bryant trial had on him:

I was devastated by the fact that Emmett could have been me or any other black kid around that same age. And so, I related to that very quickly. And we had discussions in our class about Emmett Till. I had a cover of the *JET*, took it to school. Some other students had the same thing. And so, we had rational discussions about it. And, you know, the question comes up: How do you address that? And I think for us, it was projected out that that would be our destiny to try to find remedies to a society that would allow that to happen, would condone that, and would actually free those who were responsible for that murder. And I think that that was a way in which we actually got away from revenge and hatred and those kinds of things. We talked about how we were going to use Emmett Till to build on that. We would rectify in our work and in our effort the dastardly tragedy that happened to Emmett Till.<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>124</sup> Dorie Ladner and Joyce Ladner, interviewees, Joseph Mosnier, and U.S Civil Rights History Project, "Dorie Ann Ladner and Joyce Ladner Oral History Interview Conducted by Joseph Mosnier in Washington, D.C. 2011," video. the Library of Congress, [www.loc.gov/item/2015669153/](http://www.loc.gov/item/2015669153/).

<sup>125</sup> Ibid.

<sup>126</sup> Cleveland Sellers, interviewee, John Dittmer, and U.S Civil Rights History Project, "Cleveland Sellers oral History Interview conducted by John Dittmer in Denmark, South Carolina," 2013, video, Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/item/2015669180/>.

At just eleven years of age, Dr. Sellers described what it was like to witness racialized violence of that magnitude, as well as the impact that it had on him and his peers. He mentioned the fact that *Jet* magazine was circulating within the schools and that he himself, as well as other students, were bringing it to school, discussing it with the other children, and coming to grips with the fact that racist adults had the power to kill Black children and get away with it.<sup>127</sup> Black journalism functioned as a trusted source, as well as a primary mode of witnessing in the Black community. Black journalism was used as the primary mode of dissemination and circulation of information regarding the trial within the Black community. It was also the primary source referenced throughout the oral history archives by multiple interviewees when they discussed their memories of Emmett Till's kidnapping and murder and the acquittal of his killers.

As witnesses continued to describe their past experiences, Emmett Till's death also marked a historical moment of communal mourning as a crucial part of Black culture. While Emmett Till's open-casket, three-day viewing in Chicago is a clear example of communal mourning, it was Mamie Till Mobley's decision to share that photo and have it circulated by the Black press, which extended the scope and the reach of communal mourning. The images from *The Chicago Defender* and *Jet* magazine were mailed to other parts of the country, which were talked about in schools by children and teenagers. Adults cried when discussing what they had witnessed in *Jet* in barbershops and hair salons, and the images were cut out and curated by young students like Dorie and Joyce. The publication of these images further enabled the Emmett Till Generation to mourn beyond the South and across the United States.

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<sup>127</sup> It was also stated in the interview that the teachers could not facilitate these discussions, because they would have been fired. Black children had these conversations, and I believe even if it isn't explicitly stated by them in these interviews, it is clear that these conversations shaped and contributed to their future activism.

Cleveland Sellers described knowing that this death occurred forced him to face his own mortality at the age of eleven. If this could happen to Till, if he could be taken away from his family, in the middle of the night, from the safety of his warm bed, and thrown to the bottom of a river, then anything was possible. Dorie and Joyce Ladner also moved beyond mourning into anger. They wanted to change things, to change the laws, and became fierce advocates for Civil Rights during their college years. Through their carefully cut and pasted images, their conversations regarding the case, and ultimately, their shock at the acquittal, which took some time to process, they were forced to come to grips with the fact that their worst fear had been realized; no one and nothing can protect them. However, they felt a strong urge to do what they could to protect themselves. The hurt they felt for Emmett Till was directly connected to the sadness that they felt for themselves and the possibility of facing death. To move forward, Joyce believed that you "couldn't fear death."<sup>128</sup> Scrapbooking was a means of coping, political organizing, and documenting.

Scrapbooking "pieces together Black history by editing and rearranging items that vary in timespace, voice and location," so what ultimately emerges "is not a single or linear narrative of the African American experience."<sup>129</sup> This arrangement, or rearrangement, challenges the official construction and "neatness" of the archive.<sup>130</sup> It is a space where the violence against Black people was curated by them creating their own arrangement of images,

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<sup>128</sup> Dorie Ladner and Joyce Ladner, interviewees, "Dorie Ann Ladner and Joyce Ladner Oral History Interview."

<sup>129</sup> Kristin Gilger, "Otherwise Lost or Forgotten: Collecting Black History in L. S. Alexander Gumby's 'Negroana' Scrapbooks," *African American Review* 48, no. 1/2 (2015): 111-26

<sup>130</sup> Ibid.

similar to the stories that people tell about themselves and their activism on platforms like Instagram. These scrapbooks also perform a certain kind of witnessing among Black people when they are circulated and shared within the community. Ethyl Johnson was in her thirties when she started scrapbooking, according to one of her scrapbooks in possession by her granddaughter.<sup>131</sup> Zora Neale Hurston states that for Black people, "no little moment passes unadorned,"<sup>132</sup> scrapbooks of the lynching of Emmett Till revealed that Black people knew that this was a moment of violence that was excruciating, that they had to document it, and that they needed to transform others into witnesses.



<sup>131</sup> Lori D Johnson, "Madear's Scrapbook," December 18, 2020, Chapter 16, <https://chapter16.org/madears-scrapbook/>.

<sup>132</sup> Zora Neale Hurston, "Characteristics of Negro Expression," in *African American Literary Theory: A Reader* (New York: NYU Press, 1934): 31-44.



**Figure 1.1: Pages from the scrapbook of Ethyl Johnson and her curation of the Emmett Till lynching and trial.**

Emmett Till's lynching was a moment of captive witnessing; once you saw it, you could not look away. The image of his battered and swollen face that his mother shared with the world reveals a connection to the names mentioned at the beginning of this chapter. Image curation on Instagram and memorialization is a modern form of scrapbooking for some users. They choose how to present and frame the images in order to show the truth. It is also a form of image circulation—when people repost and reshape images from other users to either spread awareness or collectively mourn.

What Dorie Ladner and her sister described above from their archival scrapbook exposes that the members of the Emmett Till Generation participated in similar practices of curation, communal mourning, trauma, and organizing, most of which take place on digital/social media platforms today. Communal mourning often culminates not only in the commemoration of the deceased but also in acts of activism. Many of the participants in the

National Museum of African-American Culture's Oral History and Folk-life project, who had witnessed Emmett Till's kidnapping and murder, were traumatized by the outcome of the trial. Many of them became active in some aspect of Civil Rights organizing. Dorie and Joyce Ladner and Cleveland Sellers had become members of SNCC (Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee) when they were in college. They were also active in the Civil Rights Movement, volunteering in multiple organizations from the March on Washington for Freedom and Jobs (1963), the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People), assisting Medgar Wiley Evers, and Clyde Kennard.

Communal mourning, as established by the Emmett Till generation, revealed the fact that children felt that their parents were incapable of protecting them. Their parents felt that the conditions of white supremacy make parental protection impossible. As time has progressed, and as more Black people become victims of extrajudicial and state violence, communal mourning has been important in healing the families and loved ones left behind and the community to come together to remember the dead and demand justice on their behalf. The importance of communal mourning further highlights the precocity of Black life in the Emmett Till Generation and beyond, as a condition of constant mourning. Scholar and poet Claudia Rankine discloses how communal mourning structures Black life:

Eleven days after I was born, on Sept. 15, 1963, four black girls were killed in the bombing of the 16<sup>th</sup> Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Ala. Now, 52 years later, six black women and three black men have been shot to death while at a Bible-study meeting at the historic Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, S.C. They were killed by a homegrown terrorist, self-identified as a white supremacist, who might also be a "disturbed young man" (as various news outlets have described him). It has been reported that a black woman and her 5-year-old granddaughter survived the shooting by playing dead. They are two of the three survivors of the attack. The white family of the suspect says that, for them, this is a difficult time. This



is indisputable. But for African-American families, this living in a state of mourning and fear remains commonplace.<sup>133</sup>

Rankine's ruminations on racial violence mark one thing as a constant in Black life:

premature death. She places her birth within the context of racial violence (she was born right after the 1963 16<sup>th</sup> Street Baptist Church Bombing) while simultaneously marking the moment in which she is writing her essay after the white domestic terrorist shooting in 2015 at the Emmanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church. Rankine was born into and writes from a place of communal mourning. She was born into an era of Black people mourning the loss of four young Black girls: Denise McNair, Addie Mae Collins, Cynthia Wesley, and Carole Robertson.<sup>134</sup>

Exactly fifty-two years later, white domestic terrorism struck again, taking the lives of Clementa Pinckney, Cynthia Graham Hurd, Susie Jackson, Ethel Lee Lance, Depayne Middleton-Doctor, Tywanza Sanders, Daniel L. Simmons, and Sharonda Coleman Singleton.<sup>135</sup>

Rankine briefly mentions that the mainstream press has presented their murderer as a "disturbed young man," which continues the legacy of anti-Black journalism in the mainstream press that the Emmett Till generation had witnessed, revealing that there will always be an attempt to justify white violence. This further demonstrates the function and the relationship between the Black press and postmemory.

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<sup>133</sup> Claudia Rankine, "The Condition of Black Life Is One of Mourning", *The New York Times*, 22 June 2015, [www.nytimes.com/2015/06/22/magazine/the-condition-of-black-life-is-one-of-mourning.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/22/magazine/the-condition-of-black-life-is-one-of-mourning.html).

<sup>134</sup> These are the names of the 16th Street Baptist Church Bombing victims that took place on September 15, 1963. Rankine uses this historic moment in the essay to show us that mourning for Black people has become as natural as breathing. You are born into it, and you will continue to witness it.

<sup>135</sup> These are the victims of the Charleston church shooting at the oldest Black Church in the United States, the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church on June 17, 2015.

Rankine views Black life, as well as those of future generations, as being interrupted due to the longstanding legacies of past violence, which relentlessly haunts Black life. Rankine succinctly describes the way that Black life is structured by death; how being Black transforms the mundane into the dangerous. Communal mourning, postmemory, and the Black press contain a blueprint, or template, with which to understand the present—using history as a tool to understand the tradition of Black death, as well as the impossibility of presenting Black bodies as ahistorical in present and future instances of anti-black violence."<sup>136</sup> As additional scenes of violence are generated, Black people cannot view these interactions as singular or ahistorical: they form a chain of events. Our experiences within postmemory are intertwined and connected with the experiences of others and the experiences we witness. As Mary Prince stated, "In telling my own sorrows, I cannot pass by those of my fellow slaves—for when I think of my own griefs, I remember theirs."<sup>137</sup> It is the Black community's curation of Black print media and their engagement and dissemination of print media amongst each other that provides a connection to contemporary Black youth's modern modes and methods of witnessing and dissemination that take shape within Black digital enclaves.

### **1.3 The Trayvon Generation and the Curation of Digital Trauma**

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<sup>136</sup> Alexander, "Can You be Black and Look at This?"

Alexander also argues that Black witnessing is different, that it is felt in the body. Allisa Richardson shares similar sentiments in relation to witnessing anti-Black violence, stating that Black people are moved "on a cellular level."

<sup>137</sup> Mary Prince, *The History of Mary Prince, a West Indian Slave: Related by Herself* (New York: Penguin, 2017).

The shooting of Trayvon Martin marked another generation of youth that had to reckon with the fact that a child could be stalked, attacked, beaten, and murdered by a white man.<sup>138</sup> Fifty-seven years after the murder of Emmet Till, a new generation experiencing anti-black, state-sanctioned, and extrajudicial murder emerged, and they were named "The Trayvon Generation" by poet and scholar Elizabeth Alexander in 2020.<sup>139</sup> She uses this term to describe the condition of today's youth growing up in such close proximity to anti-black death and murder:

I call the young people who grew up in the past twenty-five years the Trayvon Generation. They always knew these stories. These stories formed their world view. These stories helped instruct young African-Americans about their embodiment and their vulnerability. The stories were primers in fear and futility. The stories were the ground soil of their rage. These stories instructed them that anti-black hatred and violence were never far. They watched these violations up close and on their cell phones so many times over. They watched them in near-real time. They watched them crisscrossed and concentrated. They watched them on the school bus. They watched them under the covers at night. They watched them often outside of the presence of adults who loved them and were charged with keeping them safe in body and soul.<sup>140</sup>

Similar to the Emmett Till Generation, the Trayvon Generation is also deeply impacted by the death(s) that they have witnessed, but a major turning point in the Trayvon Generation, as well as the primary difference is the mode of witnessing on digital platforms via social media.

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<sup>138</sup> George Zimmerman, acquitted murderer of Trayvon Martin a seventeen-year-old Black boy who was visiting his father, who was accosted and murdered by Zimmerman on his way back from a local store after buying Skittles and an Arizona Iced Tea. Zimmerman is of German and Peruvian descent but racializes himself as white, surveilled Black people via his inherited white supremacist traditions, and deeply desired to be a member of law enforcement with its deep-rooted history that devolved from slave-catchers. He invokes a white tradition of racism to justify his racialized proclivities. I will refer to him as white throughout this chapter and beyond.

<sup>139</sup> Elizabeth Alexander, "The Trayvon Generation," *The New Yorker*, 2020, June 12. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/06/22/the-trayvon-generation> She has also published a book under the same title released on April 5, 2022.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid.

For the Trayvon generation, having the internet and personalized recording technology in the palm of their hands is in a unique position historically. They have witnessed "these violations up close." Not only have they witnessed it on their phones, on their Instagram or Facebook feeds, but they have also been primary actors. Due to the access and familiarity that they have with digital platforms, they have also aided in the dissemination and circulation of these scenes and images of racialized violence as well.

Today's youth was born into an era of digital platforms and advanced recording technology. They also share a close relationship with their devices because technology has impacted and shaped the way that they navigate the world, and they are the primary demographic on digital spaces and social media platforms, and that number is further increased when we examine the social impact of Black youth and Black youth culture on digital platforms.<sup>141</sup> Social media trends are built upon the backs of Black youth: it is their dances, their trends, their memes, their voices, and their documentation of instances of racial violence that go viral.<sup>142</sup> Despite the fact that Black youth overall are least likely to have

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<sup>141</sup> S C. Watkins, *The Digital Edge: How Black and Latino Youth Navigate Digital Inequality* (New York: NYU Press, 2018). This ethnography goes into great detail describing how low income Black and Latino students navigate and make use of digital spaces.

<sup>142</sup> Jonah Berger and Katherine L. Milkman, "What Makes Online Content Viral?," *Journal of Marketing Research* 49, no. 2 (2012): 192–205, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23142844>.

Viral: Relating to or involving an image, video, piece of information, etc., that is circulated rapidly and widely from one internet user to another.

Memes: A humorous image, video, text, etc., that is copied (often with slight variations) and spread rapidly by internet users.

traditional (home) access to the internet, they use the internet more intensely than any other group and are most likely to access the internet via their cell phones.<sup>143</sup>

Black youth are in a complex position on social media due to the nature of race relations that are transferred from the material world and exacerbated on digital platforms. They are facing racism in digital spaces and in their lived experiences in the material world. Digital spaces and platforms provide a space for them to document, speak out, contextualize and counter misrepresentations of their experiences. It provides a space for each person with a smartphone to participate in the process of digital citizen-driven journalism and media witnessing.<sup>144</sup> Citizen-driven journalism is defined by Jay Rosen as the moment "when the people formerly known as the audience employ the press tools they have in their possession to inform one another."<sup>145</sup> The underlying principle of citizen journalism is that ordinary people, not professional journalists, can be the main creators and distributors of news. In the digital age, it is commonplace to view recordings of citizens posted to the internet as valid verifiable sources that will run concurrently with the nightly news, which can be viewed via streaming networks or on YouTube. The landscape of journalism has faced a shift due to invention and popularity, and accessibility of both smartphones and social media. Anyone with a smartphone has the power to document, post, report, and bear witness. While this can seem liberating, it is clear that there are limitations to the agency that Black people have when

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<sup>143</sup> Brendesha M. Tynes and Kimberly J. Mitchell, "Black Youth Beyond the Digital Divide: Age and Gender Differences in Internet Use, Communication Patterns, and Victimization Experiences," *Journal of Black Psychology* 40, no. 3 (June 2014): 291–307.

<sup>144</sup> Richardson, "Bearing Witness While Black." The majority of Richardson's intervention discusses social media as an extension of journalism.

<sup>145</sup> Jay Rosen, "A Most Useful Definition of Citizen Journalism," *PressThink*, [http://archive.pressthink.org/2008/07/14/a\\_most\\_useful\\_d.html](http://archive.pressthink.org/2008/07/14/a_most_useful_d.html)

interacting with social media platforms. We cannot control the circulation of the images that we share, we cannot control who sees them, and we cannot even guarantee our own access to "our" social media accounts. These factors are important in mitigating how difficult witnessing becomes on these platforms and how difficult it can be to differentiate between a witness and a spectator. In fact, the spectacle is inevitable when sharing images or recordings of post-mortem or murder-in-process imagery of Black people.

The act of witnessing today takes place via our smartphones. Instances of Black people being killed are circulated on digital platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, or Facebook. We have unfettered access to scenes of violent Black death at our fingertips. There is no historical or temporal distance when we interact with digital spaces, which is not the case when interacting with physical photos and texts in the material world. Members of the Emmett Till Generation were able to have agency over what they saw and were able to choose whether or not they wanted to see. They had to purchase, acquire or borrow a magazine or newspaper in order to make a conscious decision to engage with graphic images of lynched Black people. They had time to prepare for what they were about to see (despite the fact that nothing can ever prepare you for that kind of brutality), which is directly connected to my primary intervention with this project, which is the immediacy of trauma via our current engagement with our devices and social media.

In the material world, we have control. We choose what we see. This agency, however, is lost in our interactions with digital spaces. On digital platforms, we are transported (as almost-present, captive witnesses) in near-real-time.<sup>146</sup> Access to this

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<sup>146</sup> I use the phrase "near-real-time" to describe these moments of witnessing where we are temporally, mere moments away from the actual scene of violence.

continuous archive of proliferating death on digital spaces means that Black people are being consistently traumatized on the digital platforms with which they engage on a daily basis. Black people are forced to contend with multiple modes of trauma simultaneously in both the material and digital worlds. Roxanne Gay describes her experiences witnessing the deaths of both Philando Castille and Alton Sterling online (their deaths were shared on Facebook and Instagram within 24 hours of each other), and she measures her emotional well-being by the fact that she could "still" be moved to tears.<sup>147</sup> Gay's comments gesture towards a possible collective desensitization to these scenes within digital spaces. Gay's experiences lend themselves to Hartman's theorization of how we become "immured" to these scenes of violence and engage in an unethical means of recirculation.<sup>148</sup> I contend that while the curation practices on digital platforms like Instagram and Facebook can be read as an extension of scrapbooking practices, the circulation of these graphic images is distinctly different from the violent historical implications that are inescapable with white circulation and recirculation of images of murdered Black people.

These digital platforms structure the way that we bear witness, via the circulation of citizen-recorded content on digital platforms, as well as the structure of these digital platforms

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<sup>147</sup> Roxanne Gay, "Alton Sterling and When Black Lives Stop Mattering," *The New York Times*, July 7, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/07/opinion/alton-sterling-and-when-black-lives-stop-mattering.html>.

Gay positions herself as a spectator in her description of her experiences, but I believe that while she is looking/watching, she is also witness as described by Elizabeth Alexanders ruminations on the beating of Rodney King. Gay is in fact "a witness once removed, but a witness nonetheless."

<sup>148</sup> Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010). I am specifically referencing the following quote: "I have chosen not to reproduce Douglass's account of the beating of Aunt Hester, in order to call attention to the ease with which such scenes are usually reiterated, the casualness with which they are circulated, and the consequences of this routine display of the slave's ravaged body. Rather than inciting indignation too often they immure us to pain by virtue of their familiarity...."

which further induce harm on the Black psyche through the simplicity of "improved" technological advancements (such as the "autoplay" feature), which increases our ability to be unknowingly susceptible to the dissemination of racialized violence, as we scroll through our social media feeds. These developments, in conjunction with these traumatic scenes, through visual and aural modes of witnessing on digital platforms, further contribute to the creation of new formulations of racial terror aided by advancements and features within digital spaces. Technology and culture scholar Tonia Sutherland comparatively describes the ease with which the "technologies of the time"<sup>149</sup> aided in the circulation of "images of murdered black men, women, and children during the era of American lynching, [when] there [was] no social media to replay or autoplay."<sup>150</sup>

These developments in technology shift the relationships and experiences of Black people with social media. It is the *in medias res* form and structure of social media platforms that make the intent behind the circulation of these images momentarily invisible. "For black Americans, the spectacle of Black death that replays itself without purpose or context is traumatic. Features like autoplay on Facebook (as well as features such as Facebook Live), wherein video posts begin playing as users scroll through their newsfeeds, make it impossible to predict the moment one might encounter footage of another human—one who bears racialized physical resemblances to the user—being killed."<sup>151</sup> Black people are forced to navigate social media differently from their non-Black counterparts due to the lack of control

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<sup>149</sup> Sutherland poignantly compares the circulation of lynching photos to the shared images of the body of Michael Brown in 2014.

<sup>150</sup> Sutherland, "Making a Killing."

<sup>151</sup> Ibid.



that they have when engaging with digital platforms, as well as the fact that no truly Black social space exists on digital platforms. Social media is transformed into a space where Black people can never know what awaits after the next tweet, status, or image. This structure of social media platforms makes inadvertent trauma a reality. The interventions of Andre Brock in regards to Twitter as a platform where Black participation isn't often welcomed, and their contributions and spaces (namely Black Twitter) are diminished and met with disdain due to a refusal or a lack of knowledge when it comes to the cultural competency to participate in these digital enclaves.<sup>152</sup> This makes it easy for the circulation of topics, images, etc., related to Black culture to be misrepresented, misconstrued, and coopted by white people. Even within the spaces of Black Twitter, white Twitter is still present to observe, attack, and denigrate what they do not have the cultural education to understand: how postmemory is attached to racist incidents that Black people encounter and witness and social media. Digital scholar Meredith Clark also goes into great detail discussing what mainstream journalists fail to understand about Black digital enclaves, often publicly misrepresenting the circulation of Black commentary on social issues in these spaces. While Black people have created digital spaces for the community, these spaces exist within a larger, predominantly white digital space.<sup>153</sup>

When Black death trends on social media, it is not devoid of white criticism and justification. In fact, social media is a space that invites their participation. Visual culture theorist Ariella Aïsha Azoulay analyzes how the many ways death is displayed within modern

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<sup>152</sup> Brock, "From the Blackhand Side."

<sup>153</sup> Meredith Clarke, *To Tweet Our Own Cause: A Mixed-Methods Study of the Online Phenomenon 'Black Twitter'*, Dissertation, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Graduate School, 2014.

culture reveal "cultural sites" that "authorize the display of death" and oscillate "between a spectacle and an exhibit." This oscillation speaks to the lack of control that we have over the images and videos that we share once we participate and contribute to their circulation on the internet. What Azoulay names as the "postmortem showcase" speaks to the concern that I share for images that are disseminated out of context on digital platforms where Black people have limited agency.<sup>154</sup> For Black people, digital media isn't the only space where traumatic scenes of violent death are present. Television also presents complications with the way that we are able to consume visual media. The 2015 shooting of Walter Scott forever altered my engagement with the news media. Not only did CNN display the shooting of Walter Scott on the news, but it was replayed, slowed down, and played again as they performed a "play by play" of his murder. Two decades after the Rodney King beating, which was seen across America, news outlets still attempted to dehistoricize the murder of Black people via state violence. Journalist and media studies scholar Alyssa Richardson aptly named what the mainstream media refused to identify, and that is the weight, the struggle, and the necessity of "bearing witness while Black." Black people watching scenes of anti-black violence displayed and replayed on television or on the internet "awaken" a history and a reaction within Black people on a "cellular" level.<sup>155</sup> Feidin Santana's accounts of what he witnessed and recorded

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<sup>154</sup> Ariella Azoulay, *Death's Showcase: The Power of Image in Contemporary Democracy* (Morocco: MIT Press, 2001).

While Azoulay is writing within a very specific context in regard to Israeli history, the phenomenons that she names in contemporary culture spoke to similar trends that I noticed within my analyses of digital platforms and how the circulation of Black death is further normalized in contemporary media.

<sup>155</sup> Richardson, "Bearing Witness While Black." Richardson provides a counterargument to the media studies definitions of witnessing showing us how these frameworks reach their limits and not are applicable to movements such as Black Lives Matter, and Black digital dissemination of death because these accounts do not

on his smartphone when he saw Officer Slager pursue and then murder Walter Scott emphasizes the traumatic nature of Black witnessing during these moments of crisis.

Given the nature and origins of policing in the United States, Black people are distrustful of the police's account of events involving the deaths of Black people. Instead, they rely on citizen-activated journalism, the kind of witnessing that takes place via smartphones, and Facebook or Instagram Live as more trusted and reliable sources.<sup>156</sup> Accounts reported on the news no longer hold a monopoly on the narratives of interactions with law enforcement and extrajudicial violence. This makes scholar Alyssa Richardson's ethnocentric definition of Black witnessing synonymous with postmemory.<sup>157</sup> While witnessing is deeply traumatic to Black people, we understand why it is necessary, given the history that Black people carry within. This is what inspires us to react, record, and share what we have witnessed. It is our responsibility to each other. This is what Feidin Santana and Darnella Frazier revealed in the aftermath of having to bear witness while being Black:

I never thought this would happen, that I would be a witness. I'm still scared. It was very early in the morning, so you know, umm, everything was very quiet. And you can hear the sound of, you know, the officer. You can hear the sound of Walter Scott . . . the movement, everything, everything. That's something that you never get over, you know? I will never get over it, you know. And sometimes, like, I say it's just, You have that going on in your head every time. Everything . . . the gunshots, everything,

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recognize the importance of Postmemory, and how it impacts the way that Black viewers interact with these moments of trauma.

<sup>156</sup> Richardson contends that there are three parts to Black Witnessing 1. An investigative stance to advocate for civil rights, 2. co-opting racialized digital spaces to serve as its necessary mode of dissemination, and 3. A reliance on interlocking black public spheres with varied levels of political agency to reach diverse audiences.

<sup>157</sup> Richardson describes a long history of antisemitism that must be actively fought, which still poses a threat to Jewish people living in America today. Postmemory and Black witnessing are addressing a pervasive legacy of anti-Blackness that still threatens Black life in the present, which is why so many of Black people return to the murder of Emmett Till when referencing violence in our contemporary moment.

but I believe you know that we have to over here to . . .to, umm, to be each other's keepers. To be . . . to protect each other.<sup>158</sup>

I used to shake so bad at night my mother had to rock me to sleep.<sup>159</sup>

Both Santana and Frazier are traumatized by their experiences of Black witnessing. Reynolds performed an act of digital witnessing with her phone when she decided to share the murder of George Floyd on social media. Santana also decided to record (but he didn't stream or disseminate his recording, instead giving the recording to the family of Walter Scott). What Santana and Frazier witnessed affected them, and these experiences permanently altered their lives. Feidin Santana still hears the gunshots and the cries of Walter Scott, while Darnella Frazier, one year after the death of George Floyd, is still traumatized but what she witnessed. When it comes to Black witnessing, "the line blurs between viewer and victim."<sup>160</sup> Darnella and Feidin are witnesses, but the trauma they experienced makes them victims—not victims of premature death, but victims nonetheless. Black witnessing on digital platforms also blurs the temporal distance between us as witnesses and the deceased as victims. We weren't just watching George Floyd via social media. She brought us to the scene via her recording and posting on Facebook. We were able to see it, to witness it, as if we were standing there right beside her. This is the lived experience of the Trayvon Generation.

#### **1.4 The Digital Afterlives of Slavery**

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<sup>158</sup> Laurence Mathieu-Léger and Oliver Laughland, "I Will Never Get over It: Feidin Santana on Filming the Police Shooting of Walter Scott-Video," *The Guardian*, 15 Aug. 2015, [www.theguardian.com/us-news/video/2015/aug/15/santana-captured-shooting-of-walter-scott-i-will-never-get-over-it](http://www.theguardian.com/us-news/video/2015/aug/15/santana-captured-shooting-of-walter-scott-i-will-never-get-over-it). The recording of this interview was transcribed by me.

<sup>159</sup> Darnella Frazier spoke on being traumatized after witnessing the murder of George Floyd. She recorded and shared what she witnessed on Facebook. She was seventeen years old at the time.

<sup>160</sup> Richardson, "Bearing Witness While Black."

Collectively, we are a society that shares an intimate relationship with our devices. They are with us all the time, whether it is streaming music, messaging friends and family on WhatsApp, or scrolling through our Instagram feeds. We are always connected to our jobs, to our families, to Bluetooth, to the government, to the cloud, and to each other, via our devices. Most of us would like to believe that there is a line of demarcation between the digital world and the material world, but that line is further blurred as we become more entangled with technology as time progresses. The material world bleeds into digital spaces, just as what happens when digital spaces bleed into the material world. The anti-Blackness of the material world isn't simply reproduced in digital spaces; the biases and racism of the material world are further magnified and perfected through algorithms. Historian Saidiya Hartman describes how the legacy of slavery has impacted Black life today:

If slavery persists as an issue in the political life of black America, it is not because of an antiquarian obsession with bygone days or the burden of a too-long memory but because black lives are still imperiled and devalued by a racial calculus and a political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago. This is the afterlife of slavery—skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment." <sup>161</sup>

On social media, this "racial calculus" is still visible, and the technological shifts that perfect the way that Black users experience racism and bear witness while Black within these spaces will be referred to as the digital afterlives of slavery.

The deaths that Black people witnessed on these platforms are very different from the deaths that they have "indirectly" experienced. Marianne Hirsch describes this mode of indirect witnessing as "the gap between generations," which functions as "the breach between

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<sup>161</sup> Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Macmillan, 2008).

a memory located in the body and the mediated knowledge of those who were born after." The trauma that Black people both directly and indirectly experience is still viscerally "felt," even when it isn't our own flesh being marked.<sup>162</sup> Black people see themselves in each other, and with each racialized killing that is witnessed lies a viable threat to their own mortality. While there is a generational distance between the deaths of Emmett Till, Yusef Hawkins,<sup>163</sup> and Eleanor Bumpurs,<sup>164</sup> Hirsch contends that what is "witnessed by those who were not there to live it but who received its effects belatedly, through the narratives, actions and symptoms of the previous generation, trauma both solidifies and blurs generational difference."<sup>165</sup> On digital platforms, a series of tweets in a thread can constitute an indirect mode of witnessing, collapsing timelines by placing multiple racially motivated deaths in conversation with each other within a series of tweets. Social media witnessing functions as a digital space for postmemory.

Facebook (which has acquired Instagram) censors images and statements ~~that~~ "might" be deemed graphic. This kind of censorship is a recent phenomenon, and they only started to "consider" censorship of images/imagery/videos in 2016. However, what constitutes a "graphic" for Facebook seems odd and inconsistent (especially for a user of the site and

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<sup>162</sup> Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

<sup>163</sup> Yusef Hawkins was murdered on my mother's birthday, August 23rd in 1989. He was chased by an angry mob of Italian white men in Bensonhurst, Brooklyn.

<sup>164</sup> Eleanor Bumpurs was an elderly Black Woman killed in 1984, her name wasn't mentioned for quite sometime until the shooting of Deborah Danner in 2016, who like Bumpurs was mentally ill and murdered by the NYPD. Both the Stories of Hawkins and Bumpurs were told to me by mother. Hirsch also discusses how trauma is passed on in the narratives that we receive. Trauma can be inherited.

<sup>165</sup> Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory*.

app).<sup>166</sup> Facebook recently decided that images that expose self-harm (specifically cutting) would be censored.<sup>167</sup> However, images and videos of the deaths of Walter Scott, Ahmad Arbery, and others have been shared and reshared, uncensored without impunity. It sets the stage, "making the body speak" by allowing the spectator or witness to "experience vicariously the tragical scenes of cruelty."<sup>168</sup> While digital platforms are useful, and, I would argue, necessary for mobilizing causes that often benefit the victims in these police and extrajudicial killings, they simultaneously become the space where Black pain is on display. It is my personal belief that violent depictions of dead bodies, images or videos capturing the moment of death, or the circumstances involving one's death, are indeed graphic images/videos/media.

However one chooses, or how a corporation chooses to define what constitutes a graphic image/video fluctuates, especially while engaging with social media. The difference is not only a result of cultural vestibularity,<sup>169</sup> but a culture of sanctioned violence against Black people via the deep-rooted history of anti-Black violence in the U.S. Rather, this normalization of anti-Black violence is further cemented via algorithmic racism. As consumers of technology and technological innovation, we often make the assumption that technology is objective, however, "to the extent that machine learning relies on large,

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<sup>166</sup> Abby Ohlheiser, "Facebook Will Consider Whether Graphic Content Is 'Newsworthy' before Censoring It," *The Washington Post*, 21 Oct. 2016, [www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-intersect/wp/2016/10/21/facebook-will-consider-if-graphic-content-is-newsworthy-before-censoring-it/](http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-intersect/wp/2016/10/21/facebook-will-consider-if-graphic-content-is-newsworthy-before-censoring-it/).

<sup>167</sup> Facebook censors an image by, not displaying the image directly on your timeline, if you want to see the image you have to click the text that appears in space where the image would be. This started in 2016, but they released their censorship guidelines publicly for the first time in 2018

<sup>168</sup> Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*.

<sup>169</sup> Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe."

'naturally occurring' datasets that are rife with racial (and economic and gendered) biases, the raw data that robots are using to learn and make decisions about the world reflect deeply ingrained cultural prejudices and structural hierarchies.<sup>170</sup> An audio leak of Mark Zuckerberg from October 2019 revealed their policies on how they intended to manage the circulation of racist content on their platforms:

Question: According to your policies, "men are trash" is considered tier-one hate speech. So, what that means is that our classifiers are able to automatically delete most of the posts or comments that have this phrase in it. [Why?]

Mark Zuckerberg: So as a generalization, that kind of framework and protocol that you've handed to 30,000 people around the world who are doing the enforcements, the protocols need to be very specific in order to get any kind of consistent enforcement. So, then you get to this question on the flip side, which is, "Alright, well, maybe you want to have a different policy for groups that have been historically disadvantaged or oppressed." Maybe you want to be able to say okay; well maybe people shouldn't say "women are trash," but maybe "men are trash" is okay. We've made the policy decision that we don't think that we should be in the business of assessing which group has been disadvantaged or oppressed, if for no other reason than that it can vary very differently from country to country. [. . .] So what we've basically made the decision on is, we're going to look at these protected categories, whether it's things around gender or race or religion, and we're going to say that that we're going to enforce against them equally. [. . .] It's just that there's one thing to try to have policies that are principled. It's another to execute this consistently with a low error rate, when you have 100 hundred billion pieces of content through our systems every day, and tens of thousands of people around the world executing this in more than 150 different languages, and a lot of different countries that have different traditions.<sup>171</sup>

The leaked statement reveals that managing racist content is clearly not a priority, but there is also a continued dehistoricization of racism that leads to its replication and exacerbation on

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<sup>170</sup> Benjamin, "Race after Technology."

<sup>171</sup> C. Newton, "The World Responds to the Zuckerberg Leak (also: More Leaking)," *Revue*, <https://www.getrevue.co/profile/casynewton/issues/the-world-responds-to-the-zuckerberg-leak-also-more-leaking-202477>



digital platforms. The refusal to account for the deep-rooted anti-Blackness that has always been present and prevalent on the internet is a refusal to acknowledge how that impacts the experience that Black people have on the internet. Their decision to lump race, religion, and gender equality flattens the ways in which Black users experience anti-Blackness on the platform, or even misogynoir.

Since race significantly shapes the experiences that people have on social media, it needs to be addressed directly, and anti-Blackness needs to be addressed directly as well. A one size fits all algorithmic solution will not address these issues. This refusal to obtain a basic understanding of race and how it impacts one's experiences on digital platforms is what makes social media platforms, specifically Facebook and Instagram, as breeding grounds for anti-Black language and the circulation of anti-black imagery. Digital platforms like Facebook are actively complicit in the circulation of racist language and images while "generating more and more discourse and practices but does not limit or control racism."<sup>172</sup> What Zuckerberg invoked in his statement was not only a dismissal of responsibility, but an example of "mechanisms of tyrannical power that converge on the Black body."<sup>173</sup> Facebook is a billion-dollar corporation, and they have the financial means to hire computer programmers to create and implement policies and produce algorithms that can create a digital environment in which anti-Blackness is not part of the experience. Their policy of treating all forms of discrimination as equal further marginalizes Black users.

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<sup>172</sup> Eugenia Siapera and Paloma Viejo-Otero, "Governing Hate: Facebook and Digital Racism," *Television & New Media* 22, no. 2 (Feb. 2021): 112-130.

<sup>173</sup> Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*.

Hate speech policies and content moderation systems produced by white men will only reproduce harm to the very people they are supposed to protect. Black activists are often blocked on the platform for discussing or reporting racism, which is another example of how the media can and does silence Black activism on digital platforms. Black witnessing is often dependent on social media platforms to discuss, report, and reveal racism while simultaneously engaging with a platform that is complicit in the racism that they are attempting to combat. Black people on social media platforms are subjected to, limited, and punished by these media platforms that they have no choice in engaging with.<sup>174</sup> Technology in any form is incapable of being objective, human intervention prevents this, as well as the data (hashtags, tweets, keywords, etc.) reflects the overall societal biases that are present. Even if the person(s) is (are) unaware of their biases, it will still be reflected in their technological productions. All of this must be taken into consideration when Black death is trending.

Black life has always been precarious under white supremacy. Death has always been a very present, very real threat that has forced us to think with and respond to the violence to which we are subjected. While technology provides new terrain for exposing us to different kinds or further developed modes of terror, it has provided us with the opportunity to "talk back" to create a counter-narrative against those who have immense power over our lives, including the power to end them.<sup>175</sup> Talking back is how we live, how we endure despite the

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<sup>174</sup> With Elon Musk's most recent purchase of Twitter, and Zuckerberg's ownership of Instagram/Facebook, the majority of social media platforms are owned by white billionaires, excluding Zhang Yiming owner of ByteDance (TikTok). Elon Musk's belief that Twitter's potential should move towards "absolute" free speech will only exacerbate societal issues and further and expose Black users to excess racial violence on the platform.

<sup>175</sup> Bell Hooks, *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 1988). The phrase "talking back" is described by hooks: "In the world of southern black community I grew up in "back

constant threat of death. Talking back is the "expression of our movement from object to subject" as well as a "gesture of defiance that heals, that makes new growth possible." These are the ways in which we refuse and reject the notion of our criminalization. We take control of the narrative by appropriating the good/bad dichotomy of Black citizens created by the media, exposing that surveillance, and imagery used to depict Black people are also part of the justification of Black murder. We use technology, the space of social media, and hashtags to talk back. To change the associations that we have to the images (of ourselves) that have been used to project a fallacy of intrinsic Black criminality. Tina Campt argues that refusal:

. . . Means embracing a state of black fugitivity, albeit not as a "fugitive" on the run or seeking escape. It is not a simple act of opposition or resistance. It is neither a relinquishing of possibility nor a capitulation to negation. It is a fundamental renunciation of the terms imposed upon black subjects that reduce Black life to always already suspect by refusing to accept or deny these terms as their truth. It is a quotidian practice of refusing the terms of impossibility that define the black subject in the twenty-first-century logic of racial subordination.

Campt describes the #IfTheyGunnedMeDown hashtag through images that she saw on Tumblr (the hashtag also went viral on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, but Tumblr is the medium that Campt focuses on). Campt focuses on the creativity of the hashtag and its speculative potential to imagine how one would be remembered if they were murdered by state-sanctioned violence. The condition of Black life is that death is so prominent and ever-present that one can envision how they would be remembered in the event of their deaths.

These images are activism, and because the hashtags gained popularity and traction post Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown, they are responses to their deaths which are meant

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talk" and "talking back" meant speaking as an equal to an authority figure. It meant daring to disagree and sometimes it just meant having an opinion. In the "old school" children were meant to be seen and not heard. My great-grandparents, grandparents, and parents were all from the old school. To make yourself heard, if you were a child, was to invite punishment, the backhand lick, the slap across the face that would catch you unaware, or the feel of switches stinging your arms and legs. To speak then when one was not spoken to was a courageous act—an act of risk and daring."

to highlight multiple issues. Issues surrounding discussions relating to state violence, extrajudicial justice, racial profiling, and a history of criminality unfairly projected onto Black bodies (vis-a-vis Spillers' definition of cultural vestibularity, and Dubois's presentation of Jesse Washington's lynching in Waco as Americana) has established the existence of culture in which Black punishment and Black death is an accepted norm, and at times entertainment. This hashtag talks back to a culture that has transformed Black death into a cultural norm, but instead of attempting to combat it directly, they choose to accept (impending) death and imaginatively describe what their legacies would be through the photos that are left behind on social media. It also speaks to the post-death criminalization of Black victims of state and extrajudicial violence who are always presented as criminal parties who have somehow contributed to their own deaths.<sup>176</sup> How do we grapple with an inescapable criminal status that haunts us during life and death?

By choosing to lean into the very tangible possibility of death. This participation was an intellectual and imaginative exercise in which Black people made predictions of what their afterlife legacies would be if they allowed the police or mainstream media to control the narrative by manipulating these images. They were able to show people that Black people have multifaceted, complex identities, which are often reduced to criminality in the event that they have been killed by state or extrajudicial violence. This essentially highlighted the long-standing myth of Black criminality." From the late nineteenth century onward, the high rates

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<sup>176</sup> While watching the Zimmerman trial, his lawyer stated that Trayvon Martin "contributed to his own death." It was phrased as a question when he cross examined Sybrina Fulton (Trayvon's mother) asking her on the stand if she believes that Trayvon Martin "contributed to his own death." It is a statement, that he framed as a question which emphasizes the normalization, and the public disregard for Black life on display in the courtroom, as well as what Sybrina Fulton was subjected to after losing her only child.

of arrest and incarceration within African American communities served to create what historian Khalil Muhammad has called a "statistical discourse" about Black crime in the popular and political imagination."<sup>177</sup>

This discourse doesn't only affect Black people in the material world, but it also impacts the way that Black people engage with digital spaces. Their participation in this hashtag is also a mode of resistance. Through the juxtaposition of seemingly incongruous representations of the self, Black people who participated in this hashtag invoked a history of Black misrepresentation within mainstream media. This functioned as a digital protest, but it also functioned as an act of communal digital mourning. The digital spaces used by Black people invoke postmemory, and prior modes of circulation of Black media, within the Black community. While anyone outside of the community could clearly observe, it was clear that Black people were speaking to other people within the community regarding anti-Black violence.

The hashtags #IfTheyGunnedMeDown gave the Black digital community an opportunity to collectively appropriate this criminal perception and flip it to talk back to mainstream media's manipulation of Black people's use of digital platforms. Through the use of curation and juxtaposition of personal images from social media, the Black digital community used the media's narrative that they weaponized against Black people, contributing to the justification of their deaths.<sup>178</sup> We saw the same thing happen with the

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<sup>177</sup> Elizabeth Hinton and DeAnza Cook, "The Mass Criminalization of Black Americans: A Historical Overview," *Annual Review of Criminology* 4, no. 1 (2021): 261-286.

<sup>178</sup> The Root, "If You Died, Which Picture Would the Media Use? #IfTheyGunnedMeDown #MikeBrown [Http://T.co/lJMM9a0owk](http://t.co/lJMM9a0owk) Pic.twitter.com/YYxIbPB0xA," Twitter, 11 Aug. 2014, [twitter.com/TheRoot/status/498830003551748096?ref\\_src=twsrc^tfw|twcamp^tweetembed|twterm^4988300035](https://twitter.com/TheRoot/status/498830003551748096?ref_src=twsrc^tfw|twcamp^tweetembed|twterm^4988300035)

media's circulation of Trayvon Martin's Facebook photos in which we see a young man defiantly staring into the camera with both middle fingers up. We saw firsthand how Black children and teens are also presented as a threat, one that needs to be eradicated before they get a chance to grow up. Thousands of people started using the hashtag to post dueling images of themselves: graduation vs. a hookah lounge, Halloween vs. volunteer work, at a gun range vs. giving a lecture at a university. These "contrasting" images were placed alongside each other to expose that mainstream media also has an insidious racially violent history that they invoke, which was also present in the mainstream press coverage during the Emmett Till generation. Mainstream media is an active agent in the process of vilifying deceased Black people to the public.

Black people live with the burden of knowing that their Blackness makes it impossible for them to be given the benefit of the doubt. In the event that their deaths are caused by police brutality or police adjacent whites that use their privilege to invoke a legacy of justified Black death, they are solely dependent upon those who are left behind to speak out against the mainstream media-produced narratives of their criminality that will surely follow.

Black enclaves in digital spaces gives the Black community a space to participate in a form of communal mourning that we witnessed in The Emmett Till Generation. For The Trayvon Generation, mourning often takes place on social media, with family and friends curating messages, hashtags, and photos that counter the negative media narratives that often ensue after a Black person is killed, as well as raising awareness for murders in which the state is slow to investigate or prosecute. This impending criminalization is countered with

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51748096&ref\_url=[www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2014/08/11/339592009/people-wonder-if-they-gunned-me-down-what-photo-would-media-use](http://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2014/08/11/339592009/people-wonder-if-they-gunned-me-down-what-photo-would-media-use).

digital communal mourning is, unfortunately, a common ritual that humanizes Black people to the public and reminds the public that Black people are victims in these repeated instances of racially motivated violence.<sup>179</sup> While digital spaces provide a forum for Black people to continue traditions of image curation and circulation, as well as communal mourning, it is also a space that exacerbates and exploits the trauma that Black people experience.

### **1.5 Racist Algorithms and How They Shape the Black Digital Experience**

How is the Black experience on digital platforms shaped by anti-Black technology? The work of Lisa Nakamura has shown how technology has mobilized racial stereotypes, highlighting that we cannot ignore "that the internet can and does enable new forms of racism. Whether the master's tools present the best way to address this state of affairs has yet to be seen."<sup>180</sup> As we have seen from Zuckerberg's leaked quote above, Nakamura's foresight in examining how platforms are primarily concerned with capital and not the racial violence that is perpetuated on these platforms reveals how racism is able to flourish unchecked. Back's research revealed that technology is not impeding or destroying racism but that it is, in fact, breathing new life into racism in his discussion of white supremacist mobilization and recruitment on digital platforms, which further demonstrates how digital platforms provide a "meeting space" that functions both within and beyond national borders.

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<sup>179</sup> Digital communal mourning is also a space where the dead are given a space of remembrance. Year after year on Tumblr, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, hashtags are dedicated to the deceased, allowing their names to trend again on their birthdays, or on the dates that they were murdered.

<sup>180</sup> Nakamura, *Cybertypes: Race, Ethnicity, and Identity on the Internet*.

Studies on digital racism have shown how social media platforms have specifically contributed to transforming racism into something different, something worse.<sup>181</sup> They have also examined the exacerbation of racism and how it has been aided by technology.<sup>182</sup> The work of digital scholars Safiya Noble and Ruha Benjamin has brought attention to the ways that digital platforms, digital surveillance, and search engines have aided in "perfecting" racism. Their work has been helpful in understanding the mechanics, the function, and the lack of transparency in the creation and the structure of algorithms.<sup>183</sup> Tressie McMillan Cottom's research highlights the difficulties in conducting research regarding racism and the internet:

My argument puts forth that there are two turns in the political economy of race, ethnicity, and racism: networked capital that shapes a global racial hierarchy that varies across spatial geographies and the privatization of public and economic life. Internet technologies produced the first turn, and they accelerate the second turn. Internet technologies are central to the political economy of race and racism because Internet technologies are the politics and capital of capitalism as we presently experience it.<sup>184</sup>

Our society is rapidly changing, and this digital transformation directly speaks to the experiences that Black people have when they engage with digital platforms. The internet is not a race-neutral space, and while Cottom acknowledges that it is difficult to surmise exactly

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<sup>181</sup> Les Back, "Aryans Reading Adorno: Cyber-Culture and Twenty-First century Racism," *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 25, no. 4 (2002): 628-651. Back's research also coined the phrase "cyber racism" and reveals how harmful racist white enclaves are for people of color, since white racism can mobilize online and then materialize into physical violence off-line.

<sup>182</sup> Ariadna Matamoros-Fernandez, "Platformed Racism: the Mediation and Circulation of an Australian Race-Based Controversy on Twitter, Facebook and YouTube," *Information, Communication & Society* 20, no. 6 (2017): 930-946.

<sup>183</sup> It has also been helpful in how I am working with Black digital trauma and image circulation.

<sup>184</sup> Tressie McMillan Cottom, "Where Platform Capitalism and Racial Capitalism Meet: The Sociology of Race and Racism in the Digital Society," *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity* 6, no. 4 (Oct. 2020): 441-449.



how Black people are subjected to racism, and there is not enough literature that takes a sociological stance by including the work of other scholars in the field of Digital Studies. I hope to come as close as possible to articulating what is different about racism as it pertains to digital platforms and spaces.

Lisa Nakamura's research concerning the circulation of images in "private" groups and how they engage the public on digital platforms by creating an "invitation to wonder and to participate by venturing interpretation, and thus to display wit," which further "fuels the spread of images on the internet" has been helpful in revealing the damage of images circulating without context. These digital platforms invite the viewer to project racism onto the image.<sup>185</sup> While the work of previous scholars has been essential to the field of Digital Humanities and to research at the intersection of Critical Race Studies, scholar Tressie McMillan Cottom has recognized that there lacks a theoretical framework to discuss racism in digital spaces, so her application of racial capitalism helps to start a conversation on the importance of specificity in our discussion of online racial trends.<sup>186</sup> While there has been much research into digital platforms, there is not much research that attends to the trauma-inducing Black experience of engaging with digital platforms when Black death is trending

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<sup>185</sup> Lisa Nakamura, "'I WILL DO EVERYthing That Am Asked': Scambaiting, Digital Show-Space, and the Racial Violence of Social Media," *Journal of Visual Culture* 13, no. 3 (Dec. 2014): 257-274. Nakamura's essay deeply engages with meme culture (images taken out of context, with captions by the user, or sharer of the image added to image, which often adds additional racist context to an image that is already exploitative). Nakamura's work brings me to think about the way that this image circulation speaks to lynching photography and the Comstock Act discussed earlier in this chapter, and the fact that no legal mediation for racism on digital platforms exists. It is up to the "platform's" rules and guidelines to intervene, which brings us back to Zuckerberg's leaked discussion, and the problem of equivocating all discrimination as the same.

<sup>186</sup> Cottom, "Where Platform Capitalism and Racial Capitalism Meet." Dr. Cottom is specifically speaking within the field of sociology, but her work is helpful for discussing the "logics of obfuscation" and the importance of applying sociological studies of race to digital studies.

and how Black people are transferring the traditions of Black Collective (or critical memory), communal mourning, and witnessing to digital platforms. The field of psychology is currently attempting to find a means of measuring racial trauma, but even that has its limitations.<sup>187</sup>

While there is a body of research dedicated to Digital Studies and Digital and Critical Race Studies, there is still a research area concerning the relationship between Black trauma, image circulation, and collective memory in digital spaces that is worth further exploration. This is the area of research that this project seeks to investigate, and, by extension, the complications presented with the existence of these digital spaces.

How does technology contribute to the racism and biases that Black people experience on digital platforms? Technology functions to further produce harmful environments on digital platforms through the construction of algorithms. Engagement is engagement within the sphere of the internet, and algorithms built to monitor what each user engages with while also monitoring user trends. Our first inclination is to assume that technology is not capable of racism as we know it. Algorithms are codes, a process structured with a set of rules that are followed with calculations or other mechanics of problem-solving. However, there is a lack of transparency and accessibility when it comes to algorithms, which further contributes to the general difficulty that arises in trying to understand them, and additional difficulties arise when trying to regulate them.<sup>188</sup>

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<sup>187</sup> B.T. Keum and M.J. Miller, "Racism in a Digital Era: Development and Initial Validation of the Perceived Online Racism Scale (PORS v1.0)," *Journal of Counseling Psychology* 64, no. 3 (2017): 310-324. The racism scale is determined to measure harm as "(a) personal experience of racial cyber-aggression, (b) vicarious exposure to racial cyber-aggression, and (c) online-mediated exposure to racist reality."

<sup>188</sup> Safiya U. Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression: Data Discrimination in the Age of Google* (New York, NYU Press: 2018). Noble writes extensively on the unethical practices of Google, and how these unregulated algorithms have had detrimental impact on Black life via what we can, and can't access on digital spaces due to data mining. Noble's work is specifically focused on the way that search engines mark Black women and girls

In short, algorithms mine data and use that data to make decisions that dictate things like credit rates, dating options, or even where you can live. Social media platforms and digital spaces are "free," meaning you might not pay a monetary amount to use Facebook or Instagram, but you are still paying with your personal data. When signing up for an account on any digital platform that you use, you are exchanging your personal info in order to use that platform. Algorithms extract your data, which, depending on your use of digital spaces, might consist of your age, race, sexual identity, location, marital status, etc. to determine what you see and experience. If algorithms are able to ascertain (through your decision to divulge your race on the selected platform of your choice) that you are Black, with this knowledge, algorithms can impact your search results, your news feed, and your entire digital experience. If it can recommend music based on the datasets that it collects from your Spotify or Apple Music listening history, then are algorithms sophisticated enough to make recommendations to your news feed, Instagram, and YouTube? Can algorithms "recommend" or place traumatic scenes of anti-Black violence on your timeline/feed? Yes, they can, and this is what they are built to do.

Algorithms are replicating the racism present in the material world and, through the structure of their ability to rapidly process data in their execution, further exacerbating racism in digital spaces. Algorithms have essentially streamlined racism. When Black death trends in digital spaces, the algorithm functions by measuring topics of rapid growth within a short period of time. Algorithms also make predictions that impact our notifications on our devices, possibly functioning to alert digital platforms users to "similar" scenes, or moments, of

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both racially and hyper-sexually, making a neutral search impossible. Her writing on the questions, definitions, and impact of algorithms helped to shape my own questions.

violence. Now that we know that algorithms are used to mine our apps for data in order to determine what will be on our social media feeds or give us suggestions on what topics/people we should "follow," it is possible that the timelines of Black users are potentially overexposed to scenes of violent Black death, due to the demographical data that has been gathered via algorithms. The digital afterlives of slavery are where technology and anti-Blackness converge to expose or overexpose, Black users of digital spaces, images, or videos of racial terror.

The problem is "that tech designers encode judgments into technical systems but claim that the racist results of their designs are entirely exterior to the encoding process" and "racism thus becomes doubled—magnified and buried under layers of digital denial."<sup>189</sup> The problem is the assumption of neutrality in the digital sphere, which is literally impossible. We do not exist in a neutral world, and the only way to make algorithms devoid of racism is to code them with instructions that are anti-racist because, otherwise, with their ability to rapidly process data sets, they will merely reproduce and intensify the racism of the material world on digital platforms.

Witnessing while Black is also further complicated on digital platforms. At the start of this chapter, I mentioned the multiple names of Black people that have flowed in and out of the zeitgeist, as they are unfortunately replaced by another, more recent death. But on digital platforms, the images and video recordings of their deaths exist and replay in perpetuity. In digital spaces, it becomes increasingly difficult to mitigate the circulation of images pertaining to Black death. For Black users of these digital platforms, once they choose to share or stream

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<sup>189</sup> Benjamin, "Race after Technology." Benjamin also discusses in detail how data mining also translates into surveillance for users who engage with digital platforms as well.

these images/videos/livestreams of racial terror online, they have no control over how that image/video/livestream can be manipulated. While it has been established that witnessing in digital spaces is now commonplace, it is also clear that witnessing via social media is not always possible.<sup>190</sup>

On August 1, 2016, twenty-three-year-old Korryn Gaines was at home with her five year old son when the Baltimore County Police Department attempted to serve her with a bench warrant for a prior traffic violation. When the first officer entered her home, she had her gun drawn, which prompted him to leave. The Baltimore SWAT Team responded, and a standoff began. Gaines decided to use the Facebook Live feature as an attempt to show live footage of what she was being subjected to. This livestream was an attempt by Gaines to have witnesses to what was taking place inside her home, but her livestream was intercepted by the Baltimore Police.<sup>191</sup> Having access to that digital mode of witnessing that has become so popular in this contemporary moment others was not available to Gaines. This interception of Korryn Gaines' livestream by the Baltimore Police Department and Facebook is troubling and revealing. It is troubling because it reveals that the state is obviously aware of the ways in which social media is used by Black people and that they are not above using their power to intercept or outright stop these videos/livestreams from taking place. Even more troubling is the fact that the state and digital platforms can work together to not simply control the narrative, but they can function as the sole narrative, suppressing all others. While media scholars like Alyssa Richardson, Rayshawn Ray, Melissa Brown, Neil Fraistat, and Edward

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<sup>190</sup> B. Woods, (2016, August 3), "Facebook Deactivated Korryn Gaines' Account During Standoff, Police Say," *The Guardian*, Aug 3 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/aug/03/korryn-gaines-facebook-account-baltimore-police>

<sup>191</sup> Ibid.

Summers and have performed in-depth analytical research on the potentialities of Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram for social justice, witnessing, and bolstering social movements, Black digital space is still controlled by mainstream media, and they still have the power to manipulate, intervene, or even silence these spaces.<sup>192</sup>

Black witnessing and the transmission of trauma, whether oral, textual, visual, etc., is an inextricable part of the Black experience. While the intent behind the sharing of these images/video/livestreams cannot always be easily discovered due to the nature of social media, it is clear that the galvanization of the public takes precedence over Black death being viewed as a spectacle. Not to understate the significance of the former, but what about the deaths of those who often fail to have witnesses? This is, unfortunately, the space where Black women enter.

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<sup>192</sup> Rashawn, "Ferguson and the Death of Michael Brown on Twitter." This essay provides a breakdown of how a collective identity is mobilized by analyzing the frequency with which certain hashtags are used.

## Chapter 2: Who Bears Witness For Black Women?

While witnessing is complicated on digital platforms, it has functioned as a means of providing an account of visual evidence that has been proven to be vital in our contemporary moment. This evidence can be used as a source that can often lead to an arrest, and it can even be submitted as evidence in the event of a trial. Black digital spaces have been proven to have an immense impact on the material world. Specifically, the impact of Black Twitter as a digital enclave has been vital in conversations surrounding social justice.<sup>193</sup> Critical Race and Digital Studies scholar Andre Brock writes that "Black Twitter came to online prominence through the creative use of Twitter's hashtag function and subsequent domination of Twitter's trending topics."

Brock continues, "Twitter's discourse conventions, ubiquity, and social features encouraged Black participation; Black Twitter is Twitter's mediation of Black cultural discourse, or signifyin'. In particular, Black hashtag signifyin' revealed alternate Twitter discourses to the mainstream and encouraged a formulation of Black Twitter as a 'social public,' a community constructed through the use of social media by outsiders and insiders alike."<sup>194</sup> Digital spaces such as Black Twitter are crucial in navigating digital conversations and spaces, but also recognizing the importance of the mobilization of hashtags when employed by Black users. Black women have produced hashtags that later became movements.<sup>195</sup> Digital spaces are also spaces where Black women build community as well as

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<sup>193</sup> Jeffrey Layne Blevins, "Tweeting for Social Justice in# Ferguson: Affective Discourse in Twitter Hashtags," *New Media & Society* 21, no. 7 (2019): 1636-1653.

<sup>194</sup> Brock, "From the Blackhand Side."

<sup>195</sup> The creators of the Black Lives Matter Movement are three queer Black women (Alicia Garza, Opal Tometi, and Patrisse Cullors).

spaces where they show up to defend and protect Black women, thus constructing social enclaves to show up for each other when it seems that no one else will.

Unfortunately for Black women, witnessing on their behalf within digital spaces reveals the same issues that they experience in the material world. Their voices and their efforts to be heard are often silenced. I want to return to the incident concerning the death of Korryn Gaines. In her attempt to use social media to document and bear witness to her own story, she started streaming the standoff between herself and the Baltimore police via the Facebook live feature, but the police intercepted and shut down both her Facebook and Instagram accounts.<sup>196</sup> In the aftermath of Gaines' murder, the public soon learned that not only had she been killed, but her five-year-old son had been shot in the elbow and face. Korryn Gaines was murdered in her home over a warrant regarding a traffic violation.<sup>197</sup> Facebook's compliance with the officers to shut down Gaines' stream emphasizes the fraught relationship that exists between users of digital spaces and those who control these spaces, revealing that these digital spaces are places where their agency is limited.<sup>198</sup> While witnessing on digital platforms has transformed the way that we view and document interactions between Black people and the police, it has also become the primary mode in *how* these incidents are disseminated. But it must be noted that these platforms maintain and enforce their power to limit, inhibit, and outright restrict the user's ability to bear witness.

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<sup>196</sup> Zoe Spencer and Olivia N. Perlow, "Sassy Mouths, Unfettered Spirits, and the Neo-Lynching of Korryn Gaines and Sandra Bland: Conceptualizing Post Traumatic Slave Master Syndrome and the Familiar 'Policing' of Black Women's Resistance in Twenty-First-Century America," *Meridians* 17, no. 1 (2018): 163-183.

<sup>197</sup> Ibid.

<sup>198</sup> Ibid.



Violence, whether state-sanctioned or extrajudicial, Black women on Instagram perform practices that are similar to the traditional practice of scrapbooking by Black people in previous generations: collecting an assemblage of images and placing them in a particular order in a post or in an Instagram story to either provide a counter-narrative or to give a narrative to women whose stories, lives, and deaths are also ignored. This mode of curating images is also a kind of witnessing, with images that can be rapidly circulated across other digital platforms with ease. Scrapbooking and some aspects of social media are thought of as private practices, something personal, but scrapbooks circulated and were shared, and in the case of private archivists like Alexander Gumby, scrapbooks were to be displayed.<sup>199</sup> On Instagram, the account holder is also placing these images on "display" for selected viewers, meticulously collecting digital content to memorialize Black women; from the smiling image of Korryn Gaines to the clip of Salau marching for the rights of Black transwomen, these spaces of memorialization are designed and shared with intent, similarly to the scrapbooks of the Emmett Till Generation. With their practices of collection and curation, they have the power to amplify the stories of Black women such as Korryn Gaines, Sandra Bland, and Oluwatoyin Salau, so that they are remembered not by police reports, dash/body cam footage, or "the preludes to [their] deaths."<sup>200</sup> They are remembered by what Black women on social media piece together to preserve their humanity and remind us of the lives that they lived.

## **2.1 Black Women Countering Mainstream Media in Digital Spaces**

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<sup>199</sup> Melanie Chambliss, Brent Hayes Edwards, and Aleksandra Mitchell, "Archives from the Black Diaspora: A Roundtable Discussion," *African American Review* 54, no. 1 (2021): 19-30.

<sup>200</sup> Elizabeth Alexander, "The Trayvon Generation," *The Best American Magazine Writing 2021* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021), 307-316.

Black women are cognizant of how race and gender impact their lived experiences in the material and the digital worlds simultaneously. Despite this marginalization, Black women often and readily step into the task of witnessing and disseminating scenes of racialized violence via social media to counter dominant narratives that often justify Black death at the hands of the state.<sup>201</sup> While Black women provide this labor, they are rarely the beneficiaries of witnessing, meaning that the violence that Black women experience is rarely recorded, making the violence that they experience seem less visible. Because of this lack of witnesses due to technological interventions, when viewing racialized/gendered state violence directed at Black women, the only perspective or gaze that is available is often the one provided by the state (via dash-cams, surveillance videos, body cameras, etc.), which is simultaneously responsible for the violence.

In the case of extrajudicial, intra-racial, and gendered violence experienced by Black women, there is rarely any visual evidence outside of what is provided by the state in the aftermath of their deaths. This often leads to speculation and the production of harmful narratives (from mainstream media, social media, and even fictional narratives from the state) that divert attention away from the violence that Black women face, preventing them from being recognized as victims. Black women are faced with a conundrum in which they aren't recognized as victims of racialized violence in the same way that Black men are,<sup>202</sup> and they

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<sup>201</sup> Shaneda Destine, *Contemporary Black Women Activists' Consciousness and Agency in the Struggle Against State Violence*, Dissertation, Howard University, 2017.

<sup>202</sup> Ashley L. Smith, "#BlackWomenMatter: Neo-Capital Punishment Ideology In The Wake Of State Violence," *Journal of Negro Education* 85, no. 3 (2016): 261-273. While this chapter doesn't address the gendered differences in the way that Black women experience state violence, it is important to note that gender marks the distinction in how Black women and girls experience violence. This chapter is speaking specifically to the kind of state violence that state troopers and the police produce, not "state" in the broader meaning of the word, which is described in Ashley L. Smith's article outlining a more capacious definition of the state to reveals that Black women experience state violence in a myriad of ways.

are not centered in gendered violence in the same way that white women are, which leaves them in a state of disposability since the violence they experience is not prioritized or recognized as racial or gendered violence.

In the aftermath of their deaths, Black women mobilize via social media, transforming it into a space of investigation, by performing acts of posthumous witnessing for the victims.<sup>203</sup> Social media is also the ground upon which they construct spaces in the digital era to raise awareness or find justice for Black women who are often overlooked by mainstream media. Digital Humanities scholar Andre Brock argues that internet platforms have created new ways of disseminating, circulating, and understanding Black culture.<sup>204</sup> By giving Black people the space and opportunity to create social enclaves for marginalized people within an already marginalized group: for example, queer Black people, non-gender conforming Black people, as well as Black women. Digital platforms function as a space where Black women build community, as well as a space where they can bear witness for each other. Their interactions with digital platforms have also permanently changed modern modes of knowledge production.<sup>205</sup>

When Black women on digital spaces raise awareness regarding the violations that they are often subjected to, they aren't simply creating trending hashtags; they are creating a

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<sup>203</sup> Shannon Malone Gonzalez and Faith M. Deckard, "'We Got Witnesses' Black Women's Counter-Surveillance for Navigating Police Violence and Legal Estrangement," *Social Problems* 0, no. 1 (2022): 1-18.

<sup>204</sup> Andre Brock, *Distributed Blackness: African American Cybercultures* (New York: NYU Press, 2020).

<sup>205</sup> Tara McPherson, "U.S. Operating Systems at Mid-Century: The Intertwining of Race and UNIX," in *Race After the Internet* (New York: Routledge, 2012).

community that gives Black women the power and the tools to protect other Black women.<sup>206</sup> There is also an active community of online education that is present in these spaces, building upon Black Feminist Theory ". . .that comes from the seemingly personal experiences of individual Black women's lives."<sup>207</sup> These digital spaces are not only driven by citizen journalism, but they also simultaneously function as activist-driven spaces where the mobilization of hashtags is essential to raising awareness of the issues that Black women face. Hashtags have become the primary mode of documenting and organizing the racialized/gendered state and extrajudicial violence that Black women encounter.

When users of these digital platforms employ hashtags, they are also contributing to an online archive of instances of racialized violence directed at Black women because a hashtag's function is to "proliferate, to mediate connections across time and space" within digital spaces.<sup>208</sup> They also function as a "space" where one click can provide access to repeated and disturbing trends of racialized/gendered violence in which Black women are targeted. To return to the concept of postmemory discussed in Chapter 1, hashtags, like postmemory, connect the racialized violence that Black women face by refusing to present each death as a singular instance.<sup>209</sup> It reveals a digital proliferation of death which aids online activism and

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<sup>206</sup> Melissa Brown, "# SayHerName: A Case Study of Intersectional Social Media Activism," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 40, no. 11 (2017): 1831-1846.

<sup>207</sup> Combahee River Collective, "The Combahee River Collective Statement," *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* 1 (1983): 264-274.

<sup>208</sup> Tara L. Conley, "Decoding Black Feminist Hashtags As Becoming," *Black Scholar* 47, no. 3 (2017): 22-32. Conley argues for an analysis of the potential of hashtags and the way that they are specifically used by Black women to animate Black Feminist Theory in digital spaces.

<sup>209</sup> Kelli R. Gill and Ruba H. Akkad, "Reshaping Public Memory through Hashtag Curation," *Across the Disciplines* 18 (2021).

social justice efforts.<sup>210</sup> By presenting all of these deaths in the same "place" via hashtags, each death provides evidence of a problem that mainstream media refuses to address. Digital platforms provide Black women with the space to speak to each other and to the world against police brutality, rape, state violence, extrajudicial violence, and misogynoir.<sup>211</sup> Scholar Tara Conley has argued not only for the potential but for the study of the influence of hashtags produced by Black women online. This influence cannot be denied, and this becomes evident in one of the most popular hashtags regarding witnessing, racialized/gendered violence, and Black women, #SayHerName.<sup>212</sup>

Scholar Safiya Umoja Noble disputes this, saying that while the images are there, they cannot function as archives:

Trafficking in Black death and dying, including resistance movements that call for justice on the face of it, does not preclude using these images as commodity or clickbait. This is part of the troubling landscape of digital media platforms, which often erase the context and history of racial violence in the United States from the dissemination of content. While many think of the internet as a perpetual "digital archive" of the many societies within which it is organized, it is anything but, for archives are organized intentionally to frame and understand communities and ideas in context.<sup>213</sup>

I agree with Noble that archives are organized with intention, but I still believe that despite the lack of attention to detail that it takes to organize a traditional archive, hashtags in digital spaces *are* intentional. It is not being documented with the precision of library sciences, but

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<sup>210</sup> Shatema Threadcraft, "North American Necropolitics and Gender: On #BlackLivesMatter and Black Femicide," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 116, no. 3 (July 2017): 553-579. Threadcraft's paper speaks at length to the problem of Black Femicide and disproportionate rates at which Black women die from homicide.

<sup>211</sup> Brown, "# SayHerName."

<sup>212</sup> Conley, "Decoding Black Feminist Hashtags as Becoming."

<sup>213</sup> Safiya Umoja Noble, "Critical Surveillance Literacy in Social Media: Interrogating Black Death and Dying Online," *Black Camera* 9, no. 2 (2018): 147-160.

hashtags are capable of organizing information, albeit in a non-traditional and non-academic sense. But because these digital platforms do not belong to the users of these spaces, they have little agency in how and where this information is stored. If it is an archive, it is an archive that exists in that particular digital space and is also the property of that particular digital platform.<sup>214</sup> Even if it came from a citizen journalist's phone, once it is uploaded to the platform of their choice, they relinquish control of the image and/or recording.

#SayHerName was not simply a hashtag, but it was a movement that challenged mainstream media's refusal to provide news coverage concerning the underreported deaths of Black women. Mainstream media has a complex history when it comes to the (mis)representation of Black women. Either they are completely overlooking the issues that affect Black women, or they are circulating stereotypical images of them.<sup>215</sup> "The negative images that circulate about Black women render them as "non-newsworthy" by the mainstream press.<sup>216</sup> There is a large body of sociological and legal research that has revealed the complex struggles that Black women face when they are subjected to state and/or sexual violence.<sup>217</sup> When Black women experience sexual violence, not only do they have to fight their assailants, but they also have to combat stereotypical beliefs regarding their womanhood,

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<sup>214</sup> Gill and Akkad, "Reshaping Public Memory Through Hashtag Curation."

<sup>215</sup> #SayHerName made the violence that Black women faced visible on digital spaces. As mentioned in the previous chapter, citizen driven journalism is crucial in making violence against marginalized communities publicly legible.

<sup>216</sup> Sherri Williams, "Digital Defense: Black Feminists Resist Violence with Hashtag Activism," *Feminist Media Studies* 15, no. 2 (2015): 341-344.

<sup>217</sup> Melissa V. Harris-Perry, *Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes, and Black Women in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013).

which is only further exacerbated by the circulation of stereotypical media.<sup>218</sup> Black women are presented as a problem not worthy of defending and not worthy of protection. Black women cannot escape the stereotypes that historically mark and impact their existence.<sup>219</sup> Black women use digital spaces to combat their erasure in mainstream media, and they also use digital spaces as a means of bearing witness to the violence they face, despite the obstacles that they face within digital spaces.

#SayHerName shed light on the plight of Black cis and transgender women by exposing the violence that Black women were (and are still) being subjected to and mainstream media's refusal to acknowledge that violence. Black women's activism, via the use of hashtags and their use of digital spaces fills in the gaps of mainstream media while revealing the harmful effects of their racism. 2015 had the highest number of Black transwomen murdered on record (up until that point), and almost none of those stories were reported by mainstream media.<sup>220</sup> However, it was the transition and coming out of Caitlyn Jenner<sup>221</sup> that received the bulk of media attention.<sup>222</sup> It was the #SayHerName hashtag and movement that allowed the stories pertaining to the murders of Black women to circulate and proliferate, creating a collection of curated violent encounters accessible to anyone that had

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<sup>218</sup> Kimberle Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review* 43 (1990): 1241

<sup>219</sup> Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe."

<sup>220</sup> Janae L. Teal, "*Black Trans Bodies are Under Attack*": *Gender Non-conforming Homicide Victims in the US 1995-2014*, Dissertation, Humboldt State University, 2015. The number of Black transwomen murdered doubled from the year before.

<sup>221</sup> A white, rich, privileged transwomen, affiliated with one of the most infamously influential families, the Kardashians.

<sup>222</sup> Conley, "Decoding Black Feminist Hashtags as Becoming."

access to the internet and social media with one tap. By drawing attention to the issues that Black women face, these activist hashtags produced by Black women also functioned as sites of Black feminist intellectual production.<sup>223</sup>

These digital spaces are where Black women such as Feminists Jones have flourished via social media by bringing Black feminist theory to the masses and ultimately to the mainstream. Black women went from being the ones who were most often denied access to fundamental rights to becoming the main creators and proprietors of this discourse. These hashtags do not just function as a space to circulate the underreported deaths of Black women; they also serve as counter-public discourses. Hashtags employed by Black women also give them the space to amplify the issues that affect them when these hashtags start to trend. They create a space for Black women across the diaspora to discuss, relate, and at times theorize about their social conditions via digital platforms.<sup>224</sup> Black women depend on digital spaces to give visibility to the violence that they face, despite the fact that their agency on these spaces in the event that they are victims of state/gendered violence can be limited or completely erased.

Digital platforms allow Black women the space to share and reflect on their experiences, giving them the opportunity to have a digital community in the event that a material one might be absent. While Black women put so much labor into constructing digital spaces for other Black women, these spaces and hashtags on social media platforms are not closed groups, and they are vulnerable to criticism from outsiders. Journalism scholar Marian

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<sup>223</sup> Chelsea Peterson-Salahuddin, "Posting Back: Exploring Platformed Black Feminist Communities on Twitter and Instagram," *Social Media + Society* (January-March 2022): 1-13.

<sup>224</sup> Brock, *Distributed Blackness*.



Meyers describes the obstacles that Black women face within media representation, which impacts their experiences and the way that they are perceived in both the material and digital worlds. They are frequently portrayed in mainstream media as victims of violence, poverty, and other stereotypes, but while they are often seen, Black women are rarely heard.<sup>225</sup> They are not allowed to tell their stories and frame their experiences accordingly. Digital platforms give Black women the opportunity to be in control of their narratives and to speak publicly about their experiences.

While social media has been a pivotal space for organizing and Black community building, it also recreates and transfers many of the social ills Black women endure in the material world and exacerbates them on digital platforms. These digital discussions often reveal that Black women are faced with unique circumstances and "are subjected to disproportionate sexual assault, community violence, and public sexual aggression."<sup>226</sup> Black women and their digital spaces are also susceptible to digital violence; "Violence in the digital world can be especially harmful to those women and girls at risk of or exposed to intersecting forms of discrimination. For example, women of color are more impacted by violence online or through digital means than white women, with Black women being 84% more likely to receive abusive tweets on Twitter."<sup>227</sup>

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<sup>225</sup> M. Meyers, *African American Women in the News: Gender, Race, and Class in Journalism* (New York: Routledge, 2013). Meyers also contends that there should be more scholarship attending to the digital lives of Black women as well.

<sup>226</sup> Shatema Threadcraft, "North American Necropolitics and Gender."

<sup>227</sup> Council of Europe, *No Space for Violence Against Women and Girls in the Digital World*, Commissioner for Human Rights, March 18, 2022, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/commissioner/-/no-space-for-violence-against-women-and-girls-in-the-digital-world>.

Because of this, digital spaces are also a space where Black women are forced to encounter additional trauma, violence, and misogyny.<sup>228</sup> Not only are they vulnerable to this violence from random digital encounters, but the more prominent they are, the more likely they are to be attacked. From Trump stating that congresswoman Maxine Waters "dresses like a stripper" to Michelle Obama constantly being depicted and referred to as a man, Black women are hyper-visible in digital spaces, whether they are public figures or everyday women, which makes it easier for them to be vulnerable to racial violence. This hyper-visibility contributes to Black women's social awareness and conditioning to white apathy<sup>229</sup> when they experience violence on these platforms. This is what makes the contributions of Black women to these spaces radical; despite the trauma that they experience within these spaces as well as in the material world, Black women resist through their use of social media when they perform acts of care via hashtags, or when they curate images and videos as an extension of African American traditional scrapbooking practices. Black women have to advocate for themselves on digital platforms because white women rarely speak up in their defense, so Black women are often left to defend themselves, and each other. Black women are not only subjected to apathy from white people, but it also comes from *within* the Black community as well.

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<sup>228</sup> Tressie M. M. Cottom, "Black Cyberfeminism: Ways Forward for Classification Situations, Intersectionality, and Digital Sociology," *Digital Sociologies* (2016).

<sup>229</sup> Jessica Roden and Muniba Saleem, "White Apathy and Allyship in Uncivil Racial Social Media Comments," *Mass Communication and Society* (2021): 1-24.

In digital subcultures, this apathy is transformed into outright hatred and justification of violence against Black women.<sup>230</sup> This particular digital enclave is known as "the manosphere." While the existing scholarship on the manosphere is helpful in understanding how violence against women materializes in the "real" world, it is important for us to recognize and name how race directly impacts these spaces, and, most importantly, how it aids and animates the vitriol directed at Black women. The preexisting scholarship on these digital enclaves does not address the importance of race, and the fact that there is a separate manosphere for Black men underscores the importance of race and the necessity to include an understanding of interracial dynamics within the Black community for further analyses.

The manosphere is defined as a "toxic brand of anti-feminism" across a "range of online networks and platforms," which is often referred to as the Red Pill or MGTOW community (Men Going Their Own Way). The purpose of this particular online subculture is to provide men with a virtual meeting space to theorize about the perceived privileges of women and how women are collectively infringing upon the rights of men. Digital Humanities scholar Debbie Ging argues that "many of these new toxic assemblages appear to complicate the orthodox alignment of power and dominance with hegemonic masculinity by operationalizing tropes of victimhood, "beta masculinity," and involuntary celibacy (incels).<sup>231</sup> The men within this subculture believe that they are locked out of patriarchy as a system that places men in power. Instead, this online subculture of bitter, entitled white men holds that

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<sup>230</sup> While there has been an abundance of research dedicated to "incels" and how the violence that they promote in digital spaces, manifests in material violence against women, there has been very little research that has been dedicated to the sub-culture of Black incels or "Blackcels" and the violence that they produce in digital spaces, and the material world.

<sup>231</sup> Debbie Ging, "Alphas, Betas, and Incels: Theorizing the Masculinities of the Manosphere," *Men and Masculinities*, 22, no. 4 (Oct. 2019): 638–657.

women "owe" them sex, company, and relationships. Also, these men blame women for the majority, if not all, of their problems.

These subcultures also tend to be right-wing, with a propensity for discussing their desires to harm women, and sometimes these desires move offline into the material world, resulting in actual violence.

An example of this is the case of Elliot Rodgers.<sup>232</sup> The Black incel movement is considered a sub-sub-culture within the manosphere, and it was in the wake of the Tory Lanez vs. Megan Thee Stallion Twitter and Instagram conflict that this sub-sub-culture was revealed via a group of troubling tweets.<sup>233</sup> This apathy towards the struggles that Black women face has contributed to a digital culture that has created additional obstacles in allowing Black women to be recognized as victims of violence, instead portraying them as agents of their own destruction. Thus, Black women are forced to show up for themselves and for each other through the digital communities that they create. Digital spaces function as "a site of resistance where Black feminists challenge violence committed against women of color, and

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<sup>232</sup> Elliot Rodgers was a self identified incel who uploaded a video to YouTube titled "Elliot Rodgers Retribution" outlining his plan, before he left his home to begin his 2014 killing spree (in which he took his own life at the end of it). He said that he wanted to punish women for rejecting him and to harm sexually active men because he was jealous of them. He also described his childhood, issues with his family, a hatred of women, and his inability to find a girlfriend as well as his contempt for couples, especially interracial ones. He is praised as the "supreme gentleman" by the incel community for BBC News, "Elliot Rodger: How Misogynist Killer Became 'Incel Hero'," BBC, Apr. 25, 2018, [www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-43892189](http://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-43892189).

<sup>233</sup> Megan Thee Stallion was shot by her friend at the time, rapper Tory Lanez on July 12, 2020 after attending a party. As the details of the incident were slowly revealed Megan was and still is not viewed as a victim. As Marian Meyers previously noted, the media narratives of Black women shapes their perception. Because of this people are less likely to see Black women as victims, but more likely to see them as combative, and as contributing to the violence that they experience. In short, media circulation has presented the image of suffering Black women as static.

they leverage the power of Black Twitter to bring attention and justice to women who rarely receive either."<sup>234</sup>

It is also a struggle to have these Black women who experience state violence be viewed as victims. Scholar Shateena Threadcraft's work details her observations regarding the "right" kind of body that can be used to galvanize social movements, and that body is almost always a "cishet . . . able-bodied . . . male" and "dead."<sup>235</sup> Because the violence that Black women experience isn't prioritized within their communities, nor in mainstream media, digital spaces become the place where they can voice their concerns, where they highlight the violence that mainstream media doesn't. This is the space where Black women talk to each other and "talk back" to mainstream media.<sup>236</sup>

Black women also perform acts of citizen journalism by sharing the stories that mainstream media too often ignores. Scholars from the fields of media studies, journalism, digital humanities, and digital/critical race studies have been essential in analyzing and recognizing the complexities faced by Black women within the digital space while highlighting the contributions and labor on digital platforms. Most of the scholarship examining Black women and digital witnessing examines the potential and impact of digital spaces, which is important and helpful in articulating how these interventions can materialize and minimize the potential of harm or violence in the material world. They have also revealed the labor of Black women, and the production and animation of Black feminist theory in

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<sup>234</sup> Williams, "Digital Defense."

<sup>235</sup> Shatema Threadcraft, "North American Necropolitics and Gender."

<sup>236</sup> Hooks, *Talking Back*.

Black women's digital spaces as well.<sup>237</sup> Shateema Threadcraft's hierarchy of concern is helpful for articulating why Black male death becomes hyper-visible when shared or posted on Facebook, Instagram, or Twitter. While Black women do experience state violence less frequently when it comes to police shootings, it still happens,<sup>238</sup> but we have to consider that Black women experience state violence in a myriad of ways.

Black women's use of digital spaces is radical, but in order to have a complete picture of how Black women engage with and contribute to digital spaces, we cannot only examine the potentialities, we must also examine the limitations and restrictions of digital spaces and the way it has specifically impacted Black women. Witnessing and community building on digital platforms is essential for Black women to cope with and bring attention to the violence that they face. However, digital platforms are not neutral spaces, and even as communities are built upon them, they do not belong to Black women. Once again, limited agency and access to these spaces have to be addressed.

Digital witnessing for Black women includes distinct limitations and complications due to the intervention and collaboration of the state and the owners of these digital spaces. When examining the recorded evidence in the aftermath of the deaths of Black women via interpersonal or state violence (Breonna Taylor, Korrine Gaines, Sandra Bland),<sup>239</sup> it becomes

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<sup>237</sup> Christen A. Smith, "Cite Black Women: A Critical Praxis (A Statement)," *Feminist Anthropology* 2, no. 1 (2021): 10-17.

<sup>238</sup> Sherri Williams, "# SayHerName: Using Digital Activism to Document Violence Against Black Women," *Feminist Media Studies* 16, no. 5 (2016): 922-925.

<sup>239</sup> Breonna Taylor was killed during a no knock warrant in her home on March 26, 2020. She was 26 years old. Background information on Korrine Gaines's murder is in the intro of this chapter. Sandra Bland was found hanged in a jail cell in Waller County, Texas in July 13, 2015. She was 28 years old. Her death was ruled a suicide.

clear that these scenes cannot be circulated due to the fact that state intervention makes it difficult for these videos to be seen by the public, because often times they are not released, making it seem as if these recordings do not exist.<sup>240</sup> The current body of scholarship, as it pertains to Black women and digital spaces, has contributed to and established the fact that Black women have been, and continue to be influential in shaping digital discourse. But the scholarship mostly focuses on the potential, social activism, and knowledge production in these spaces. It is equally important that we include and discuss the problems that Black women face in accessing these spaces as citizen journalists and witnesses. It is important that we not only understand the potential of digital spaces but also how digital spaces intersect with state power, producing a digital environment that is antagonistic, silencing Black women in the crucial moments when they need witnesses the most.

For a capacious understanding of Black women's engagement with digital spaces, we must also examine the limits of these spaces, as well as how these limitations impact circulation and witnessing on digital platforms. I am examining the limitations of digital witnessing in digital spaces to contribute to future conversations and scholarship concerning the disruption of Black women's witnessing when documenting racialized/gendered/extrajudicial and state violence against Black women. It is important to understand that the state's control of the narrative, through surveillance videos, dash-cams, body cams, etc., is not a neutral depiction of Black women's final moments. It is also important that we look at this silencing and interrupting of Black women's access to witnessing (denying Black women the ability to record on their cell phones, shutting down their social media) as another mode of

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<sup>240</sup> Body-camera footage in the case of Breonna Taylor (which wasn't released to the public, but a *New York Times* digital reenactment was) is the only account of events.

state violence and control. We need to examine digital repression as a sect of state violence when we examine the experiences of Korryn Gaines and Sandra Bland.

## **2.2. Digital Repression, Media Manipulation, & the Limitations of Digital Witnessing**

In 2014 the world witnessed the pivotal role that the internet and digital platforms played in connecting communities beyond our national borders. The correspondence and community between protesters in Ferguson (after the murder of Michael Brown) and those in Palestine revealed foreign allies in the face of struggle.<sup>241</sup> They shared tips on how to survive a heavily policed protest: to write important phone numbers on your body, what to do if you have been maced, what to do in the event that you are arrested, to post your motives on social media prior to attending protests in the event that you are murdered.<sup>242</sup> Digital spaces have become vital in recent years, and it is clear that our collective society is dependent on these spaces. Digital platforms have changed the way we engage with mainstream media by challenging the stories that they tell and what they prioritize.

What people have been capable of doing with social media is revolutionary, but we must also keep the work of scholar Ruja Benjamin in mind, which has revealed that racism is codified and improved upon in our everyday encounters with technology while contributing to the ways in which we are digitally surveilled.<sup>243</sup> Furthermore, additional evidence reveals that behind the scenes, governments across the world have been working at developing and fine-

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<sup>241</sup> Yarimar Bonilla and Jonathan Rosa, "# Ferguson: Digital Protest, Hashtag Ethnography, and the Racial Politics of Social Media in the United States," *American Ethnologist* 42, no. 1 (2015): 4-17.

<sup>242</sup> Cristina Mislán and Sara Shaban, "'To Ferguson, Love Palestine': Mediating Life Under Occupation," *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*, 16, no. 1 (2019): 43-60

<sup>243</sup> Benjamin, "Race after Technology."



tuning multiple digital tools to "surveil, manipulate, and censor the digital flow of information in the realm of their authority."<sup>244</sup> Surveillance is further complicated when both race and gender enter into the frame. Simone Browne's research has examined how race has historically impacted surveillance from her analyses of how Black people have been surveilled over time, from the surveillance of runaway slaves to social media. Her work also reveals the fact that we do not know much about digital surveillance because the government is intentionally keeping citizens uninformed. By highlighting the fact that Black people have experienced a history of surveillance in the United States, Browne forces us to examine how that history impacts the way that Black people navigate the material world and digital spaces.<sup>245</sup>

This history of Black surveillance and racism in the United States has produced a sense of racial paranoia among Black citizens.<sup>246</sup> This "culturally biased paranoia" has often been misdiagnosed, positing that the trauma that Black people live with due to racism and surveillance is an actual mental illness, without taking into account this country's history with policing and the terrorism inflicted upon Black communities. This refusal to acknowledge racial trauma further contributes to the concept of postmemory.<sup>247</sup> What was often and is still, at times, regarded as racial paranoia within Black populations ignores the history of racial violence that has been experienced and witnessed by Black people in America. Black people

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<sup>244</sup> Anita R. Gohdes, "Repression Technology: Internet Accessibility and State Violence," *American Journal of Political Science*, 64, no. 3 (2020): 488-503.

<sup>245</sup> Simone Browne, *Dark Matters* (Raleigh-Durham: Duke University Press, 2015).

<sup>246</sup> John L. Jackson, *Racial Paranoia: The Unintended Consequences of Political Correctness: The New Reality of Race in America* (City: Civitas Books, 2008).

<sup>247</sup> Hirsch, "The Generation of Postmemory."

have always needed a way to talk back and counter mainstream misrepresentations of their experiences. From Black media outlets to the use of digital spaces, Black people are now in a position where they have access to power through their use of digital spaces.<sup>248</sup>

Getting additional opinions from other Black people on these digital spaces to affirm their experiences of being followed, of being denied services, of being racially profiled, or other forms of racial harassment. Black people often turn to social media to document these events, to have witnesses just in case "something" happens.<sup>249</sup> Digital witnessing today is necessary because *if* that "something" happens to end in violence, they want people to *see* it in the event that they are not able to speak for themselves. Witnessing exists as a response to racism, and it is often how potential victims of racial violence protect themselves. Trayvon Martin's phone call to Rachel Jeantel was an attempt to have her bear witness for him the night he was followed.<sup>250</sup> Witnessing is crucial in the event that the person seeking a witness does not survive the encounter. Even if concrete evidence does not culminate in concrete results (i.e., a conviction), it still provides evidence that the event took place.

However, witnessing via social media platforms for Black women has its obstacles,<sup>251</sup> and to examine this point, I want to return to the case of Korryn Gaines, previously mentioned in more detail. The case of Korryn Gaines revealed not only that the state has the power to

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<sup>248</sup> Harrison P. Pinckney, "Black Spaces/White Spaces: Black Lives, Leisure, and Life Politics," *Leisure Sciences* 40, no. 4 (2018): 267-287.

<sup>249</sup> Richardson, "Bearing Witness while Black."

<sup>250</sup> Jennifer C. Nash, "Unwidowing: Rachel Jeantel, Black death, and the "Problem" of Black Intimacy," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 41, no. 4 (2016): 751-774.

<sup>251</sup> Brian Pitman, Asha Ralph, Jocelyn Camacho, and Elizabeth Monk-Turner, "Social Media Users' Interpretations of the Sandra Bland Arrest Video," *Race and Justice* 9, no. 4 (2017): 479-497. Black women are viewed as "victims" they are often blamed for their deaths by social media users, this essay unpacks the obstacles Black women face in the attempt to be recognized as victims of violence.

intervene in our personal social media accounts but that it *will* and can use that power. A.L. Whaley's findings when it comes to racial paranoia examine the fact that a white person rendering a Black person as paranoid is something that needs to be examined within the construct of racial power dynamics, and I would add that a white officer is not only capable of asserting power over someone Black because they are white but doubly so because of the power afforded by the state. Korryn Gaines was also described as being paranoid for wanting to record her encounters with the police. But to be fair, considering the conditions of Black life, fear of the police, fear of death at the hands of the state, and the history of Black surveillance, her fear was anything but irrational.

In the aftermath of Korryn Gaines' death, her motherhood and her sanity were challenged on both social media and mainstream media.<sup>252</sup> The narrative that circulated depicted Gaines as someone who foolishly brandished a gun in the presence of police officers in an attempt to justify her death. They reported that she had experienced multiple encounters with the police but never provided the public with any information regarding the details of those encounters. This allowed them to add a layer of justification to her death, presenting her as a criminal instead of presenting her as someone who was surveilled. One of her encounters with the police was so traumatic that it resulted in Gaines experiencing a miscarriage (she was pregnant with twins). She attempted legal action against the officers who mishandled her at the precinct.<sup>253</sup> Gaines, due to her traumatic experiences, legally purchased a firearm because

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<sup>252</sup> LaShonda Carter and Tiffany Willoughby-Herard, "What Kind of Mother is She?: From Margaret Garner to Rosa Lee Ingram to Mamie Till to the Murder of Korryn Gaines," *Theory & Event* 21, no. 1 (2018): 88-105.

<sup>253</sup> The Lynching Sites Project of Memphis, *History: Ida B. Wells*, December 6, 2016, <https://lynchingsitesmem.org/news/history-ida-b-wells>

she felt completely unprotected, and she was not wrong. Before they murdered Korryn Gaines, the Baltimore Police Department decided to shut down her social media accounts to "preserve the integrity" of the negotiations, to stop her followers from "encouraging non-compliance" with the police, and to "protect" her five-year-old son.<sup>254</sup> However, in the aftermath of these "negotiations," Korryn's son was shot, and she was killed. There is no video of Gaines' murder (that is available to the public), despite an 11.6-million-dollar body camera program for the Baltimore Police Department.<sup>255</sup>

We must also acknowledge that even if we had the police's account of events, we must keep in mind that state surveillance is never neutral. Due to the history of racialized state violence in this country, video evidence, or any evidence shared by the state is suspect. An example of the state acting in bad faith was the October 14, 2014 shooting of Laquan McDonald. He was a Black teen from Chicago who was shot sixteen times, and it also took sixteen police officers and supervisors to cover up his murder. They destroyed witness accounts of the shooting and intentionally altered their audio and visual recording equipment.<sup>256</sup> These are the conditions that make digital witnessing a powerful and necessary tool, but it is also vulnerable. When the State does decide to make an attempt at being "forthcoming" and "transparent" with their evidence during these investigations concerning racialized state violence, digital platforms continue to give Black users, and particularly Black

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<sup>254</sup> Camila Domonoske, "During Fatal Standoff, Police Asked Facebook to Deactivate Woman's Account," NPR, August 3, 2016, <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2016/08/03/488500830/during-fatal-standoff-police-asked-facebook-to-deactivate-womans-account>.

<sup>255</sup> *Baltimore Sun*, "Body Camera Footage Shows Officer Planting Drugs, Public Defender Says," <https://www.baltimoresun.com/news/crime/bs-md-ci-body-camera-footage-20170719-story.html>.

<sup>256</sup> Ray Sanchez and Omar Jimenez, "16 Police Officers Participated in an Elaborate Cover-Up after Laquan McDonald's Death, Report Alleges," CNN, October 11, 2019, <https://www.cnn.com/2019/10/10/us/chicago-inspector-general-laquan-mcdonald-shooting/index.html>.

women, the ability to bear witness. In the event of their own murders, it takes place posthumously.

To examine how the state manipulates digital evidence, eliminating witnessing as a possibility for Black women, I will now turn to the case of Sandra Bland, a twenty-eight-year-old woman who was found dead in her jail cell on July 13, 2015. Dash-cam footage released by state officials gave many of Bland's digital witnesses pause. On July 21, 2015, Ava DuVernay positioned her experience as a filmmaker and her familiarity in the field of video recording and editing technology to question the glitchy, jumpy footage that was released by the State. Her tweet read: "I edit footage for a living. But anyone can see that this official video has been cut. Read/watch. Why? #SandraBland."<sup>257</sup> DuVernay is acting as a digital witness and uses her expertise to examine and recognize a difference in the gaze. In the previous chapter, intention marked the differentiation between spectatorship and bearing witness.

DuVernay's questions also highlight the importance of the gaze, which also forces us to recognize the importance of who is behind the camera. Body cameras, security footage, and dash-cams are "alienated from the bodies shown and filmed without actual humans behind the camera. These images—like the footage of Bland's arrest—present Black bodies as simply liabilities without any care for their humanity. Blackness becomes linked with deathliness, and this footage justifies white state violence."<sup>258</sup> Because this footage is derived from the

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<sup>257</sup> J.B. Shaw, "Sandy Still Speaks: the Digital Afterlives of Sandra Bland," *Prose Studies* 40 (2018): 40-59.

<sup>258</sup> *Ibid.*

State, it is incapable of being neutral; it is state property. It presents Sandra Bland as a woman that refuses to obey a white officer as if he is her master,<sup>259</sup> to which he responds quite swiftly with the "threat" of physical harm. She isn't "obedient," but her refusal to obey is not resistance, despite the fact that the public and the law deem it as such. She complied with the officer, answering his questions, but she did it while asserting her humanity and her rights. The officer's language in the video is meant to frame Bland as a problem, as a criminal, as mouthy, as deserving of violence,<sup>260</sup> and perhaps deserving of death. Recordings from the State, just like technology, are incapable of giving an objective account of events. In the same way that modern digital citizen-driven journalism is animated by what the witness/spectator recognizes as worthy of recording, the State's methods of recording also serve a purpose, and that purpose is to serve the state:

Like the state, the camera is never neutral. The representations it produces are highly coded, and the power it wields is never its own. As a means of record, it arrives on the scene vested with a particular authority to arrest, picture, and transform daily life . . . This is not the power of the camera but the power of the apparatuses of the local State, which deploy it and guarantee the authority of the images it constructs to stand as evidence or register a truth.<sup>261</sup>

In the case of the dash-cam recording of Sandra Bland,<sup>262</sup> the arresting officer seems aware of the vantage point of the camera. As soon as he yanks her out of the car a little past the nine-

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<sup>259</sup> Spencer and Olivia N. Perlow, "Sassy Mouths."

<sup>260</sup> Andrea J. Ritchie, *Invisible No More: Police Violence against Black Women and Women of Color* (New York: Beacon Press, 2017).

<sup>261</sup> John Tagg, *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories; With a New Essay* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press: 2021).

<sup>262</sup> Sandra Bland, "Traffic Stop (raw uncut)," YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=URAZ3umt7v0>.

minute mark on the video, he pulls out his gun and tells Sandra Bland, "I will light you up." He then walks her out of view to the far right of the camera.

The state's camera, the dash-cam, reveals the impossibility of neutrality. The officer knows that the camera is there and that he has the power to allow it to record what he wants it to. The state and agents of the state are still in control of the narrative surrounding Bland's arrest by controlling what we see. The audio that we can hear tells a story, but the police still have plausible deniability without visual evidence. She wanders in and out of view, but he continually forces her out of the range of the camera. We can hear Sandra Bland stating, "I have a right to record . . .," to which the cop responds, "Put your phone down, now!" By ushering Sandra Bland out of view, the officers can present her as hysterical, as combative, and as any other stereotype that one can associate with Black women. Watching the video, we can hear Bland's voice, and we can hear her screaming, but we cannot see why.<sup>263</sup> The officer has the power to manipulate and control what we see. This is a manipulation of the recording, given the officer's awareness of the location of the camera. We hear what he says, but as viewers, we are not able to see what it is that he actually *does*. This is a moment in which Bland is denied the ability to bear witness for herself as he commands her to put her phone away.

The officer's awareness of the dash camera allows him to manage what enters the frame for a future viewer. We can hear Sandra Bland screaming that he is "hurting" her, that she "can't hear," and what can be heard from the state trooper is the phrase "stop resisting,"

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<sup>263</sup> CNN, "Sandra Bland Jail Video released-CNN video," <https://www.cnn.com/videos/justice/2015/07/21/sandra-bland-death-jail-surveillance-video-nr.cnn> There is a clip from a witness obtained by CNN that captures the tail end of the arrest. It contains no vital info in comparison to the forty-seven-minute arrest video, the witnesses video is about two minutes. Despite the different vantage point it doesn't contain any vital information.

which he says repeatedly. We also hear thuds, a scuffle, a struggle, as well as Bland screaming out in pain. The trooper's control of what enters into the line of sight of the camera, as well as what he says in response to Bland's attempt to defend and protect herself, is an act of media manipulation without exterior technological intervention. The officer is "editing" what viewers are able to see, as the dash-cam records.

Both Sandra Bland and Korryn Gaines were viewed within and outside of the Black community as "troublemakers" in their arrests. Respectability politics impacted their perception of being recognized as victims.<sup>264</sup> They were viewed as "resistant" and "mouthy," but when examining both Bland and Gaines' interactions with the police in these final recordings, I see exhaustion from the State's intervention into their lives. I see two Black women who have been pulled over multiple times, who attempted to assert their legal rights, but most importantly, women that wanted to assert their humanity. They both highlight Shateema Threadcraft's articulation of Black women not fitting into the mold of victimhood; even with a gun pointed at Bland, many depicted her as the agitator. Gaines's previous Facebook and Instagram posts were used to condemn her in the aftermath of her death. Black women's rights have been circumvented for capital during slavery, for modern gynecology, for birth control, and, in the case of Recy Taylor<sup>265</sup> and so many others, just because white men could circumvent them.

When I looked at Gaines and Sandra Bland, I saw two Black women who were tired of having their rights trampled on, tired of witnessing these events play out repeatedly against

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<sup>264</sup> Evelyn Higgenbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).

<sup>265</sup> Judith E. Smith, "The Rape of Recy Taylor," Review, *Journal of American History* 105, no. 3 (2018): 782-785.



people that looked like them, so they responded in the best way that they could at that moment. They used the only power that they had, and they talked back. They talked back despite the fact that history has shown them that Black women have no rights that white men will respect. What stands out in the cases of both Sandra Bland and Korryn Gaines is that they were both exhausted by the power that the police, and thus the State, had in their lives, and they were not afraid to voice their discontent with the anti-black, anti-woman, anti-poor policing that they were forced to experience by virtue of being Black women. They refused to be silent, but that does not justify their deaths. If anything, it further reifies how Black women are subjected to racial and gendered domination that materializes in state violence that produces death. These systems aren't new, but the ways in which we encounter them and circulate them in digital spaces have shifted.<sup>266</sup> They are ultimately legacies of the racist origins of policing and surveillance. To be Black is to be aware of how this impacts our contemporary moment. If this is the legacy that impacts Black life, then white people have also inherited a legacy and a tradition that they call upon in which they continue to perpetuate anti-Black violence. If witnessing racialized violence activates postmemory, then in the case of Gaines and Bland, their resistance to being contained activated a white male legacy of violence and control.<sup>267</sup>

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<sup>266</sup> Steven Feldstein and Marina Grigorieva, "The Road to Digital Unfreedom: How Artificial Intelligence Is Reshaping Repression," *Kant Social Sciences & Humanities* (2021): 39-51.

<sup>267</sup> Spencer and Perlow, "Sassy Mouths."

There is a section in this paper that specifically discusses white male officers grappling with post-traumatic slave master syndrome.

The lack of an account of the Korryn Gaines shooting also allowed for Gaines' character to be maligned within the Black community as well. On social media, it was discussed that she was a young, unwed, Black mother whose children were fathered by two different men.<sup>268</sup> She was described as being too loud, too militant, and just too much.<sup>269</sup> She didn't fit into the neat space of Black women who could be posthumously praised. She was regarded as a bad mother with a gun. Korryn Gaines was denied access to posthumous victimhood, and she was also denied access to witnesses through the State's intervention into her social media. A police report of a prior arrest, which took place on March 10, 2016, revealed that Gaines' experienced a public arrest while she was in the car with her two children, an arrest which drew a large crowd since she was being cuffed while her children were forced to watch. She begged onlookers to "record this!" but no one did.<sup>270</sup> Black women rarely have witnesses or available recordings when it comes to instances of state violence. Korryn Gaines wanted to employ the tools that were available to her, such as social media, because she *had* to bear witness for herself because, given her previous experience with the police, she knew that it was not likely that anyone else would. Korryn Gaines invoked the legacy of Mamie Till's use of the camera via her use of her smartphone. In the same way that Mamie Till used the photograph and disseminated the violence her son faced via *Jet* magazine, Gaines attempted to circulate the violence that she knew was sure to come.

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<sup>268</sup> Carol Ann Jackson, # *SayHerName: Negotiating Issues of Victimhood, Violence, and Visibility*, Dissertation, University of Connecticut, 2017.

<sup>269</sup> Spencer and Perlow, "Sassy Mouths."

<sup>270</sup> Z. Z. McLeod, "Past Police Reports Provide Background on Woman in Monday Standoff in Randallstown," WBFF, August 3, 2016, <https://foxbaltimore.com/news/local/previous-police-report-may-shed-light-on-background-of-woman-killed-by-police-in-barricade>.

Gaines was aware of the power of social media, as well as the potential of its vast reach. She used social media to show that the Baltimore Police targeted her because she was Black. On Instagram, she posted the purchase of her legal firearm as she publicly discussed her miscarriage, stating that it was due to the physical trauma of police detainment. Gaines framed the loss of her unborn child as an additional act of state violence,<sup>271</sup> which has been named by legal scholars as a "state-violence-induced-miscarriage."<sup>272</sup> In discussions concerning state violence and Black people, experiences like the one Gaines suffered above highlight how gender figure into the types of state violence that Black women can be subjected to and how they experience state violence differently than Black men, thus compounding the types of violence that they can experience simultaneously. While the state violence that Black men experience is often compared to that of Black women, gender should always be included in scholarly discussions when analyzing the ways in which Black women experience state violence. It is so much more than just force and death at the hands of the State. It can range from the way that Black girls experience educational neglect, neglect in healthcare, physical abuse, and sexual abuse via law enforcement.<sup>273</sup> Gaines' framing of her miscarriage as an act of state violence reminds us that state violence *is* gendered violence when the police target Black women.

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<sup>271</sup> A. A. P. Forum, "Intersectionality Matters!: 1. A mother's Nightmare: The Life and Death of Korryn Gaines," Apple Podcasts, February 1, 2019, <https://podcasts.apple.com/gb/podcast/1-a-mothers-nightmare-the-life-and-death-of-korryn-gaines/id1441348908?i=1000428972641>

<sup>272</sup> Ayelet Waldman, Robin Levi, Rebecca Silbert, and Michelle Alexander, *Inside This Place, Not of It: Narratives from Women's Prisons* (New York: Verso, 2017).

<sup>273</sup> Devon W. Carbado, "Predatory Policing," *UMKC Law Review* 85 (2016): 545. Daniel Holtzclaw intentionally targeted Black women as a police officer. He would target Black women with criminal records threatening them with imprisonment in exchange for sex making him a serial rapist.

Gaines used digital platforms with the hopes of being able to have witnesses at a later time. Her final attempted use of social media to stream the police raid of her home troubles the notion of access to digital spaces when it comes to the lives of Black women. In the same vein that Korryn Gaines analyzed the violence she experienced on Instagram, we must examine and name the multiple ways in which state violence materializes in the lives of Black women. This chapter's focus on digital violations and data manipulation is important when studying the reach of state violence, and the experiences of Gaines and Bland are excellent case studies when examining the potential of digital repression. What if digital repression goes beyond interrupting and suppressing the final moments of Black women? What if, at some point, the State decides to suppress citizen journalism shared on digital platforms entirely? This is why it is important to examine digital suppression and the role that the State plays in enacting it. The Baltimore Police Department's use of its power to shut down Korryn Gaines' social media can be framed as an act of state violence via repression.

While the context differs from what political scientist Anita Ghodes investigates in her research—namely, the tools of political and social repression within totalitarian regimes—we can recognize the similarities in the tools of digital repression that were used by the police department in the case of Korryn Gaines.<sup>274</sup> If they are capable of intervening in this way and foreclosing witnessing as an option for Black users of digital spaces, what will stop them from intervening in the future? Digital Studies and Sociological scholar Safiya Umoja Noble writes on the tenuous nature of evidence produced by Black people and disseminated on digital platforms writing:

Under the current conditions that drive digital media platforms like Google Search, which I have previously written about at length, and subsidiaries of its parent

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<sup>274</sup> Ghodes, "Repression Technology."

company, Alphabet, such as YouTube or Google Maps, many communities, and their histories and identities are held hostage to the profitability of the spectacle. I want to challenge the idea that certain or all social media records will serve as an arbiter of justice, as if documents are a matter of objective fact. We know, for example, again, that videos and photos existed in the deaths of Oscar Grant and Korryn Gaines, yet citizen-produced records have not had the same legitimacy as other forms of records generated by the State, and are therefore often considered suspect by legal, State-sanctioned decision-makers<sup>275</sup>

While digital spaces have proven to be helpful, Noble also highlights the fact that citizen journalism has its shortcomings. When Black death trends, the shared digital recordings that go viral often become the possessions of the platforms on which they are posted. These images of Black people dying become "commercial property that works in service of the consolidation of power, even while working simultaneously to raise consciousness and awareness of the differential status and lack of justice for Black people in the United States."

<sup>276</sup> While these videos have been helpful in attaining justice, social media, unfortunately, also functions as a space where Black people are heavily surveilled.<sup>277</sup> Sharing information on digital platforms can be terrifying for Black people, especially when it backfires.

### **2.3 Black Women's Proximity to Violence: Digital Silencing & The Erasure of Black Women**

Not only do Black women struggle to find digital witnesses and to be recognized as victims of state violence, but they are also susceptible to intra-racial violence. Oluwatoyin Salau is a BLM college student activist from Florida who used Twitter as a platform to bear witness to the dangers she faced as a housing and financially insecure young Black woman. Through her words, she revealed the constant and increased proximity that she had to

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<sup>275</sup> Noble, "Critical Surveillance Literacy in Social Media."

<sup>276</sup> Ibid.

<sup>277</sup> Ibid.

violence. Her tweets were her personal narrative, the closest thing that we have to a live feed that ultimately detailed and pinpointed the near-exact moment of her death. Salau's death highlights the struggles that Black women face. Salau was a Black woman who, despite her marginalized position in society, still labored for the Black lives that were not prioritized. She often protested the lack of attention that was given to the frequent murders of Black trans-women in mainstream media. Ten days before she was murdered, she tweeted the following:

Black Lives Matter. We do not ask for our stories to be put on display for pity but we deserve to be SEEN there cannot be any censorship on this matter.

— Oluwatoyin (@virgingrltoyin) June 1, 2020<sup>278</sup>

We were able to experience the uncertainty, the limitations, and the fear that Oluwatoyin felt in her last moments. Black women, who also functioned as posthumous witnesses for "Toyin," were closely watching her story, drawing from the complex collective memory of sexual abuse. Psychologist and scholar Carolyn West interrogates the structures that impact the way that Black women navigate the material world:

The legacy of trauma can be multigenerational, a reality that should not be ignored by future researchers. For example, although they never lived through the atrocities, second- and third-generation family members of Jewish Holocaust survivors also may be traumatized (Danieli, 1998). Similarly, some events continue to live in the collective memory of African Americans, including sexual violence during slavery in the form of rape, forced breeding, and coercive medical experiments, such as the 40-year government-sponsored Tuskegee study that withheld treatment from African Americans diagnosed with syphilis. Furthermore, these historical events may influence how contemporary victims respond to IPV. For instance, memories of lynchings and police brutality make some Black women reluctant to report their abusers to a legal system that they perceive as discriminatory.<sup>279</sup>

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<sup>278</sup> Alycee J. Lane, *For Colored Girls at the End of Empire when Nonviolence is not Enough* (New York: Lantern Books, 2020).

<sup>279</sup> Carolyn West, "Violence in the Lives of Black Women," *Women and Therapy* 25, no. 3 (Jan. 2014): 5–27.

For Black women, racial and gendered violence are interconnected, and it impacts the violence that they experience both within and outside of their communities. "Violence represents power in society, who can inflict it, and who falls victim to it . . ." <sup>280</sup> These systems of power and their impact are compounded once they intersect with the histories of racial and gendered domination that Black women have been subjected to. In digital spaces, this history is further amplified as internet spaces have started to "eclipse traditional media distribution channels," but both mainstream media and the internet have a "significant influence on forming opinions on race and gender." <sup>281</sup> In other words, mainstream media and the internet have an immense impact on the way that Black women are *read*, both in the material and digital world. The imagery that is circulated, or what mainstream media refuses to circulate, contributes to a history of silence and dismissal around the racial and gendered violence that they face. Black women are not viewed as being susceptible to gendered violence, and their lives, and thus their deaths, do not experience the same urgency or dissemination.

This is the space that Oluwatoyin enters as a young Black woman as she uses her digital space as a diary, revealing the many ways in which Black women encounter violence. Oluwatoyin's fate is a reminder that even when Black women labor for movements that promote the protection of Black life, that protection does not always reach or apply to them. The digital enclaves of Black women often highlight the unfortunate violence that Salau and many other Black women are subjected to. They shared her testimony and added their own stories to not only amplify the violence that took Salau's life but to reveal the frequency of

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<sup>280</sup> George Gerbner, Larry Gross, Marilyn Jackson-Beeck, Suzanne Jeffries-Fox, and Nancy Signorielli, "Cultural Indicators: Violence Profile No. 9," *Journal of Communication* 28, no. 3: 176-207.

<sup>281</sup> Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression*.

racial/gender-based violence that Black women collectively experience. Salau's tweets reveal not only her vulnerability but the obstacles facing Black women:

Anyways I was molested in Tallahassee, Florida by a black man this morning at 5:30 on Richview and Park Ave. The man offered to give me a ride to find someplace to sleep and recollect my belongings from a church I refuged to a couple days back to escape unjust living conditions.

— Oluwatoyin (@virgingrltoyin) June 6, 2020

When we arrived at his house he offered me a shower, and I thanked him and he gave me a change of clothes. He exposed himself to me by peeing with the bathroom open obviously knowing I was out of it. I told him about a sexual assault situation that happened . . .

— Oluwatoyin (@virgingrltoyin) June 6, 2020

to me in March involving Ivan a 32 year old Ghanaian man who currently schools at FAMU and lives at 211 Jakes and Patterson (I am currently 19 years old) who tried to force me to give him oral sex and then continued to harass me thru text and knocking at my door for days.

— Oluwatoyin (@virgingrltoyin) June 6, 2020

The same niggas I'm risking my life for are the same niggas who are convinced they are stealing away my "innocence" or jewel not knowing that I am standing on a rock. Therefore I can never be broken or robbed.

— Oluwatoyin (@virgingrltoyin) June 6, 2020<sup>282</sup>

Salau's fourth tweet above reveals the paradoxical position of Black women. While Black women often contribute to social justice movements and often labor as witnesses for Black men, they are also subjected to experiencing sexual violence at the hands of the same men that they labor to protect. Salau's tweets highlight the complexities of Black women's experiences, as well as the social obligations that they have to Black men. Salau's death also demonstrates that within the same movement, the lives of Black women are not given the same attention.

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<sup>282</sup> These tweets were transcribed from images of Oluwatoyin's deleted Twitter page.



Scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw describes the dismissal of Black women's deaths as them being "reduced to collateral damage" so that "our deaths can seem so natural that some Black men dismiss them."<sup>283</sup> The dismissal that Crenshaw references is the lack of public protection from Black men and the fact that the violence that Black women face is never centralized in discussions of racial violence; they are an afterthought in response to the violence that Black men experience. Toyin's fate must be situated within the historical framework that forces Black women into spaces of disposability, despite their labor for movements that refuse to give precedence to their needs.

Black womanhood for Salau was a constant space of negotiation, a space where she was forced to make choices out of choicelessness.<sup>284</sup> Salau left her dorms because of an attempted sexual violation from a male student, which unfortunately left her without housing in the middle of a global pandemic. Everywhere she went to find shelter only further emphasized her vulnerability. Her socioeconomic background, her gender, and her Blackness made her a target. Her small, thin frame was no match for the man who would make sure that her final moments would ultimately become the exact thing that she was attempting to escape.<sup>285</sup> Soon after Salau's death was announced, her Twitter account was removed as if she had never existed. While digital spaces seem to highlight the abundance of violence that Black

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<sup>283</sup> K. Crenshaw, "Breonna Taylor and Bearing Witness to Black Women's Expendability," *Medium*, October 9, 2020, <https://level.medium.com/breonna-taylor-and-bearing-witness-to-black-womens-expendability-472abf5f6cee>

<sup>284</sup>" She is a new world black and a new world woman, extracting choice from choicelessness . . ." Toni Morrison's description of *Sula*.

<sup>285</sup> Aaron Glee Jr. confessed to killing and raping her (as well as another local activist, 75-year-old Victoria Sims, her body was found along with Salau's). He was previously arrested for assaulting (by kicking her repeatedly in the stomach) a woman because she refused his sexual advances. Not only was Salau seeking a place to stay, but she was seeking protection. Salau's life and death highlights the dangers of being a Black woman. Salau was only nineteen.

people face, Black women and their accounts of violence, as well as their attempts to bear witness on digital platforms, face disruption (in the case of Korryn Gaines), manipulation (in the case of Sandra Bland), and effacement (in the case of Oluwatoyin "Toyin" Salau). How can we account for and respond to the ways in which Black women's accounts of witnessing in digital spaces are effaced? How can we intervene before Black women become hashtags?

The labor of Black women, for Black women, in digital spaces is not only essential but invaluable. Digital spaces, through their use of hashtags, do not only perform posthumous acts of witnessing for Black women that are victims of racialized/gendered state and extrajudicial violence; they keep the names of Black women in the digital sphere through digital mourning and memorialization. The digital afterlife of Oluwatoyin Salau is constructed from Black women's digital mourning. Black women on digital platforms memorialize the deaths of Black women in order to bring continued attention to the injustice and conditions that took their lives while celebrating the lives that they lived as well. Black women use digital spaces to resist the effacement that Black women like Salau experience in the aftermath of their deaths.

The contemporary use of Twitter has far surpassed its intended use of sharing "inconsequential" information in 140 characters or less.<sup>286</sup> Black women have used the app as a means of raising awareness, shifting narratives, and arguing for social justice and change.<sup>287</sup> Black women use digital spaces to perform digital wake work,<sup>288</sup> which are acts of care and

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<sup>286</sup> *Los Angeles Times*, "Twitter Creator Jack Dorsey Illuminates the Site's Founding Document. Part I," <https://latimesblogs.latimes.com/technology/2009/02/twitter-creator.html>

Today the amount of characters that can be used on Twitter has been doubled.

<sup>287</sup> Catherine K. Steele, *Digital Black Feminism* (New York: NYU Press, 2022).

<sup>288</sup> KaLyn T. Coghill, "World Wide Wake: A Look Into Digital Wake Work in Response to the Murder of Breonna Taylor," Virginia Commonwealth University 24th Graduate Symposium, April, 2021.

communal mourning that take place on digital platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, and other similar platforms. Scholars have demonstrated through their research of these spaces how digital memorialization functions.<sup>289</sup> There is the creation of memorial pages that are consistently curated by digital users and posthumously dedicated to victims that have experienced racial and/or gendered violence. In the same way that murals are often dedicated to victims of State and racialized violence,<sup>290</sup> these memorial pages allow for a collective representation of the dead to exist, as well as a digital site of communal mourning.<sup>291</sup> Despite the effacement and other interventions into the social media of the Black women discussed in this chapter. These pages also function to provide digital users with often unseen facets of the deceased's personality, to further emphasize that what was seen via state surveillance footage is not an accurate depiction of that person's life. It reveals how surveillance video can become the sole narrative that remains in people's memories. These pages present the public with a broader view of the victim's life. It places additional emphasis on the humanity of Black women. Despite the limitations of digital witnessing and the effacement of Black women's digital spaces, these digital memorialization pages combat the digital erasure of Black women. Black women labor to produce memorialization pages for Black women who have been victims of violence to make sure that their experiences and their stories are visible and unforgotten.

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<sup>289</sup> Martin Gibbs, "# Funeral and Instagram: Death, Social Media, and Platform Vernacular," *Information, Communication & Society* 18, no. 3 (2015): 255-268.

<sup>290</sup> Jonathan M. Lohman, *"The Walls Speak": Murals and Memory in Urban Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001).

<sup>291</sup> Alice Marwick and Nicole B. Ellison, "'There Isn't Wifi in Heaven!' Negotiating Visibility on Facebook Memorial Pages," *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 56, no. 3 (2012): 378-400.

Black women also use hashtags as a means of both mourning and memorializing the lives and the deaths of Black women that have been killed due to racialized and gendered violence. Digital Humanities scholar Tara Conley has described the function of hashtags and how they allow multiple experiences to proliferate across temporalities in digital spaces.<sup>292</sup> Kimberlé Crenshaw has also discussed how the #SayHerName hashtag has helped amplify the issues facing Black women and the ways in which their experiences must be included when we discuss state violence against Black people.<sup>293</sup> Hashtags are useful, and they continue to be useful when it comes to galvanizing movements. But they are also effective tools for memorialization as well.

Through hashtags, Oluwatoyin's activism, as well as curated images of her in memoriam, circulated on social media under #Oluwatoyin. On Instagram, the hashtag #Oluwatoyin combatted the deletion of her Twitter page. Her words are still circulated on the anniversary of her death across digital platforms by Black women to remind the world that she was once here and that she should still be here. While her Twitter page no longer exists, outside of the screenshots that were saved by others on Twitter and other digital spaces, Oluwatoyin's words continue to circulate through a video of her at a Black Lives Matter protest. A few days before her death, she was protesting for Black trans-women and the lack of media attention that their deaths received. Her death as a vocal and passionate activist led to her interview on the news to trend. Actresses like Kerry Washington and Gabrielle Union

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<sup>292</sup> Conley, "Decoding Black Feminist Hashtags as Becoming."

<sup>293</sup> Crenshaw, "Breonna Taylor and Bearing Witness to Black Women's Expendability."

circulated her photos and commented on the unfortunate circumstances that took her life.<sup>294</sup>

Digital commemoration, memorialization, and hashtags combat the digital erasure and intervention that Black women experience in these spaces.

The cases of Oluwatoyin Salau, Korryn Gaines, and Sandra Bland reveal the obstacles in terms of access to digital spaces, removal from digital spaces, and the manipulation of surveillance that Black women are subjected to in these spaces. While digital suppression is often only discussed in relation to government regimes,<sup>295</sup> hacking computers,<sup>296</sup> terrorism,<sup>297</sup> and businesses implementing damage control,<sup>298</sup> it would be interesting to include the case of Korryn Gaines in these analyses and conversations of digital suppression. It is important to examine the limitations of digital witnessing as another way in which Black women experience a particular kind of silencing, which drives Black women to perform digital wake work to raise awareness and speak for the dead.

The digital spaces that Black women create to bear witness to and mourn Black women incorporate and curate all aspects of their lives because they know that Black women do not have to be perfect to be recognized as victims worthy of protection. These digital

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<sup>294</sup> N. Lang, "Oluwatoyin 'Toyin' Salau Spent Her Final Days Defending Black Trans Lives, *Them*, <https://www.them.us/story/suspect-arrested-for-murder-of-oluwatoyin-salau>.

<sup>295</sup> Saeid Golkar, "Liberation or Suppression Technologies? The Internet, the Green Movement and the Regime in Iran," *International Journal of Emerging Technologies & Society* 9, no. 1 (2011).

<sup>296</sup> Pericle Perazzo, "DIO Suppression Attack Against Routing in the Internet of Things," *IEEE Communications Letters* 21, no. 11 (2017): 2524-2527.

<sup>297</sup> James A Lewis, "The Internet and Terrorism," *Proceedings of the ASIL Annual Meeting, Vol. 99* (London: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

<sup>298</sup> Angela Daly, "Private Power and New Media: The Case of the Corporate Suppression of WikiLeaks and its Implications for the Exercise of Fundamental Rights on the Internet," in *Human Rights and Risks in the Digital Era: Globalization and the Effects of Information Technologies* (Hershey, PA: IGI Global, 2012): 81-96.

spaces created by Black women and for Black women show that the lived realities of Black women's race and gender increase their proximity to violence. These spaces also theorize how they experience state violence in a multitude of other ways outside of police violence.<sup>299</sup> Why is it that death is the only space where the vulnerability of Black women becomes a reality in the eyes of the nation? Why is it that viral death becomes the space where the protection of Black women becomes a mantra once they can no longer benefit from it? What can be done to protect Black women while they are alive?

#### **2.4 Hashtags as Intervention: Moving From the Digital to the Material World**

Black women have a clear understanding of the ways in which they are hyper-visible, while the violence that they face is not. While hashtags function mainly within the sphere of digital spaces, they are being activated in online digital spaces, moving from Instagram and Twitter into tangible change in the streets. The hashtag #YouOkSis was created by Feminista Jones and @BlackGirlDanger to start a conversation where Black women could share and discuss some of the violent and dehumanizing street harassment that they have experienced.<sup>300</sup> In these digital conversations, Black women shared their experiences that they had either witnessed or experienced firsthand in the material world or online in their "DMS."<sup>301</sup> This viral hashtag marks a moment of importance because it charged Black women in the digital sphere to protect Black women and each other by intervening in the material world. Street

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<sup>299</sup> The Instagram page @TheDarkestHue is one of the digital spaces that memorializes deceased Black women through hashtags. It also discusses the different ways that Black women experience gendered/racial/state violence. This page continuously highlights, theorizes, discusses and educates Black women on intra-racial racial issues from aesthetics (featurism, colorism, etc.) to community and domestic violence.

<sup>300</sup> Conley, "Decoding Black Feminist Hashtags as Becoming."

<sup>301</sup> DMS are colloquial slang for direct messages that can be sent on both Twitter and Instagram.

harassment is not always viewed as something that can result in deadly force, but for Black women, their rejection of men within their communities can be dangerous.<sup>302</sup>

Tiarah Poyau, a twenty-two-year-old Black college student at St. John's University, was shot because she refused to dance with a man that she did not know.<sup>303</sup> Mary Spears, a twenty-seven-year-old Black woman, was shot while she was out with her fiancé. Family members stated that she had "politely" told the man who ultimately shot her that she "wasn't interested."<sup>304</sup> Janese Jackson, a Black twenty-nine-year-old mother, decided to have a drink at a bar with a friend. A man at the bar had made sexually "aggressive" remarks towards Janese. She asked him to "chill" when he grabbed her behind and followed her to the car. He shot her in the parking lot.<sup>305</sup> The street harassment that so many Black women experience was highlighted through Feminista Jones using Twitter as a platform to start an open conversation and intervention with the hashtag #YouOkSis. The hashtag started trending in 2016, the same year that the aforementioned murders took place. #YouOkSis came from the question "You okay, sis?" as an innocuous way for Black women to create communities and offer and extend protection to Black women in the event that they might be in danger. They were able to communicate with women in the material world that were strangers prior to them

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<sup>302</sup> Nina M. Flores, "Tweeting the Gendered City: Analysis of Harassment, Reflections on Justice," *Journal of Critical Thought and Praxis* 6, no. 3 (2017).

<sup>303</sup> Larry Celona, "Student Killed at J'ouvert Wanted Man to Stop Grinding on Her: Cops," *New York Post*, Sept. 7 2016, [nypost.com/2016/09/06/student-killed-at-jouvert-wanted-man-to-stop-grinding-on-her-cops/](http://nypost.com/2016/09/06/student-killed-at-jouvert-wanted-man-to-stop-grinding-on-her-cops/).

<sup>304</sup> Craig Johnson, "Black Women Killed-Mary 'Unique' Spears Killed after Rejecting an Admirer," *BlackGirlTragic.com*, June 8, 2016, [www.blackgirltragic.com/home/2016/6/6/mary-unique-spears-killed-after-rejecting-an-admirer](http://www.blackgirltragic.com/home/2016/6/6/mary-unique-spears-killed-after-rejecting-an-admirer).

<sup>305</sup> Craig Johnson, "Black Women Killed-Janese Jackson: Man Allegedly Said He'd 'Merk' Woman for Rejecting Him at Bar," *BlackGirlTragic.com*, June 6, 2016, [www.blackgirltragic.com/home/2016/6/6/ripjanese-man-allegedly-said-hed-merk-woman-for-rejecting-him-at-bar](http://www.blackgirltragic.com/home/2016/6/6/ripjanese-man-allegedly-said-hed-merk-woman-for-rejecting-him-at-bar).

vocalizing the digital refrain. The phrase/question "You okay, sis?" functioned as a digital marker, making (short-term) changes in the material world.

This hashtag and conversation also shifted the narrative and the focus away from white women who were monopolizing the digital conversation on street harassment. At the same time that these murders of Black women had taken place, a video featuring a white woman documenting her experiences with street harassment titled "10 Hours Walking in NYC as a Woman" went viral.<sup>306</sup> While this particular video is important for highlighting the experiences that women face, it further demonstrates that while all women experience street harassment, Black women's experiences with street harassment are impacted by race and gender. Because Black women cannot untangle their race from their gender, the street harassment that white women face cannot exist as the baseline for gendered violence. It also highlighted that white women did not engage in the circulation of Black women's fatal experiences with street harassment. This further highlights the competing solidarities within digital spaces.<sup>307</sup> Both gender and race deeply impact the way that Black women experience gendered violence in both the material and digital world. The hashtag #YouOkSis, created by Feminista Jones and @BlackGirlDanger, was an attempt to move from the digital space to the material world in order to create community for Black women. Black women in these spaces were invited to share the ways in which they showed up for other Black women. In these spaces, there is potential for Black women to speak, share, and collectively find methods to escape sexual, racial, and gendered violence in real, tangible ways by constructing a digital community that is later transformed into a tangible one in the "real" world.

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<sup>306</sup> Flores, "Tweeting the Gendered City."

<sup>307</sup> Conley, "Decoding Black Feminist Hashtags as Becoming."



Black women's digital spaces are an example of the potential of these spaces to intervene in the material world. While street harassment is clearly different from Black women's experiences with state violence, the potential for the hashtag #YouOkSis can be extended beyond its intended purpose. While this kind of intervention that is suggested with #YouOkSis would not apply to the cases of Korryn Gaines or Sandra Bland, it could have possibly changed the trajectory for someone like Oluwatoyin Salau. The problem with hashtags and these digital spaces is that they gain the most traction when they are trending. The #YouOkSis trended four years before the death of Salau. The hashtag #SayHerName consistently trends due to the fact that Black women continue to die unjust deaths in a myriad of ways. While digital spaces are crucial for Black women's organizational efforts and for posthumous witnessing, it is important for us to consider how we can materialize possible interventions for Black women moving forward. Are there ways to prolong the interventions associated with hashtags like #YouOkSis, so that they continue to have an impact in the material world, and not only when they are trending?

## **2.5 Memorialization, Digital Curation, State Violence & The Precarious Nature of Black Motherhood**

Black motherhood has always been threatened in America from slavery to the present as "the theft, regulation, and destruction of black women's sexual and reproductive capacities would also define the afterlife of slavery."<sup>308</sup> The murder of Korryn Gaines further reveals that

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<sup>308</sup> Saidiya Hartman, "The Belly of the World: A Note on Black Women's labors," *Souls* 18, no. 1 (2016): 166-173.

state violence is a reproductive issue.<sup>309</sup> Gaines spoke openly about the trauma that she experienced in the aftermath of her miscarriage due to a previous encounter with police violence.<sup>310</sup> State violence is, in fact, a gendered experience, and Black motherhood reveals the complexities in the way that we identify state violence.<sup>311</sup> Black women have to fight against multiple intersecting points of oppression: gender, race, and socioeconomic status simultaneously as they live in a society that denigrates them. When they are victims of state violence, they are also forced to subject themselves to a criminal justice system that has shown, time and time again, that they have no intention of protecting them. This is most evident in the way that Black women experience state-sanctioned violence.

State-sanctioned violence against pregnant Black women still continues in our contemporary moment, and it reveals the way that the legacy of slavery still impacts the lives of Black women. This is demonstrative of the way that race and gender impact Black women's experiences when they engage with the criminal justice system. In this section, I turn to the gestational violence that Black women are still experiencing to reject projections of Black motherhood onto deceased Black women. In the aftermath of a Black women's death by state or other forms of violence, comments on digital platforms reveal the way in which motherhood is projected onto deceased Black women. Black motherhood will not prevent or protect Black women from experiencing state violence. In fact, visibly pregnant Black women

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<sup>309</sup> Leah Iman Aniefuna, M. Amari Aniefuna, and Jason M. Williams, "Creating and Undoing Legacies of Resilience: Black Women as Martyrs in the Black Community Under Oppressive Social Control," *Women & Criminal Justice* 30, no. 5 (2020): 356-373.

<sup>310</sup> A. A. P. Forum (2019, February 1). "Intersectionality matters!"

<sup>311</sup> Breea C. Willingham, "Black Women and State-Sanctioned Violence: A History of Victimization and Exclusion," *Canadian Review of American Studies* 48, no. 1 (2018): 77-94.

often become targets of state violence because of it.<sup>312</sup> Due to a legacy of racial inequality in the United States, Black people are concentrated in communities that are heavily surveilled and policed. This, unfortunately, leads to hostile interactions with police officers.

State violence is clear-cut and easily recognized when it comes to police violence, but there are other ways in which the state fails Black mothers, and other state agencies that produce Black death must also be included when we discuss Black women and state violence. State violence is not limited to the police, but it is also present in the carceral system,<sup>313</sup> the public school system,<sup>314</sup> child welfare agencies,<sup>315</sup> and state hospitals.<sup>316</sup> The intersections of gender and race make it highly apparent that Black women endure the brunt of societal hardships within a white patriarchal society, and the violence they experience when they are pregnant further demonstrates their vulnerability.<sup>317</sup> The case of Tiffany Wright, a fifteen-

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<sup>312</sup> Jaquelyn L. Jahn, "Gestational Exposure to Fatal Police Violence and Pregnancy Loss in US Core Based Statistical Areas, 2013–2015." *EClinicalMedicine* 36 (2021): 100901.

<sup>313</sup> Lauren Kuhlik and Carolyn Sufrin, "Pregnancy, Systematic Disregard and Degradation, and Carceral Institutions," *Harvard Law & Policy Review* 14 (2019): 417. Pregnant Black women are subjected to harsher punishments which extends the legacy of slavery with Black women giving birth while shackled and confined, only to have their children taken away from them.

<sup>314</sup> Hannah L. F. Cooper and Mindy Fullilove, "Excessive Police Violence as a Public Health Issue," *Journal of Urban Health* 93, no. 1 (2016): 1-7. Black children in public schools are heavily policed and even when this abuse of power is recorded, it rarely results in decreasing or eliminating the police presence in schools.

<sup>315</sup> Dorothy E. Roberts, "Prison, Foster Care, and the Systemic Punishment of Black Mothers," *UCLA Law Review*, 59 (2011): 1474. Black pregnant teens rarely receive adequate care as they navigate multiple systems in which they experience violence stemming from public schools, foster/group homes, social workers and hospitals.

<sup>316</sup> Stephanie R. M. Bray and Monica R. McLemore, "Demolishing the Myth of the Default Human that is Killing Black Mothers," *Frontiers in Public Health* 9 (2021): 630. The death of Black mothers and their children is at an all time high in the United States as many agencies struggle to find a way to manage medical racism that they are subjected to.

<sup>317</sup> Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Say Her Name: Resisting Police Brutality Against Black Women," Columbia Law School Scholarship Archive, 2015, [https://scholarship.law.columbia.edu/faculty\\_scholarship/3226/](https://scholarship.law.columbia.edu/faculty_scholarship/3226/).

year-old pregnant teenager that was placed in the foster care system, reveals the myriad of ways pregnant Black women experience state violence.

Wright was eight months pregnant when she was murdered by her foster brother at a bus stop in North Carolina in 2009 (she was placed in his care after the death of their foster mother). It was also suspected that her foster brother, Anthony Mitchell, murdered Tiffany because she was pregnant with his baby. Wright had confided in a social worker and school officials who also suspected that Mitchell was having sex with her. Tiffany Wright was failed by multiple state agencies, which ultimately resulted in her death. The first line of defense that should have intervened was her social worker. While the public school did reach out to the appropriate agency, they did not remove her from the home when it was clear that she was being sexually abused. Tiffany Wright's death should also be included as an example of state violence. It is clear that women don't experience state violence in the same way as men, but that does not stop them from experiencing similar fates. Tragically, in the aftermath of Tiffany's death, the community and the state were sensitive to his needs as a Black man unjustly treated in the criminal justice system with prior convictions. He received two years for violating his probation.<sup>318</sup>

Tiffany Wright's life is emblematic of the issues that are currently facing Black women and girls (and this violence is increased if these girls are poor, queer, or wards of the State). While interpersonal violence statistics usually take into account violence between romantic partners, I wonder how many cases of interpersonal violence like Wright's slip through the cracks of what should be included as an extension of state violence. Black women and girls

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<sup>318</sup> Beth Richie, *Arrested Justice: Black Women, Violence, and America's Prison Nation* (New York: New York University Press, 2012): 30.

like Tiffany can be preyed upon within the home, abandoned by state agencies, and trapped within societal structures that leave them especially vulnerable. The similarities between Salau's story at the start of this chapter and Wright's murder are strikingly similar when we examine how young, poor Black women and girls are left with very few options. While the circumstances surrounding their deaths are often shared on social media with vigor and with the intent of using their lives (and their demise) as a cautionary tale, I wonder what it would take to get this level of concern and care while they were still living. The myth of Black women and girls as superhuman, or even magical, unfortunately, uplifts them beyond the realm of humanity. Black women and girls will never be safe in a world that views them as anything other than human.

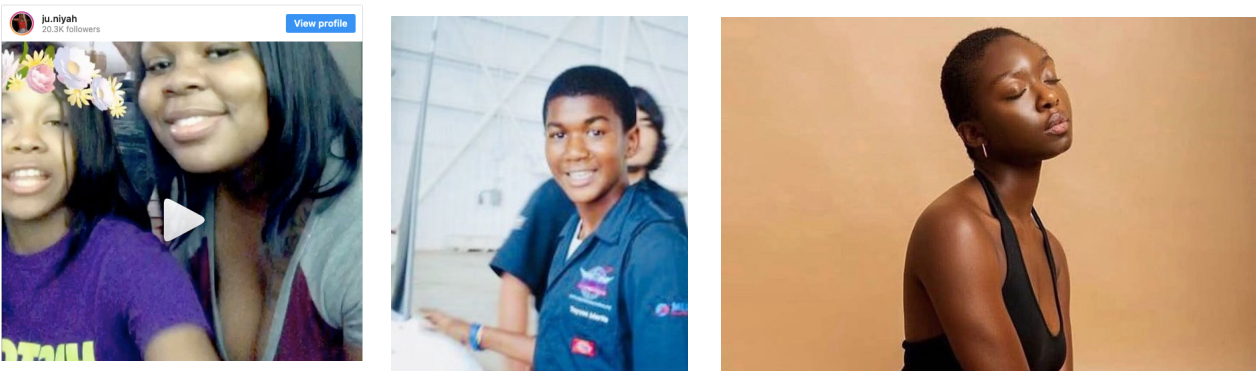
The memorialization of Black women in digital spaces works to remind the public of their humanity, and it makes the violence against them visible because it often happens in private.<sup>319</sup> Black women's memorialization of slain Black women keeps the past alive through this visual representation on Instagram and Twitter. These online "monuments" contribute to the construction of postmemory by creating a site where people can organize around a shared traumatic event. This is what also took place during the Emmett Till Generation and the circulation of their scrapbooks amongst each other. The circulation of their scrapbooks facilitated their discussions on the violence that they witnessed, which ultimately fueled their activism and acted as a catalyst for their involvement in civil rights.

On Instagram and Twitter, the curated images and digital "monuments" for victims give us a sense of who was lost: from Sabrina Fulton's Instagram when she shared that smiling

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<sup>319</sup> Shatema Threadcraft, "Making Black Femicide Visible," *Philosophical Topics* 49, no. 1 (2021): 35-44.

photo of Trayvon Martin at the Barington Irving Summer Youth Flight Program, to that adorable video that Ju'Niyah Palmer shared with her sister Breonna Taylor Smiling and being silly with a cute flower-crown filter, to a serene photo of Oluwatoyin Salau. On social media, users of these platforms highlight the circumstances of a victim's death and the beauty of their lives in simultaneity. They are intentionally curating and constructing digital memorials that should be examined as an extension of Black people's involvement in scrapbooking and print culture.<sup>320</sup> The process of collection and circulation on digital spaces does have its limits in terms of the possibility/threat of digital suppression, but there is a culture of collecting and dissemination on digital platforms that invites further investigation into the ways that uniquely mirror some of the practices and aesthetics of scrapbooking practices.



**Figure 2.1: From left to right, Breonna Taylor and her sister, Trayvon Martin at aviation camp, and Oluwatoyin Salau.**

Digital photo curation on these platforms can circulate through multiple interfaces since these images can be circulated and disseminated with a single button that allows you to share seamlessly between TikTok, Facebook, and Instagram. This assemblage of images shared across social media networks does not shift the view from the circumstances that ended

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<sup>320</sup> Joycelyn Moody and Howard Rambsy, "Guest Editors' Introduction: African American Print Cultures," *MELUS* (2015): 1-11.

their lives. Rather, it works to provide a complete picture of the lives that they had lived. Scrapbooking has been discussed as a means of art therapy to help people mourn their loved ones in bereavement groups,<sup>321</sup> but in the context of digital assemblage, this compilation of images is simultaneously telling the stories of the individual while capturing a very specific moment in time. When we examine the individual accounts of strangers and the public Instagram pages of family members of the victims of state and extrajudicial violence as a whole, almost as if each account is a piece of a larger puzzle, these stories contribute to a larger picture that depicts a historical moment of tumultuous violence. Instagram and the way that images are assembled (if they remain undisturbed) can function as a time capsule. Scrapbooks are also "assembled like a time capsule in book format."<sup>322</sup> They are these physically deteriorating mini archives. They sometimes exist in secret, something that relatives stumble upon in the aftermath of the death of a loved one, like Lori D. Johnson's grandmother's Emmett Till scrapbook.

Emory University Library's digitization project is dedicated to the preservation of scrapbooks via digitization. The project, deeply invested in "how people record their memories,"<sup>323</sup> is related to the modern mode of Black preservation of important memories today, which often takes place on TikTok or Instagram. From milestones such as college acceptance to the unspeakable traumas that are witnessed, life is documented in images and

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<sup>321</sup> Mary Kohut, "Making Art From Memories: Honoring Deceased Loved Ones Through a Scrapbooking Bereavement Group," *Art Therapy* 28, no. 3 (2011): 123-131.

<sup>322</sup> Ann Frellsen, Kim Norman, and Brian Methot, "Scraps of Memories, Shards of Time: Preserving the African American Scrapbook Collection of Emory University Libraries, a Save America's Treasures Grant Project," *The Book and Paper Group Annual* 33, no. 2014 (2014): 26-34.

<sup>323</sup> Ann Frellsen, Kim Norman, and Brian M, "Scraps of Memories, Shards of Time: Preserving the African American Scrapbook Collection of Emory University Libraries, a Save America's Treasures grant project," *The Book and Paper Group Annual* 33, no. 2014 (2014): 26-34

video on these platforms, with each account functioning as a digital scrapbook. The most recent digital memorials on Instagram are flooded with images of Breonna Taylor, Oluwatoyin Salau, and George Floyd, all of whom were murdered in 2020, a moment of social and political unrest that inextricably links the lives of two people who were murdered by state violence and a BLM activist who protested the very violence that took their lives. Gender, unfortunately, impacts the way that these digital memorials unfold and shape the way that Black women are remembered in these spaces. One of the ways that gender impacts the way that these memorials are constructed is how female victims are not only portrayed as young women whose lives were tragically cut short, but are often portrayed as potential mothers lost. However, we have seen how motherhood does not insulate Black women from violence.

It is also important that we resist the desire to project motherhood onto the deceased victims of racist/gendered/state violence during our memorialization of them. When people speak of deceased Black women such as Breonna Taylor or Oluwatoyin Salau, they often say that they died before having the chance to become mothers. If the case of Korryn Gaines has taught us anything, it has demonstrated that pregnancy further complicates and increases the way that Black women experience state violence. We also know that Black children further complicate the ways in which they and their mothers experience violence. Motherhood cannot save Black women, and it is incapable of protecting Black children.<sup>324</sup>

Black children have been and continue to be victims of racist/state violence, and due to contemporary technology, the effects of that are detrimental. "Race-centered violence kills

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<sup>324</sup> Nathaniel Bryan, "Remembering Tamir Rice and other Black Boy Victims: Imagining Black Playcrit Literacies Inside and Outside Urban Literacy Education," *Urban Education* 56.5 (2021): 744-771.



Black children on a daily basis by either murdering them in the streets—taking their bodies or murdering their spirits—taking their souls." Black children are subjected to violence through the over-policing of their neighborhoods and the over-policing of their bodies in schools. Educational Theory scholar Bettina L. Love states that Black children experience "spirit murdering within a school context" due to the lack of "inclusion, protection, safety, nurturance, and acceptance because of fixed, yet fluid and moldable, structures of racism."<sup>325</sup> Black children's experiences with state violence as victims and witnesses in their communes, in their schools, and on their smartphones have ultimately produced an unprecedented mental health crisis among Black youth.

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<sup>325</sup> Bettina L. Love, "Anti-Black State Violence, Classroom Edition: The Spirit Murdering of Black Children," *Journal of Curriculum and Pedagogy* 13, no. 1 (2016): 22-25.



## Chapter 3: The Kids Aren't Alright

Across racial barriers, American children are no strangers to violence.<sup>326</sup> For Black children, this exposure to violence is further intensified due to structural racism in this country that gave birth to segregation ordinances and redlining.<sup>327</sup> Because of this, young Black people are often relegated into communities of lower socioeconomic backgrounds, which often correlates with an increased police presence in their communities. This also increases the ways in which they are surveilled, as well as the likelihood that they will experience state violence at an earlier age in comparison to non-black children.<sup>328</sup> Young Black people are growing up in a world where not even school can provide a moment of respite from either intentional or unintentional instances of anti-blackness.<sup>329</sup> School is also the space where Black children are most likely to be subjected to repeated instances of state violence.<sup>330</sup> While there is a significant body of scholarship that addresses the history that young Black people have in relation to racialized and/or state violence, it is important that as technology develops

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<sup>326</sup> Jane F. Knapp, "The Impact of Children Witnessing Violence," *Pediatric Clinics of North America* 45, no. 2 (1998): 355-364. This early study mainly focuses on children (the study doesn't specify race) witnessing violence within their communities, and in their homes. This study is useful for thinking of how general violence in the U.S. such as mass school shootings like Sandy Hook and Columbine impacts children. If we take this study a step further and apply it to the ways in which Black children experience and witness violence, particularly racialized violence, it becomes apparent that we need different definitions to speak to these experiences.

<sup>327</sup> Mark Percy, "Redlining": Teaching About Racial Residential Segregation," *Virginia Social Science Journal* 50 (2015).

<sup>328</sup> Crystal Lynn Webster, *Beyond the Boundaries of Childhood: African American Children in the Antebellum North* (Raleigh-Durham University of North Carolina Press, 2021).

<sup>329</sup> Gloria Boutte and Nathaniel Bryan, "When will Black Children be Well? Interrupting Anti-Black Violence in Early Childhood Classrooms and Schools," *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood* 22, no. 3 (2021): 232-243.

<sup>330</sup> Love, "Anti-Black State Violence, Classroom Edition."

and it becomes further ingrained into their everyday lives, that future scholarship considers and includes the impact of Black witnessing and engaging with digital platforms on Black youth.

Technology, via smartphones, tablets, laptops, etc. is a significant part of their social development, and Black youth, even if they are fortunate enough to escape experiencing the aforementioned instances of anti-Blackness firsthand, they are growing up in the era of the digital age. There have been and will, unfortunately, continue to be digital witnesses to scenes of disturbing racialization and state violence. They were born into a world in which the internet was a given, automatically shaping the ways in which they navigate, engage with, document, and interpret the world they live in.<sup>331</sup> While this has provided them with the opportunity to connect and create communities and spaces that have been important to their social development,<sup>332</sup> it also means that they have grown up with access to technology that has allowed them to witness, via streaming, via digital platforms such as Facebook or Instagram live, murders of Black people, of death in progress, in near real-time.<sup>333</sup> Black children are in a unique position when it comes to their experiences, both documenting and bearing witness to racialized violence, not just in digital spaces but in the material world as

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<sup>331</sup> Sarah Jensen Racz, "Parenting in the Digital Age: Urban Black Youth's Perceptions About Technology-Based Communication With Parents," *Journal of Family Studies* 23, no. 2 (2017): 198-214.

<sup>332</sup> Lauren Grimes. "The Value of Black Lives."

<sup>333</sup> Code Switch, "A Decade of Watching Black People Die," NPR, May 31, 2020. <https://www.npr.org/2020/05/29/865261916/a-decade-of-watching-black-people-die>. In July 2016 the deaths of both Philando Castile and Alton Sterling were streamed on the internet via citizen journalism and Facebook. Philando Castile's girlfriend Diamond Reynolds streamed his murder via a hostile traffic stop which prompted her to record. Alton Sterling's death was filmed by multiple bystanders.

well. This chapter will focus specifically on young Black people's experiences of witnessing both state and racialized violence in relation to their interactions with digital spaces.

### 3.1 "This Is For The Kids Who Die:"<sup>334</sup> The Black Youth Mental Health Crisis

There is currently a national crisis concerning the suicide rates of Black youth.<sup>335</sup> This is concerning because while Black people have long dealt with inequality, housing/food insecurity, higher rates of unemployment, and racism, their suicide rates have been consistently low. The sudden uptick in suicides has created an additional public health crisis in which Black children are now, for the first time in history, more likely to die from suicide than their white peers.<sup>336</sup> Most of the research that is dedicated to this issue is focused on quantifying, predicting, and procuring accurate numbers concerning the suicides of Black youth, but due to the fact that this is a recent phenomenon, many of these studies acknowledge that the underlying causes can be a myriad of factors while understanding that there is also an urgent need to address the cause(s).<sup>337</sup>

In other words, there is very little research concerning the epidemiology of suicide amongst Black youth. While this project is not a psychological study, it is important that

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<sup>334</sup> Langston Hughes and Arna W. Bontemps, *The Poetry of the Negro, 1746-1949: An Anthology* (Garden City, N.Y: Doubleday, 1949). The title of this subsection comes from the first line of the Langston Hughes poem "Kids Who Die."

<sup>335</sup> Jocelyn I. Meza, Katie Patel, and Eraka Bath, "Black Youth Suicide Crisis: Prevalence Rates, Review of Risk and Protective Factors, and Current Evidence-Based Practices," *Focus* 20, no. 2 (2022): 197-203.

<sup>336</sup> Joshua Gordon, "Addressing the Crisis of Black Youth Suicide," *National Institute of Mental Health*, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 22 Sept. 2020, <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/about/director/messages/2020/addressing-the-crisis-of-black-youth-suicide>.

<sup>337</sup> A. H. Sheftall, F. Vakil, D. A. Ruch, R. C. Boyd, M. A. Lindsey, and J. A. Bridge, "Black Youth Suicide: Investigation of Current Trends and Precipitating Circumstances," *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, U.S. National Library of Medicine, <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/34509592/>.

future scholarship investigating causation in the increase of suicides amongst Black youth consider accumulative trauma and anxiety via racialized violence and digital witnessing. That is not to say that this chapter is equipped to mark digital racialized trauma as *the* sole cause, but that it is specifically examining the possibility of a *correlation* that should be included due to the impact that witnessing has and the potential that modern technology has created by giving young Black people access to a proliferation of racial trauma. While the previous chapter discusses digital witnessing and how it has been instrumental in creating community amongst Black women despite its limitations, it is important to examine its current and continued impact on Black youth. Witnessing and documenting death in this era, while tragic, has shown that these tragedies also have the potential to create and further cement digital communities.<sup>338</sup> It is important to recognize the impact and impetus for social change that has been made possible within these spaces, but it is equally important to examine, investigate, and attempt to name the different formulations of racial terror and trauma that are made possible as our technological advancements continuously improve.

There are clear disparities when it comes to the ways in which Black youth gain access to the internet.<sup>339</sup> Young Black people primarily access the internet through their phones,<sup>340</sup> and they prefer using their phones over other devices. Despite the fact that most young Black people do not have internet service in the home, this is not an obstacle. Young Black people

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<sup>338</sup> Jennifer Earl, Thomas V. Maher, and Jennifer Pan, "The Digital Repression of Social Movements, Protest, and Activism: A Synthetic Review," *Science Advances* 8, no. 10 (2022).

<sup>339</sup> Brendesha M. Tynes and Kimberly J. Mitchell, "Black Youth Beyond the Digital Divide."

<sup>340</sup> As time progresses I would argue that "traditional access" to the internet in the home is becoming less traditional as society transitions to public Wi-Fi.

are the most active group on social media platforms,<sup>341</sup> even if they do not have what is defined by sociological scholars as "traditional access" to the internet.<sup>342</sup> Black youth have been the driving force behind popular culture and internet trends, even though they are rarely credited or rewarded for their content.<sup>343</sup> There is an undeniable presence of Black children, teens, and young people creating spaces and content on digital platforms. Black youth have created many of the trends that are present in spaces such as TikTok, despite the fact that their white counterparts benefit from the theft of cultural productions and creative labor.<sup>344</sup> But TikTok is a relatively new social media platform,<sup>345</sup> so most of the events in which state or extrajudicial violence is witnessed, recorded, and disseminated (for example, in the case of Eric Garner and George Floyd) tend to be posted on platforms such as Facebook or Instagram.<sup>346</sup>

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<sup>341</sup> Monica Anderson and Jingjing Jiang, "Teens, Social Media & Technology 2018," Pew Research Center 31 (2018): 1673-1689.

<sup>342</sup> V. J. Rideout, K. Clark, and K. A. Scott, "The Digital Lives of African American Tweens, Teens, and Parents," [https://cgest.asu.edu/sites/default/files/2021-02/digital\\_lives\\_report\\_0.pdf](https://cgest.asu.edu/sites/default/files/2021-02/digital_lives_report_0.pdf).

<sup>343</sup> Ali Johnson, "Copyrighting TikTok Dances: Choreography in the Internet Age," *Washington Law Review* 96 (2021): 1225.

<sup>344</sup> Yvonne Ile, "How Black Creators Stopped The Clock on TikTok," *INSAM Journal of Contemporary Music, Art and Technology* 1, no. 8 (2022): 60-79.

<sup>345</sup> TikTok was launched in 2016 (2014 if you count its first iteration released in China) and it is most popular with the 13–18-year-old demographic. When I discuss social platforms used in this chapter I am referencing Facebook and Instagram because I am determining Black youth as what has been named the Trayvon Generation. The generation that was born with social media already in existence, which is a demographic that is much larger than what most researchers would determine as Black youth. Also, TikTok did not become the most used app until between 2019 and 2020. Due to the structure of the app (audio and video stitching/editing is its primary use) it is not a platform that is often used for witnessing (as it is defined in this project).

<sup>346</sup> They are owned by the same company, so it is easy to share information across these platforms.

Their cultural productions and contributions that they have created have been invaluable to American culture. Black youth have an obvious presence online, and it is only natural to question how our current culture of documenting and disseminating racialized violence affects them. If young Black people clearly have an impact on digital culture, it can be assumed that due to their significant online presence, they are also deeply impacted by what permeates and circulates within these spaces, even when they are participants.

Young Black people today are familiar with digital witnessing. In fact, their contributions and online activity via civilian journalism have been invaluable.<sup>347</sup> However, the trauma that they endure in the process and the proximity to violence via digital witnessing need to be addressed in scholarly discussions concerning young Black people and digital witnessing.<sup>348</sup> Also, the labor of Black girls and their contributions as witnesses need to be highlighted.<sup>349</sup> They are also subjected to additional racialized trauma, oftentimes left without the resources to navigate it. We have to think of Diamond Reynolds being comforted by her four-year-old daughter after witnessing her father's murder.<sup>350</sup> Seventeen-year-old Darnella Frazier also recorded George Floyd's final moments and shared them on her Facebook page,

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<sup>347</sup> Richardson, "Bearing Witness While Black."

<sup>348</sup> Kenya Downs, "When Black Death Goes Viral, It Can Trigger PTSD-like Trauma," PBS, July, 23 2016, [www.pbs.org/newshour/nation/black-pain-gone-viral-racism-graphic-videos-can-create-ptsd-like-trauma](http://www.pbs.org/newshour/nation/black-pain-gone-viral-racism-graphic-videos-can-create-ptsd-like-trauma).

<sup>349</sup> Lauren Leigh Kelly, "A Snapchat Story: How Black Girls Develop Strategies for Critical resistance in School," *Learning, Media and Technology* 43, no. 4 (2018): 374-389.

<sup>350</sup> Wendy Kozol, "Importance of Seeing the Trauma: The Video of Diamond Reynolds and Daughter in the Back of a Police Car," Oberlin College, 2017, [https://digitalcommons.oberlin.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=4851&context=faculty\\_schol](https://digitalcommons.oberlin.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=4851&context=faculty_schol). Her young daughter told her mother "I don't want you to get shot." after the police murdered her father.



actively opposing mainstream media's depiction of the incident.<sup>351</sup> It is clear that young Black people are forced to navigate the world differently from their non-black counterparts. Their trauma is one that teaches them that they must learn to manage their own fears to protect and bear witness for others. When Young Black people interact with digital spaces, they must also learn how to navigate a digital terrain of proliferating trauma. In other words, Black people, and young Black people specifically, since they have the largest digital presence and impact, are also consuming large amounts of trauma-inducing media, leading them to experience a kind of digital post-traumatic stress disorder.

Post-traumatic stress from racism is only recognized by the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Health Disorders<sup>352</sup> when it involves a "direct" traumatic experience with racism, such as a physical assault.<sup>353</sup> However, racism and the trauma that comes with it are not solely physical. It is important that in order to accurately address how people, and in this chapter's specific focus, how young Black people are impacted by the racial violence that they witness, demonstrate that racism's trauma is not a singular event; it is cumulative.<sup>354</sup> If the DSM-5 in and of itself is not equipped to accurately diagnose racially induced PTSD, this can create difficulties when it comes to future research concerning the troubling increase of suicides in young Black people. Young Black people are most likely to experience both state

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<sup>351</sup> Stephan A. Schwartz, "Police Brutality and Racism in America," *Explore* 16, no. 5 (2020): 280. Darnella Frazier was visibly shaken in the aftermath of Floyd's murder by the Minneapolis Police Department.

<sup>352</sup> This book is also referred to as the DSM-5. I will refer to it as such moving forward. It is the manual that governs how mental disorders are diagnosed.

<sup>353</sup> Monnica T. Williams, "Assessing Racial Trauma Within a DSM-5 Framework: The UConn Racial/Ethnic Stress & Trauma Survey," *Practice Innovations* 3, no. 4 (2018): 242.

<sup>354</sup> Zuleka Henderson, "In Their Own Words: How Black Teens Define Trauma," *Journal of Child & Adolescent Trauma* 12, no. 1 (2017): 141-151.

violence and racialized violence, and Black girls are most likely to experience gendered violence as well.<sup>355</sup> If the DSM-5 is not constructed to accurately address the ways that young Black people experience racism both in the material and digital world, it will lead to further complications in assessing proper diagnoses for young Black people. Black people (and, thus, young Black people) are positioned on the outside of the DSM-5, further complicating diagnoses and adding additional barriers including the lack of access that Black people have to mental health services.<sup>356</sup> Even the most competent mental health professional can face difficulties in caring for Black patients if they lack the cultural competency to address their specific needs.<sup>357</sup>

The implications of these psychological studies are clear, as the scholarship in this area cites that the precursors to suicide are not limited to, but most likely involve, one or a combination of the following: "trauma, anxiety, and depression."<sup>358</sup> In December 2019, the Congressional Black Caucus released "Ring The Alarm: The Crisis of Black Youth Suicide in America," which primarily functioned as a call to action (to the National Institute of Mental Health) to fund more Black scientists to study these troubling trends.<sup>359</sup> It is clear that the

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<sup>355</sup> Shannon Malone Gonzalez, "Black Girls and the Talk? Policing, Parenting, and the Politics of Protection," *Social Problems* 69, no. 1 (2022): 22-38.

<sup>356</sup> Katherine Kirkinis, "Racism, Racial Discrimination, and Trauma: A Systematic Review of the Social Science Literature," *Ethnicity & Health* 26, no. 3 (2021): 392-412.

<sup>357</sup> The Association of Black Psychologists, *FamilyCare, CommunityCare and Selfcare Tool Kit: Healing in the Face*, July 2016, [d3i6fh83elv35t.cloudfront.net/newshour/app/uploads/2016/07/07-20-16-EEC-Trauma-Response-Community-and-SelfCare-TookKit-1.pdf](https://d3i6fh83elv35t.cloudfront.net/newshour/app/uploads/2016/07/07-20-16-EEC-Trauma-Response-Community-and-SelfCare-TookKit-1.pdf).

<sup>358</sup> Dijonee Talley, "Understanding Situational Factors and Conditions Contributing to Suicide Among Black Youth and Young Adults," *Aggression and Violent Behavior* 58 (2021): 101614.

<sup>359</sup> Emergency Task Force on Black Youth Suicide and Mental Health, "Ring the Alarm: The Crisis of Black Youth Suicide in America," Congressional Black Caucus Emergency Task Force, 2018.

Congressional Black Caucus recognized that there was a cultural issue and divide in the way that Black mental health was being handled. The Black Congressional Caucus' report highlights the importance of acknowledging that Black youth need a mental health assessment and approach that addresses the specific challenges that they face. The first chapter of this dissertation examines the experiences of the Emmett Till Generation, which revealed that young Black people witnessing and experiencing racial trauma is not new, but today, in what scholar Elizabeth Alexander has named The Trayon Generation, the way in which they experience and participate as witnesses has changed. And the trauma they experience has been magnified.

### **3.2 Black Youth, Digital Spaces, and Depression**

For Black youth, finding a way to escape the circulation of violent imagery when Black death is trending can be nearly impossible. As additional digital users post and repost with additional commentary in conjunction with news updates, it can completely overwhelm the digital timeline and, thus, the user of the platform. For other social media users, this is simply a nuisance, but for young Black people, there is no place to hide from trauma on the internet.<sup>360</sup> If trauma, anxiety, and depression are cited as some of the major causes leading to suicide in young Black people,<sup>361</sup> it is evident that witnessing racialized murders via state violence or otherwise can contribute to preexisting anxiety or be an anxiety-inducing factor in

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<sup>360</sup> Brendesha Tynes, "Race-related Traumatic Events Online and Mental Health Among Adolescents of Color," *Journal of Adolescent Health* 65, no. 3 (2019): 371-377.

<sup>361</sup> Arielle H. Sheftall, "Black Youth Suicide: Investigation of Current Trends and Precipitating Circumstances," *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry* 61, no. 5 (2022): 662-675.

and of itself.<sup>362</sup> When Black youth are witnesses to police shootings, feelings of fear and anxiety are further exacerbated. When Young Black people engage with these recorded interactions with law enforcement, it further intensifies anxiety-ridden ideations when they feel like they cannot trust the people who are supposed to keep them safe."<sup>363</sup> Racism is transformed into an inescapable experience. Not only are they witnessing racialized state violence in digital spaces, but it is combined with everyday instances of racism. Daily micro-aggressions and discrimination can eventually become too heavy to bear, further contributing to feelings of isolation and alienation. Young Black people have to experience and navigate racial trauma in digital spaces, which contributes to digital PTSD. Each viral murder of Black people adds to the anxieties already present in young Black people's lives. In addition to the fact that anxiety is considered to be a significant factor in the suicides of Young Black people, the digital experiences of young Black people inevitably produce anxiety. The digital transmission of trauma is an integral part of the online experience for Black youth's frequent engagement with digital platforms.<sup>364</sup>

When Black death trends on social media platforms, the updated statuses and comment sections reveal that Black people are experiencing mental and psychological anguish with the frequent dissemination and circulation of racialized violence.<sup>365</sup> It is not surprising to see

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<sup>362</sup> Chad Posick and Akiv Dawson, "The Health Outcomes of Direct and Witnessed Interactions with the Police: Do Race and Ethnicity Matter?," *Journal of Adolescent Health* 69, no. 2 (2021): 183-184.

<sup>363</sup> Aprile Benner, "The Toll of Racial/Ethnic Discrimination on Adolescents' Adjustment," *Child Development Perspectives* 11, no. 4 (2017): 251-256.

<sup>364</sup> Anderson and Jingjing Jiang, "Teens, Social Media & Technology, 2018."

<sup>365</sup> Jocelyn R. Smith Lee and Michael A. Robinson, "'That's my Number One Fear in Life. It's the Police': Examining Young Black Men'S Exposures to Trauma and Loss Resulting From Police Violence and Police Killings," *Journal of Black Psychology* 45, no. 3 (2019): 143-184.

young Black people state that they are taking a social media hiatus, as well as pleas from other digital users asking others to be mindful when sharing these images/videos. These reactions, ranging from anger, grief, and sadness, can suggest something deeper lurking beneath the surface.<sup>366</sup> It is obviously upsetting to watch someone, or in the case of young Black people, who have been watching recordings of Black people dying for years.<sup>367</sup> There is no "getting used to this" for young Black people. Each death that they witness, whether state violence or something else, chips away at their sanity. While witnessing is a duty that we have to each other, modern technology and the way in which we bear witness further contributes to a deterioration of mental health when Black death is trending.<sup>368</sup> The effects of witnessing via our devices on digital platforms can create symptoms of, and further contribute to depression, substance abuse, and, in some cases, psychosis.<sup>369</sup>

Interacting with digital spaces when Black death trends has been shown to culminate in anxiety, depression, and racial trauma for Black people on digital platforms. If young Black people are the dominant demographic on social media, it means that they are also consuming large amounts of traumatic media, watching people that look like them that are the same age as them be killed. They've been watching this kind of trauma for almost as long as they've

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<sup>366</sup> Raja Staggers-Hakim, "The Nation'S Unprotected Children and the Ghost of Mike Brown, or the Impact of National Police Killings on the Health and Social Development of African American Boys," *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment* 26, no. 3-4 (2016): 390-399.

<sup>367</sup> Felicia Campbell and Pamela Valera, "'The Only Thing New is the Cameras': A Study of US College Students 'Perceptions of Police Violence on Social Media,'" *Journal of Black Studies*, 51, no. 7 (2020): 654-670.

<sup>368</sup> Alyssa Flowers, "News: Depression and Anxiety Spiked Among," *The Washington Post*, June 12, 2020, [www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/search/research-news/10210/](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/search/research-news/10210/).

<sup>369</sup> Samuel R. Aymer, "'I Can'T Breathe': A Case Study—Helping Black Men Cope with Race-Related Trauma Stemming from Police Killing and Brutality," *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment* 26, no. 3-4 (2016): 367-376.

been alive. While the current scholarship surrounding Black youth discusses the impact of witnessing on Black youth, it primarily focuses on the impact that witnessing state violence has on Black men and boys. This scholarship has been important in articulating the mental impact that witnessing has on Black youth. However, it is important to acknowledge the cultural significance of witnessing Black culture and how witnessing has been changed and intensified via technology, further contributing to a kind of trauma that hasn't been experienced prior to the introduction of streaming technology, smartphones, and digital platforms. This must be examined as we also experience an increase in suicides in Black youth that we have not witnessed up until this moment. These trends should be studied in tandem with racial trauma in digital spaces. Even if causation is unfounded, a correlation between the two can assist in producing culturally relevant mode(s) of mental health intervention for Black youth. Digital witnessing via citizen journalism has proven to be necessary and will continue to be seen as a primary mode of evidence, but it is clear that the ramifications of digital witnessing impact those whose presence dominates digital spaces, and that is young Black people.

If "the greatest triumph is to live to tell and bear witness to the struggles of others" and recognize that "blood ties are not the only ties that bind,"<sup>370</sup> then young Black people are charged with heavy responsibility. Their command and creative use of digital spaces, as well as their cultural familiarity with postmemory, place them in a unique social position. This position is one in which they are the protectors. Black youth are "Captive Maternal"<sup>371</sup> in the

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<sup>370</sup> Elizabeth Alexander, *The Trayvon Generation* (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2022).

<sup>371</sup> Joy James, "The Womb of Western Theory: Trauma, Time Theft, and the Captive Maternal," *Carceral Notebooks* 12, no. 1 (2016): 253–296.

making. Only time will tell if current digital trends have permanently reversed the traditional relationship between parent and child. But it is now evident that "layered atop the never-ending anxiety of parenting, Black parents live with the truth that [they] cannot fully protect [their] children."<sup>372</sup> Young Black people who have grown up as digital witnesses, watching social media-based movements and hashtags like #BlackLivesMatter and #SayHerName<sup>373</sup> infiltrate their timelines again and again. With each new name in a similar situation, unfortunately, unfolds painful awareness of the fact that their parents cannot protect them.<sup>374</sup> With their knowledge of technology and digital spaces, they all have the ability to function as digital witnesses. With their citizen journalism, they are the ones that operate as protectors. This is a heavy but necessary burden to bear because they hope that in the event that it is their name that enters into the zeitgeist of these digital timelines and spaces, someone will do the same for them. This level of responsibility facing Black youth, in conjunction with the mental, emotional, and psychological labor needed to participate in digital witnessing on social media platforms, reveals the complexities, intricacies, and obstacles that they face when engaging with digital spaces. Social media is a space where despite difficulties in gaining access and having a minority population on digital spaces, young Black people still dominate digital

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<sup>372</sup> Alexander, *The Trayvon Generation*.

<sup>373</sup> Rema Reynolds and Darquillius Mayweather, "Recounting Racism, Resistance, and Repression: Examining the Experiences and# Hashtag Activism of College Students with Critical Race Theory and Counternarratives," *The Journal of Negro Education* 86, no. 3 (2017): 283-304.

<sup>374</sup> K. Mohrman and Mia Fischer, "Black Deaths Matter? Sousveillance and the Invisibility of Black Life," *Ada: A Journal of Gender, New Media, and Technology* 10 (2016): 1-13.

platforms,<sup>375</sup> so it is no surprise that they have been able to start movements through their mobilization of the media<sup>376</sup> via digital witnessing and civilian journalism. Digital witnessing is how young Black people exercise the act of care "because that's all that we can do, is care one by one by one."<sup>377</sup>

This act of care is embodied in the term "captive maternal," which emerges out of necessity in communities that have been devastated or effaced by the legacies of colonialism and chattel slavery.<sup>378</sup> While this kind of care is often feminized, captive maternals do not have to be women. Scholar Joy James defines captive maternals as "Black female, male, trans, or ungendered persons, feminized and socialized into caretaking within the legacy of racism and US democracy."<sup>379</sup> James highlights the life of Erica Garner as an example of a Captive Maternal. The loss of her father further mobilized her political activism, positioning her as a non-traditional political figure.<sup>380</sup> Erica Garner was "transformed into a courageous political operative for democratic values after the police killed her father."<sup>381</sup> She boldly fought against the violence inflicted by the NYPD, eventually dying from the daily stressors of combatting

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<sup>375</sup> AP-NORC, "Instagram and Snapchat are the Most Popular Social Networks for Teens; Black Teens are Most Active on Social Media, Messaging Apps," *The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research* (2017).

<sup>376</sup> Nora Gross, "# IfTheyGunnedMeDown: The Double Consciousness of Black Youth in Response to Oppressive Media," *Souls* 19, no. 4 (2017): 416-437.

<sup>377</sup> Patricia Saunders. "Defending the Dead, confronting the Archive: A Conversation with M. NourbeSe Philip," *Small Axe* 12, no. 2 (2008): 63-79.

<sup>378</sup> James, "The Womb of Western Theory."

<sup>379</sup> Ibid.

<sup>380</sup> Joy James, "Abolitionist and Ancestor: The Legacy of Erica Garner," *American Literary History* (April 2021): e27-39.

<sup>381</sup> Ibid.



racism mere months after giving birth.<sup>382</sup> While it might be too early to determine the potential for young Black people to operate as Captive Maternals in digital spaces, that labor has always been present. From Erica Garner's daughter using her body to cover the television when the media would circulate a video of her grandfather's death at the hands of NYPD<sup>383</sup> to four-year-old De'Anna surprisingly and calmly comforting her mother after she had just witnessed her father's murder by the police.<sup>384</sup> Black children are forced to maintain their composure, while adult police officers fail to have any when interacting with them.

Young Black people today have lived through the murders of Trayvon Martin, Tamir Rice, Aiyanna Stanley Jones, Adam Toledo, Ma'Khia Bryant, and so many others. It can be assumed that given the ways in which young Black people are exposed to death, they have also developed a different type of socialization when it comes to coping with death. In the case of Erica Garner and Diamond Reynolds' daughters, their trauma was secondary, and attending to their parents' needs was primary. While this shift in dynamics is not new, it will be interesting to see, as time progresses, if young Black people's engagement with digital platforms, witnessing, and citizen journalism will create potential spaces for alternate methods of care.

### **3.3 Darnella Frazier & The Weight of Digital Witnessing**

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<sup>382</sup> Ibid.

<sup>383</sup> Ibid.

<sup>384</sup> Elijah C. Watson, "The Composure of Black Children in the Face of Police Instability," Okayplayer, June 23, 2017, [www.okayplayer.com/originals/composure-black-children-face-police-instability-diamond-reynolds.html](http://www.okayplayer.com/originals/composure-black-children-face-police-instability-diamond-reynolds.html). In the aftermath of the murder of Philando Castille, De'Anna, their daughter, comforted her mother, Diamond Reynolds.

A year after the death of George Floyd, Darnella Frazier was awarded one of the most prestigious awards in journalism. In 2021 she received a Special Pulitzer Citation "for courageously recording the murder of George Floyd, a video that spurred protests against police brutality around the world, highlighting the crucial role of citizens in journalists' quest for truth and justice."<sup>385</sup> Her Pulitzer is an example of the importance of digital platforms and the role of citizen journalists. Darnella Frazier's recording and dissemination of George Floyd's murder at the hands of the Minneapolis police via Facebook not only spawned multiple protests but also a movement.

Darnella Frazier's labor went beyond that of digital witnessing, but she was also a legal witness on behalf of George Floyd during the trial of the Minneapolis officer who was responsible for his murder. Not only did Darnella Frazier record and disseminate Floyd's murder which became the catalyst that fueled a movement, but she also testified in court. Her contributions to this case and to citizen journalism are invaluable. While these contributions are now necessary and are part of the way that we collect evidence in this contemporary moment, it is important to discuss the trauma of witnessing and the way that digital spaces exacerbate trauma. Darnella Frazier's award reveals how a Black teenage girl can be held up as an example of courage to the American public, but she is also an example of the lived trauma of racism, as well as the weight of Black witnessing.

Darnella Frazier's experiences with witnessing reveal the obstacles that young Black people face in digital spaces. Witnessing is a necessary part of Black culture. However, it comes with a risk to one's physical and mental health. Feidin Santana, the young man from

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<sup>385</sup> The Pulitzer Prizes, 2021 Pulitzer Prize Winners," [www.pulitzer.org/winners/darnella-frazier](http://www.pulitzer.org/winners/darnella-frazier).

North Carolina who witnessed and recorded the shooting of Walter Scott, described his experiences in detail.<sup>386</sup> He still battles with depression from the incident, which comes from the very tangible fear of retribution from the police. Santana stated that he "never thought that" he "would be a witness" and that "he is still scared."<sup>387</sup> George Holiday, the man who recorded the infamous Rodney King beating, stated that he wonders if perhaps he would have been better off staying in bed instead of recording that night.<sup>388</sup> He stated that even after the officers were acquitted that he still received death threats. Holiday also claims that the media attention led to the dissolution of his marriage, and to this day, people refer to him as "the man that started the riots."<sup>389</sup> The one thing that all of the witnesses have in common is the fact that their lives have been forever changed by not only witnessing but disseminating these instances of violence. Darnella Frazier's experiences with witnessing have come with one of the highest journalistic honors but witnessing on digital platforms also comes at a cost.

The difference between the modes of witnessing employed by both Holiday and Santana is that for Holiday, his video was shared before the internet existed. Television functioned as the primary mode of dissemination. While Holiday is still haunted by his experience of witnessing, he did not have to contend with additional visibility on digital platforms. He was also an adult. That isn't to say that he isn't susceptible to trauma, but to

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<sup>386</sup> Steve Almasy, "Feidin Santana on S.C. Shooting: I Told Them What They Did Was an Abuse," CNN, April 13, 2015, [www.cnn.com/2015/04/09/us/south-carolina-witness-video/index.html](http://www.cnn.com/2015/04/09/us/south-carolina-witness-video/index.html).

<sup>387</sup> Andrea Salcedo, "Five Years before George Floyd, a Bystander Filmed Another Pivotal Police Killing. It Nearly Cost Him Everything," *The Washington Post*, April 21, 2021, [www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2021/04/21/chauvin-sentencing-feiden-santana-recording/](http://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2021/04/21/chauvin-sentencing-feiden-santana-recording/).

<sup>388</sup> Michael Keaton, "The Other Beating," *Los Angeles Times*, Feb. 19, 2006, [www.latimes.com/la-tm-holidayfeb19-story.html](http://www.latimes.com/la-tm-holidayfeb19-story.html).

<sup>389</sup> Ibid.

mark that adults are equipped with the mental capacity to process both these instances of violence, and Holiday, as an adult, still suffered from the trauma that comes with witnessing. Feidin Santana's witnessing of the Walter Scott shooting was disseminated on digital platforms and television, but not by Santana himself. Santana brought the video to the family directly, and they shared it. Both Santana and Holiday have discussed experiencing depressive episodes from what they witnessed, as well as anxiety stemming from the possibility of the police exacting revenge.<sup>390</sup>

The current body of scholarship that discusses witnessing is important for recognizing how traumatic these moments are and how they impact Black people. Frazier's experience as a witness on digital platforms is an important addition to the preexisting literature because her experience reveals the reciprocal nature of digital dissemination. In the same way that we have access to digital platforms, the public also has access to those who disseminate content.<sup>391</sup> While she recorded and shared this video for all of us to bear witness to what she saw that day, using her social media platform also made her a hyper-visible target, which further exacerbated the trauma she experienced.

While Darnella Frazier's experience was similar to both Holiday's and Santana's, as all three of them recorded instances of racialized violence, what makes her experience different is how accessible she is to the public due to digital platforms and how she is treated and targeted

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<sup>390</sup> Brenna Ehrlich, "Ramsey Orta, Man Who Filmed Eric Garner's Arrest, Has Been Released from Prison," *Rolling Stone*, June 9, 2020, [www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-news/ramsey-orta-eric-garner-prison-release-1011646/](http://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-news/ramsey-orta-eric-garner-prison-release-1011646/). Ramsey Orta, the man who recorded the murder of Eric Garner by the NYPD, claimed that he was often harassed and targeted by police. He also regretted being "involved" stating that the public scrutiny was too much to bear. "It put me in a messed up predicament." He also claimed that he was poisoned by correction officers while on Rikers Island, stating that they put rat poison in his food, and he was also slashed while imprisoned as well.

<sup>391</sup> Except for the cases where the person that submits a recording chooses to remain anonymous.

in the aftermath of sharing that recording. Another major difference is Darnella Frazier's age when she witnessed the murder of George Floyd at only seventeen. Her age is significant because it marks a generation of Black youth that have grown up with their formative years consisting of witnessing a steady stream of racialized violence. As I described in Chapter 1, digital platforms and their structure made access to witnessing this kind of violence at an increased frequency possible. This should be kept in mind when we discuss how this exposure informs the lived experiences of young Black people such as Darnella Frazier.<sup>392</sup> What they witness further contributes to a traumatic kind of social conditioning.<sup>393</sup>

This method of extracting and analyzing media is described by Stuart Hall as "decoding," which is "the level of connotation of the visual sign, of its contextual reference and positioning in different discursive fields of meaning and association and is the point where already-coded signs intersect with the deep semantic codes of a culture and take on additional more active ideological dimensions."<sup>394</sup> Multiple people can view a particular scene in the media, and they will interpret it or decode that media in different ways. Stuart Hall breaks down the encoding and decoding process into four stages:

1. Production, which is where encoding begins, is the creation of the object or message. The creator draws from society's dominant values, ideologies, and beliefs. It starts with "knowledge-in-use concerning the routines of production, technical skills, professional ideologies, institutional knowledge, definitions and assumptions, assumptions about the audience"<sup>395</sup> this is what ultimately forms the "production

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<sup>392</sup> Sherri Williams, "Stream of Sadness: Young Black Women's Racial Trauma, Police Brutality and Social Media," *Feminist Media Studies* 21, no. 8 (2021): 1270-1284. Williams' qualitative study on how young Black girls experience witnessing anti-Black violence was helpful in unpacking cultivation theory.

<sup>393</sup> George Gerbner, "Cultivation Analysis: An Overview," *Mass Communication and Society* 1, no. 3-4 (2017): 175-194.

<sup>394</sup> Stuart Hall, "Encoding—Decoding (1980)," in *Crime and Media* (New York: Routledge, 2019), 44-55.

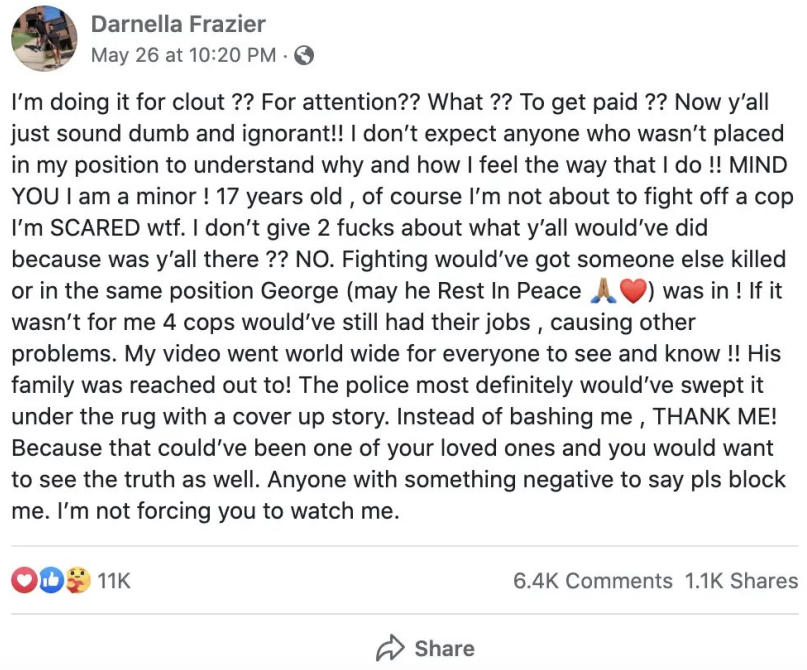
<sup>395</sup> *Ibid.*

structures of the television." However, there are also topics, treatments, agendas, events, personnel, images of the audience, "definitions of the situation" from other sources, and "other discursive formations" that create the overall political and socio-cultural structure.

2. Circulation is how the viewer perceives the message, whether it is visual or written. Also, the circulation of the event impacts perception. It comes into the home, and the viewer has to select the content.
3. Use: for the message to be understood, it requires an active recipient (which users of social media platforms are).
4. Reproduction is the interpretation of the message by the audience and what is done with that interpretation (decoding). When Frazier shared what she witnessed, she decoded the message and shared it with the intent that other receivers of the message act as witnesses as well.

Hall's method of decoding/encoding is relevant when discussing how young Black people have been born into a world where they have always been watching and always had access to Black people being murdered. Darnella Frazier was seventeen when she recorded the final moments of George Floyd, which means that she was only eleven at the time of Mike Brown's murder in Ferguson. She was ten when Renisha McBride was killed. She was nine years old when Trayvon Martin was killed. She has been watching and witnessing since she

was a child. When analyzing modern modes of witnessing, we must keep in mind that this kind of trauma is close to the surface because racial trauma is cumulative.



**Figure 3.1: The Facebook post that Darnella Frazier shared a day after her post of the recording of George Floyd's murder went viral.**

Darnella Frazier's witnessing takes place against a backdrop of inescapable racial trauma. Frazier has not appeared in any news interviews since her recording went viral. She only speaks through the statements/posts that she shares on her Facebook page. In the aftermath of her recording of George Floyd going viral, Frazier was subjected to online harassment from adults. The racial harassment due to her releasing her recording of Floyd's murder countered the dominant narrative that the police put forth—that he was responsible for his own death.<sup>396</sup> Outside the racist invective present in the comment sections, Frazier also

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<sup>396</sup> Philip Bump, "Analysis | How the First Statement from Minneapolis Police Made George Floyd's Murder Seem like George Floyd's Fault," *The Washington Post*, April 21, 2021, [www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/04/20/how-first-statement-minneapolis-police-made-george-floyds-murder-seem-like-george-floyds-fault/](http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/04/20/how-first-statement-minneapolis-police-made-george-floyds-murder-seem-like-george-floyds-fault/).

had to face bullying from within the Black community. That recording activated an entire history of other murders, and, at that moment, the trauma that lies just beneath the surface within postmemory deeply triggered Black people. Due to the fact that they were triggered by this, that feeling of helplessness was transformed into anger, and that anger led to them projecting an impossible task onto a teenager; they questioned why she did not "get involved."

It is not that recording, witnessing, and disseminating the video was not enough. It was actually too much for them to bear. They wanted her to somehow invoke a kind of power that we have never possessed. They did not simply want intervention when they asked Frazier to physically "do something;" they needed *something* to delay the inevitable. Frazier, instead of processing what she experienced the day before, was now forced to defend herself from these digital attacks. Becoming a witness to what became a pivotal moment in her life and historically on an accessible digital platform (Facebook) placed her in a position where she had to defend herself and her decision to post the video. Frazier was forced to justify her fears while reminding the public that she was a minor. Using a digital platform such as Facebook to document instances of state violence makes someone like Darnella Frazier hyper-visible. The structure of the platform gives Darnella Frazier the ability to make her post available to the public so that it has the maximum number of viewers, increasing the number of witnesses. However, making a post public on Facebook also makes the person who created the post vulnerable via the comments section.

When examining digital platforms, the power of the comments section is undeniable. However, comment sections have a reputation for being volatile digital spaces, and this can be



magnified when the content shared is polarizing.<sup>397</sup> In the case of Darnella Frazier, recording and disseminating the final moments of George Floyd on a digital platform made her vulnerable to the public, digital commentators, and mainstream media. In the previous chapter, the management of hate speech on digital platforms was revealed to be lacking, which proved that it was not a priority for digital platforms to create algorithms that can accurately monitor hate speech when programmers fail to accurately define what it is.<sup>398</sup> Comment sections are not only a place where people on digital platforms engage with the posted content, but it also becomes a space where words can and do transform into tangible harm in the material world, such as doxing.<sup>399</sup>

Chapter 2 also discusses how harm can go beyond doxing and result in physical harm.<sup>400</sup> It has also been proven that Black women carry the brunt of digital harassment, and misogynoir has forced Black women celebrities to take a hiatus from digital platforms for the sake of their mental health.<sup>401</sup> There has already been a precedent set on how Black women are handled in digital spaces, and this is the space that a Black teenage girl had to bear witness to while protecting herself from these attacks.

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<sup>397</sup> Simon Flueckiger, "The 2016 Global Report on Online Commenting-Wan-IFRA," *WAN*, Sept. 28, 2021, wan-ifra.org/insight/the-2016-global-report-on-online-commenting/.

<sup>398</sup> Andrew Jakubowicz, "Algorithms of Hate: How the Internet Facilitates the Spread of Racism and How Public Policy Might Help Stem the Impact," *Journal and Proceedings of the Royal Society of New South Wales* 151, no. 467/468 (2018).

<sup>399</sup> Noelle Steele, *Trolls Under the Bridge: Anonymous Online Comments and Gatekeeping in the Digital Realm* (Columbia, Ann Arbor: University of Missouri Press, 2013).

<sup>400</sup> In Chapter 2 of this dissertation, there is a brief section on incels that functions as an example of digital harm transforming into physical harm.

<sup>401</sup> Caitlin E. Lawson, "Platform Vulnerabilities: Harassment and Misogynoir in the Digital Attack on Leslie Jones," *Information, Communication & Society* 21, no. 6 (2018): 818-833.

On digital platforms, there are instances where Hall's decoding/encoding theory aligns with the conditioning that takes place within our society. Norms from the dominant society are reified, intensified, and with the assistance of algorithms, further perfected in digital spaces.<sup>402</sup> Racism, and specifically anti-blackness, is one of the norms from mainstream media that also permeates digital spaces.<sup>403</sup> Black youth recirculate these scenes as a means of encoding, instructing viewers and other receivers of this message to act. Darnella Frazier's use of digital platforms and her post reveal how, despite the invective she has experienced on digital platforms within the comment section of her George Floyd post, she is still able to respond and control how much access the public has to her. Darnella Frazier (outside of her testimony) in the Chauvin trial only "speaks" through what she writes on social media. There have been no press releases or interviews with Frazier. She maintains her power and privacy by allowing social media to be the only outlet where her voice can be heard. This isn't surprising, considering the intimate and complex relationship that young Black people have with social media, but it is important to note that digital platforms are the space in which she chooses to "speak." Frazier's choice of social media as the sole space to communicate to the public further emphasizes how the lives of young Black people are intertwined with digital spaces, for better or worse.

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<sup>402</sup> Donald F. Tibbs, "From Tiktok to Racial Violence: Anti-Blackness in the Gendered Sphere," *Thomas Law Review*, 33 (2020): 198.

<sup>403</sup> Emily M. Zitek and Michelle R. Hebl, "The Role of Social Norm Clarity in the Influenced Expression of Prejudice Over Time," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 43, no. 6 (2007): 867-876. Doxing is the process of publicly posting someone's personal information, specifically their work or home address.

A year after sharing the recording of George Floyd, Darnella Frazier "spoke" again, and she issued her first public statement.<sup>404</sup> The statement she released revealed that not only was Frazier obviously traumatized by the event, but her nine-year-old cousin, who she was accompanying to the store at the time, was also present and traumatized by the events that took place that day.<sup>405</sup> Frazier's experiences with her utilization of digital platforms as a witness and as a citizen journalist reveal the extent of the trauma that she experienced. Hall's encoding/decoding theory, in terms of the way that the public, and in this case young Black people like Darnella Frazier, can be forcefully inculcated by the racialized violence that becomes a familiar occurrence on digital platforms. In her own words, Frazier's written statement highlights the stakes of witnessing and documenting racialized violence against Black youth.<sup>406</sup> It also further emphasizes that digital platforms can exacerbate racial trauma by contributing to and creating environments that subject young Black users of these spaces to additional racial trauma. The following is an excerpt from Darnella Frazier's Facebook page:

I am 18 now and I still hold the weight and trauma of what I witnessed a year ago. It's a little easier now, but I'm not who I used to be. A part of my childhood was taken from me. My 9-year-old cousin, who witnessed the same thing I did, got a part of her childhood taken from her. Having to up and leave because my home was no longer safe, waking up to reporters at my door, closing my eyes at night only to see a man who is brown like me, lifeless on the ground. I couldn't sleep properly for weeks. I used to shake so bad at night my mom had to rock me to sleep. Hopping from hotel to hotel because we didn't have a home and looking over our back every day in the

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<sup>404</sup> Sayantani Nath, "Darnella Frazier, Teen Who Recorded George Floyd's Dying Moments, Says 'I Still Hold the Weight and Trauma'," MEAWW, May 26, 2021, [www.meaww.com/darnella-frazier-george-floyd-death-full-public-statement-dangerous-black-in-america](http://www.meaww.com/darnella-frazier-george-floyd-death-full-public-statement-dangerous-black-in-america).

<sup>405</sup> LaDonna Long and Sarah E. Ullman, "The Impact of Multiple Traumatic Victimization on Disclosure and Coping Mechanisms for Black Women," *Feminist Criminology* 8, no. 4 (2013): 295-319. This article speaks specifically on sexual violence, but I do think that the language used for discussing how Black women cope with trauma is useful in this context.

<sup>406</sup> Patricia Garcia, Cecilia Fernández, and Holly Okonkwo, "Leveraging Technology: How Black Girls Enact Critical Digital Literacies for Social Change," *Learning, Media and Technology* 45, no. 4 (2020): 345-362.

process. Having panic and anxiety attacks every time I seen a police car, not knowing who to trust because a lot of people are evil with bad intentions. I hold that weight. A lot of people call me a hero even though I don't see myself as one. I was just in the right place at the right time. Behind this smile, behind these awards, behind the publicity, I'm a girl trying to heal from something I am reminded of every day. Everyone talks about the girl who recorded George Floyd's death, but to actually be her is a different story. Not only did this affect me, my family, too. We all experienced change. My mom the most. I strive every day to be strong for her because she was strong for me when I couldn't be strong for myself. Even though this was a traumatic life-changing experience for me, I'm proud of myself. If it weren't for my video, the world wouldn't have known the truth. I own that. My video didn't save George Floyd, but it put his murderer away and off the streets.<sup>407</sup>

Frazier's statement above highlights the possibility of an emerging captive maternal dynamic emerging between Frazier and her mother. There is not enough information to categorize it as such, but it is clear that she feels indebted to her mother for the care that she provided to her during her most traumatic experience to date. Frazier's statement also reveals that while she recognizes that her mental health needs to be prioritized, she simultaneously feels a duty to protect her mother from the public. Her attempts to "be strong" for her mother in the moments that she was not able to bear the weight of witnessing reveals the sense of duty Frazier feels.

Frazier's experience with digital platforms as a citizen journalist and as a witness (by bearing witness and by serving as an actual witness at the trial) reveals that she also has a deep commitment to social justice.<sup>408</sup> She acknowledges that while it was not possible for her to save George Floyd, she was able to prevent one officer from killing other Black citizens. Despite the trauma she has lived through and is still experiencing, Frazier places the utmost importance on justice for George Floyd. Frazier describes in detail the PTSD that she is

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<sup>407</sup> Paul Meara, "Darnella Frazier Issues First Public Statement on Anniversary of George Floyd's Death," *BET*, May 26, 2021, [www.bet.com/article/g8su2e/darnella-frazier-issues-first-public-statement](http://www.bet.com/article/g8su2e/darnella-frazier-issues-first-public-statement).

<sup>408</sup> Charles H.F. Davis, "Student Activism, Resource Mobilization, and New Tactical Repertoires in the 'Digital Age' in Student activism, Politics, and Campus Climate in Higher Education (New York: Routledge, 2019), 112-124.

experiencing from witnessing the incident, which ranges from visceral reactions to police cars, her inability to sleep, and that at one point every night before she went to bed, she still saw "a man who is brown" like her "lifeless on the ground." Frazier's statement reveals that while this particular moment of witnessing was life-altering, it was not the only time that she had seen Black people being killed.

Returning to Hall's encoding/decoding theory, popular media heavily influences our perceptions of the world, especially when viewing violence in the media. When what people see in the media aligns with their lived experiences, that is referred to as resonance.<sup>409</sup>

Resonance was measured by Gerbner using race (mainly white and Black people), and the data showed that white people, while they consumed less media, experienced less resonance. For Black people, they experienced higher rates of resonance while also consuming more media than white people.<sup>410</sup> Gerbner asserted that part of cultivation theory is that minority groups are watching themselves from the perspective of the dominant group. So, resonance, and the frequency with which Black people witness violence against people that look like them in the media, is part of mainstream media's structure. Gerbner's study mainly focused on short-term exposure to media and could not have foreseen how media would become an inextricable part of our lives. Hall's encoding/decoding theory highlights how young Black

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<sup>409</sup> G. Gebner, "The Mainstreaming of America: Violence Profile," *Journal of Communication* (1980): 10-25.

While cultivation theory focuses solely on television and primetime television specifically, it is still helpful when thinking about the images/media that we consume and the effects that it has on viewers. Despite the fact that Gerbner used this theory to show how exposure to media messaging via television can warp one's view of the world, I think that the media messaging portion of the theory is especially applicable to digital media consumption.

<sup>410</sup> Ibid.

people, as one of the largest consumers of digital spaces, are exposed to large quantities of media and the ramifications of being exposed and having access to this kind of violence<sup>411</sup> at the frequency it occurs have become experts at decoding these messages, and this further proves that this needs to be addressed when discussing cumulative racial trauma in the lives of Black youth.<sup>412</sup> This is important in thinking about the ways in which they consume and view media and how it can contribute to and exacerbate preexisting racial trauma. The following lines were taken from Frazier's statement (not included in the excerpt above) revealing how preexisting racial trauma has affected her:

A year ago today I witnessed a murder. The victim's name was George Floyd. Although this wasn't the first time I've seen a black man get killed at the hands of the police. We are looked at as thugs, animals, and criminals, all because of the color of our skin. We the people won't take the blame, you won't keep pointing fingers at us as if it's our fault, as if we are criminals. I don't think people understand how serious death is . . . that person is never coming back.<sup>413</sup>

The racism that Frazier was exposed to via the media started long before she recorded the murder of George Floyd. While state violence against Black people is not new, the way in which we access it is. Our modern technological advances have also aided in giving individuals the ability to amplify these moments of injustice, to reveal that there is a pattern to this kind of violence. Frazier's statement highlights the fact that bearing witness to this kind of violence has been a constant in her life. When it comes to violence and media conditioning,

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<sup>411</sup> Ibid.

Gerbner also contends that televise programming restricts choice

<sup>412</sup> Thema Bryant-Davis and Carlota Ocampo, "Racist Incident-Based Trauma," *The Counseling Psychologist* 33, no. 4 (2005): 479-500.

<sup>413</sup> Meara, "Darnella Frazier Issues First Public Statement on Anniversary of George Floyd's Death."

Gerbner argues that ". . . the pattern rather than the frequency is the essential feature in portrayals of violence."<sup>414</sup> While the frequency does have an impact, so does "the pattern" of this violence. The pattern that Frazier and so many other young Black people have been exposed to is how race and anti-Blackness shapes their lives. When Darnella Frazier states that she has been "watching" this violence prior to what she witnessed that day with George Floyd, it is more likely than not that the previous experiences of witnessing that she is referencing within her statement stem from what she has seen play out repeatedly in the media, and on digital platforms. Frazier's statement reveals that she has not only been a consumer of this kind of media, but she is also an active participant. Young Black people like Frazier are not only consuming the media they have been presented with, but they are reacting to it and, oftentimes, countering it.<sup>415</sup>

Frazier's statement demonstrates that she has seen the negative portrayals of Black people in the media, and she is actively resisting those stereotypical media portrayals. Frazier's statement responds to the mainstream media's negative portrayals of Black people, which has presented a pattern that justifies their murders to the public.<sup>416</sup> Her statement reveals that she (like many young Black people engaging with digital platforms) is knowledgeable of the narrative that mainstream media presents to the world regarding

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<sup>414</sup> Gerbner, Gross, Jackson-Beeck, Jeffries-Fox, and Signorielli, "Cultural Indicators: Violence Profile no. 9."

<sup>415</sup> L. M. Ward, "Wading Through the Stereotypes: Positive and Negative Associations Between Media Use and Black Adolescents' Conceptions of Self," *Developmental Psychology*, 40, no. 2 (2004): 284–294. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0012-1649.40.2.284>

<sup>416</sup> Adams-Bass, Valerie N., Howard C. Stevenson, and Diana Slaughter Kotzin, "Measuring the Meaning of Black Media Stereotypes and their Relationship to the Racial Identity, Black History Knowledge, and Racial Socialization of African American Youth," *Journal of Black Studies* 45, no. 5 (2014): 367-395.

Blackness, that deadly force is necessary,<sup>417</sup> and that the deaths of Black people have been transformed into a familiar pattern within the media.

Digital platforms often become the space where anti-black/state violence is first introduced to young Black people, as well as the space where they are most likely to first hear about it when it happens.<sup>418</sup> Communications scholar Sherri Williams' qualitative study on young Black women and their exposure to anti-black violence via digital platforms reveal that young Black women that witness racialized violence on digital platforms have a visceral reaction to watching these scenes of violence because these moments contribute to a timeline over the span of their lives in which each racist event proliferates.<sup>419</sup> This further demonstrates the importance, and the presence of postmemory, which makes witnessing for young Black people, and in the case of young Black women like Frazier, resonate on multiple registers. Bearing witness is necessary, but it is also traumatic, and it is my intention behind this research to demonstrate how digital platforms have impacted witnessing for Black youth.<sup>420</sup> Black youth, with their command of digital spaces, carry an insurmountable weight with their participation in citizen journalism and digital activism. This is now part of the experience of growing up young, Black, and witnessing on digital platforms.

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<sup>417</sup> Wendi Pollock, Natalia D. Tapia, and Deborah Sibila, "ptheory: The Impact of Crime Media's Portrayal of Race on the Desire to Become a US Police Officer," *International Journal of Police Science & Management* 24, no. 1 (2022): 42-52.

<sup>418</sup> Felicia Campbell and Pamela Valera, "The Only Thing New Is the Cameras: A Study of U.S. College Students' Perceptions of Police Violence on Social Media," *Journal of Black Studies* 51, no. 7 (2020): 654-670.

<sup>419</sup> Williams, "Stream of Sadness."

<sup>420</sup> Allissa V. Richardson, "The Coming Archival Crisis: How Ephemeral Video Disappears Protest Journalism and Threatens Newsreels of Tomorrow," *Digital Journalism* 8, no. 10 (2020): 1338-1346.



This experience has also contributed to a shift in the type of media that is marketed to Black youth. Witnessing and citizen journalism has not only impacted Black youth, but it has also impacted the media that is geared towards them. Culturally relevant stories that speak to their experiences are now necessary. To come of age as a young Black person is to participate in the act of digital witnessing. When Darnella Frazier said that part of her and her younger cousin's childhood was taken away, it revealed a truth that remains constant in this contemporary moment of digital and material world witnessing; the frequency and the pattern of this witnessing have given birth to the modern bildungsroman of Black youth. Witnessing is now the benchmark that marks that path between adulthood and childhood for Black youth.

### **3.4: The Emergence of a Different Black Bildungsroman**

The subject area of the Black bildungsroman has been extensively examined across the diaspora<sup>421</sup> when it comes to young Black girls grappling with coming of age while enduring misogynoir and witnessing traumatic events from slave narratives to fiction.<sup>422</sup> Texts such as *The Bluest Eye* (1970) by Toni Morrison, which completely altered how we view and who we center in the bildungsroman,<sup>423</sup> and contemporary texts like Jacqueline Woodson's *Another Brooklyn* (2016) which highlight that girlhood for Black girls is fraught with complications<sup>424</sup> that force us to expand how we come to define these life-altering moments when Black girls

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<sup>421</sup> Dana A. Williams, "Contemporary African American Women Writers," in *The Cambridge Companion to African American Women's Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009): 71-86.

<sup>422</sup> Courtney Cook, "A History of the Resilience of Black Girls," *Girlhood Studies* 12, no. 2 (2019): 133-136.

<sup>423</sup> Sapphyre Smith, "Dismantling Ethnic Notions Through Bildungsromane: An Examination of The Bluest Eye," *Inquiry@ Queen's Undergraduate Research Conference Proceedings*, 16 (2022).

<sup>424</sup> Elisa Kinnunen, "'Dreams are Not for People Who Look Like You'—The Social Construction of Black Girlhood in Jacqueline Woodson's *Another Brooklyn*," (2022).

come of age.<sup>425</sup> The bildungsroman for Black boys witnessing violence has been studied as a trope from the battle between a young Frederick Douglass and his master in *The Narrative of Frederick Douglass* (1845)<sup>426</sup> to Ellison's battle royale scene from *Invisible Man* (1952)<sup>427</sup> coming of age through either participating in or witnessing violence by Black boys and girls has been established and studied literary scholars.<sup>428</sup> The role and iterations of social media have also been addressed by scholars writing about Black protagonists.<sup>429</sup>

The markers of Black youth culture have shifted to include narratives of witnessing state violence and police brutality. *The Hate U Give* (2017), a best-selling novel by Angie Thomas, is a story about a teenage Black girl named Starr who witnesses the death of her best friend Khalil during a traffic stop on the way home. It is a coming-of-age story about youth activism on social media (and the material world) and bearing witness.<sup>430</sup> The author Angie Thomas initially wrote the first version of the text as a response to the cellphone recording of the murder of Oscar Grant by the police on the platform of the Oakland subway system

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<sup>425</sup> Stephanie S. Rambo, *Girlhood as a Spatial Politic in Black Diasporic Literature* by Mary Prince, Harriet Jacobs, Edwidge Danticat, Natalie Baszile, Jesmyn Ward, and Kacen Callender, Dissertation, Louisiana State University, 2022.

<sup>426</sup> Wes Berry, "Masculinity: Spotlight: Robert Penn Warren," in *The Routledge Companion to Literature of the US South* (New York: Routledge, 2022), 207-210.

<sup>427</sup> Tamlyn E. Avery, "The Crisis of Coming of Age in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* and the Late Harlem Bildungsroman," *Limina* 20, no. 2 (2014).

<sup>428</sup> Gonçalo Piolti Cholant, *Since Why is Difficult: The Representation of Violence and Trauma in African-American and Afro-Caribbean Literature by Women: Autobiography, Fiction, and Subjectivity in the Bildungsroman*, Dissertation, Universidade de Coimbra, 2019.

<sup>429</sup> Violeta Duce, "Social Media and Female Empowerment in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*," *The European Legacy* 26, no. 3-4 (2021): 243-256.

<sup>430</sup> Francesco Bacci, "Black Lives Matter: Police Brutality, Media, and Injustice in 'The Hate U Give,' 'Dear White People,' and 'On the Other Side of Freedom,'" *REDEN. Revista Española de Estudios Norteamericanos* 2, no. 1 (2020): 7-22.

known as BART. She expanded on the text in the aftermath of witnessing the deaths of Trayvon Martin, Mike Brown, and Tamir Rice. Season 4, episode 1 of the Showtime series *The Chi* (2021), titled "Soul Food," features the two youngest cast members, Kevin and Jake, experiencing a slow dissolution of their friendship when Jake is a victim of police brutality and his friend Kevin is a witness to his victimization. As Jake and Kevin take their daily walk home from school, Jake encounters another teen, and they get into a verbal altercation that almost becomes a fight. The other teen spots the cops and runs off, leaving Jake and Kevin standing there as a white officer approaches, walking in their direction, demanding to see Jake's identification. Jake, knowing that he did not do anything, walks away from the officer. The cop immediately resorts to violence, slamming him to the ground and punching him repeatedly while telling him to stop resisting. The other students see the commotion, and they pull out their phones to record the encounter. Kevin is frozen, but he eventually shakes it off and attempts to reach for his phone just as another officer arrives and pulls a gun on him, shouting, "Get on the ground!" As the shot widens, we see that everyone is watching, adults and students alike, feeling powerless as Jake's limp body is cuffed and thrown into the squad car.

The emergence of the bildungsroman discussed throughout the remainder of this chapter highlights how witnessing in this particular moment is impacting culture and contributing to a new bildungsroman that focuses on witnessing either via smartphone or any technological device that can record visual data. Season 1, episode 7 of the FX Series *Atlanta* (2016) entitled "B.A.N.S." features a fictional cereal commercial for *Coconut Crunch-O's Cereal*. The commercial is animated, and it takes place inside an ancient Egyptian tomb. The three Black children (one boy and two girls) walk into the tomb escorted by a police officer.

As they walk in, a mummified wolf falls out of a sarcophagus and attempts to steal the cereal from the kids. The police officer intervenes as the children watch on in terror, asking questions and trying to make sense of what they are witnessing. The little Black boy pulls out his phone and begins to record. The little Black girl attempts to intervene, but she is told to let the officer do his job. He sternly tells the little girl (but it feels more like a warning) to "Back up . . .sir!" The children stand defiantly before him, the wolf (which is obviously an avatar for a Black man) as the wolf appears to worry about his fate.



**Figure 3.2: Still from the animated Coconut Crunch-O's cereal Atlanta (2016), "B.A.N.S."**

What I am describing and naming as the Black bildungsroman is the emergence of a specific type of visual media that addresses racialized/state violence. From a genre-bending series like *Atlanta* (2016) to a novel (2017) and the film adaptation of that novel (2018) with

*The Hate U Give*, and in a serialized drama like *The Chi* (2021), there is a clear cultural shift in contemporary media that centers the coming of age stories of Black youth by framing them within moments of witnessing and/or recording state violence. I want to address and also argue that contemporary media is responding to Black witnessing and citizen journalism by positioning witnessing state violence as a pivotal and life-changing event that pushes its characters out of the realm of childhood and into adulthood. This feature of the Black Bildungsroman speaks to the traumas that young Black people face coming of age through witnessing violence in digital spaces and the material world. In the same way that Darnella Frazier had "seen" these killings before, it didn't "prepare" her to be a witness; it was an additional death that was added to all of the other lives that she had seen perish before her eyes. The trauma that Black youths are witnessing is not a singular event or even a timeline of events. It is compounded. The contemporary Black bildungsroman sees and speaks to this experience of witnessing and participating in citizen journalism as a feature of being young and Black.

The film *See You Yesterday* (2019), directed by Stefon Bristol and co-written by Frederica Bailey, speaks directly to the struggles facing Black youth as witnesses. The film begins with the two protagonists, a Black teenage girl named Claudette Josephine (CJ) Walker and her best friend, a Black teenage boy named Sebastien Thomas, discussing a science project that they are working on in class. The story takes place in New York City, where the two teens attend The Bronx High School of Science, a popular magnet school.<sup>431</sup> They continue their discussion where they are actively dreaming of their science project securing

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<sup>431</sup> The three top magnet schools for science and technology in New York are Brooklyn Technical High School, Stuyvesant High School, and Bronx High School of Science, which is the school that both protagonists attend in the film.

their futures in multiple ways: winning a prestigious award at the science fair, getting college scholarships, and ultimately becoming famous. The project is a backpack that allows them to travel through time. While discussing their project, they speak to their science teacher, Mr. Lockhart, played by Michael J. Fox from the film *Back to The Future* (1985). He sits at his desk reading Octavia Butler's *Kindred*. In Butler's canonical text, a Black woman named Dana has the ability to travel between her time in 1976 and pre-Civil War America. In her travels, she is forced to contend with the dehumanization, abuse, and injustice of chattel slavery. As she travels through time (through blackouts in which she loses consciousness and awakens in her world or the past), she is mentally and physically traumatized by the past. Mr. Lockhart asks CJ and Sebastian as they stand in front of his desk, "If time travel were possible, it would be the greatest ethical and philosophical conundrum of the modern age. If you had that kind of power, what would you do? What would you change?" It is this question that foreshadows the film's storyline and ultimately sets the tone for the subject matter of the film.

After working on their science project religiously, they eventually succeed in their first attempt at time travel by only traveling back in time slightly. They understand that the possible ramifications and consequences of altering the past could be severe, but, nonetheless, they are excited that their invention works. However, the stakes of time travel are raised for the teens when CJ's brother, Calvin, is shot by a racist police officer. After CJ bears witness to her brother's murder, she is compelled to go back in time to save him. But as she repeatedly returns to the past, each iteration of events results in her brother being repeatedly killed. CJ is unrelenting, and she eventually convinces her best friend, Sebastian, to travel back in time with her to help her save Calvin's life. On their first attempt, they are unsuccessful in stopping Calvin's murder. On the second attempt, CJ is successful. She saves Calvin's life, but this time

Sebastian is killed. On her third attempt, CJ tries to prevent Sebastian's death. While she is able to save Sebastian, she is unable to save her brother. After she confides in Sebastian, telling him about the alternate outcomes, he pleads with CJ to accept her brother's death as fate and that she should stop risking their lives to change it. Despite the fact that her previous attempts at altering the past have shown CJ that there are no futures available to her in which both her brother and Sebastian can survive, the film ends with CJ's refusal to accept Black death via state violence as inevitable. She continues to search the past for her desired future, in which both her brother and Sebastian survive.

*See You Yesterday* (2019) underscores the reality facing young Black people, as well as the weight and trauma of witnessing. The subject matter of the film, in tandem with the presence of Michael J. Fox, speaks to the significance of his presence in a film related to time travel. Fox, in the seminal role of Marty McFly in *Back To The Future* (1985), being cast as the teacher to two young Black time travelers forces viewers to make a stark comparison: the white teenage protagonist in *Back To The Future* (1985) *accidentally* travels back to the fifties with no mission whatsoever,<sup>432</sup> while the Black teen protagonists travel to the past with every intention of changing it. When CJ bears witness to the death of her brother, her invention and her future aspirations start to shift. Her invention is no longer something that she needs in order to attain a scholarship to college or to win a prestigious award. Her scientific labor is no longer aspirational; it is transformed into a necessary utility. CJ's numerous travels to the past

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<sup>432</sup> Marty McFly initially attempts to escape death because of the plutonium that his scientist friend, Emmett "Doc" Brown, swindled from Libyan terrorists. His mission emerged while trying to return his original era, he also had to try his best not to alter the past and impact his future. Our Black protagonists are doing the opposite: they are actively trying to alter the past.

reveal that it is nearly impossible to prevent the imminence of Black death.<sup>433</sup> When she is finally able to save her brother and her best friend is murdered instead, a traumatizing realization comes to fruition; that the loss of Black life is necessary, and it is part of how the fabric of their society is structured.<sup>434</sup> Her repeated failed attempts to stop the death of her brother and best friend due to state violence function as a metaphor for the perpetuity of anti-blackness.<sup>435</sup>

CJ's time travels reflect the issues facing Black youth today as they engage with digital spaces. Her use of technology (her time-machine backpack) is how she repeatedly witnesses anti-Black violence, similar to Black young people and their engagement with digital platforms as the space where they are most likely to encounter and witness anti-Black/state-sanctioned murders. With each death that CJ attempts to prevent, she is re-traumatized over and over again, especially when she is incapable of preventing it. This is reminiscent of Darnella Frazier's written statements and her experiences with witnessing prior to her bearing witness for George Floyd. CJ's fictional experiences speak to the realities that young Black people are faced with; they are subjected to repeated iterations of anti-Black violence, and they are also adamant about *doing something* to stop it. Both of Frazier's Facebook statements simultaneously highlight both the helplessness she felt since she could not prevent George Floyd's death and the pride she felt in contributing to his murderer being held accountable. Frazier's determination to bear witness to George Floyd forced her to push past her trauma in

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<sup>433</sup> Sharpe, *In the Wake*.

<sup>434</sup> Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*.

<sup>435</sup> Frank B. Wilderson III, *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of US Antagonisms* (Raleigh-Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).



order to prevent future deaths, even if they are inevitable. CJ pushes past repeated trauma with each failed attempt during her time travels in an attempt to save her loved ones from death in the present so that they can have a future. CJ's fictional position reflects the realities of being a Black teenage girl. This fictional setting perfectly captures one of the main issues facing young Black people today; they are the pulse at the intersection of culture and technology today, with a strong command of digital spaces (in the case of CJ, creating one of the most incredible inventions known to man thus far with her time-machine-backpack). Even with all of their brilliance and talent, they are still unable to rectify or prevent the racial injustice that plagues their communities.

The content of this film at first glance seems abysmal, as we are not only witnessing Black life subjected to these conditions in our material world but we are also reminded in this film of that reality once again, except for the fact that this film's ending brings us something else, something unknown. It rejects a pessimistic position that leaves viewers with the understanding that Black life is ultimately tethered to violence, racism, death, and dehumanization. This film forces its viewers to perform an imaginative exercise by refusing to give an ending at all. These conditions presented in the film are real, and at the end, we see that CJ is not dejected. She looks as if she has an idea, one that she does not reveal to us, as she travels back to the past once again. She refuses to give up and thus rejects a world in which racialized/state violence is unavoidable. Her face almost seems to say that "there must be another way." The ending of this film also implies that there must be an alternate way of living, and it chooses, instead, to "linger in the terrors of the present even as they exemplify

what is needed to transform it."<sup>436</sup> This film is categorized as science fiction, but it is also an example of a critical dystopian film.<sup>437</sup>

The defining feature of a critical dystopian film is that it presents undesirable futures as the premise as a means of inspiring change. This film presents the pervasiveness of anti-Blackness and the ways it impacts Black youth. Young Black people aren't given the space to make mistakes and be carefree, a passionate discussion among CJ, Sebastian, and Calvin is misinterpreted by a police officer, and it is both *his* racism and the power he wields as an extension of the state that works in conjunction to result in the death of two Black teens. The film works on "emphasizing that there are alternatives to the dystopian conditions being portrayed."<sup>438</sup> To viewers of the film, and witnesses to Calvin's murder in every iteration in which it takes place, it becomes clear that CJ's multiple attempts to alter everything, from having them take an alternate route home, or change their destination, always results in death. The one constant that consistently results in death is the presence of the police. If the film is examined as a critical dystopia, the structure that it is gesturing towards changing is that of the state and its overwhelming presence in Black communities. This pushes the viewers to imagine a different kind of exchange within the community or a different community altogether.

Like CJ, we are also forced to imagine a future where Black death is not an option. If anti-Blackness is removed as the central theme that structures our renderings of a "new"

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<sup>436</sup> Tom Moylan and Raffaella Baccolini, eds., *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination* (New York: Psychology Press, 2003).

<sup>437</sup> Keith M. Booker, *Dystopia* (Ipswich, MA: Salem Press, 2013).

<sup>438</sup> *Ibid.*

world, what kind of world(s) would be possible? This is the space where scholar Kevin Quashie works through the concept of Black aliveness.<sup>439</sup> Quashie invites us to imagine a world where Black life can exist beyond the shadow of racialized/state violence. What would it take to construct a world where Black kids are given the opportunity to be kids? Where are they given the right to life? CJ and Sebastian's experiences encapsulate what Darnella Frazier and so many other young Black people are forced to contend with: the inescapable past and present traumas, the never-ending reach of anti-Blackness, and access to technology and digital platforms where death proliferates and contributes to their cumulative traumas. Education scholar Ebony Thomas writes that our imaginations, dreams, and fantasies are what give us the ability to see beyond anti-Blackness and build something new, something radical.<sup>440</sup> What kind of future would be possible for CJ and Sebastian's brilliance and dedication to science outside of the realm of anti-blackness? What kind of future/present could be available to CJ if she did not have to dedicate her brilliance and emotional labor to save Calvin and/or Sebastian? What is implied in the gender dynamics of the film as it pertains to Black girlhood and the labor that is expected from Black girls? Farah Jasmine Griffin argues,

In this extraordinary moment in our national conversation about race, it is essential that we give voice to the black girls who, for far too long, have been uniquely denied an individual identity. At its worst, black girls are portrayed in stereotypical ways: big, loud, and tough-talking. In some instances, they are portrayed as resilient, strong, and capable. In the midst of this sit real girls with vulnerabilities, dreams, and challenges. Perhaps one reason this violence could so easily be committed against obviously

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<sup>439</sup> Kevin Quashie, *Black Aliveness, or a Poetics of Being* (Duke University Press, 2021).

<sup>440</sup> Ebony Elizabeth Thomas, *The Dark Fantastic* (New York: New York University Press, 2019).

innocent individuals is that such girls have almost never had a true voice in our culture.<sup>441</sup>

While the film does highlight Black girls as being brave and technologically savvy saviors, it doesn't highlight the fact they, too, can be victims of state violence; however, it does highlight the voice and the intellect of a determined Black girl. Even if imagining a world without anti-Blackness seems impossible, this film leaves its viewers with a powerful final scene. Black youth, along with their intimate relationship with technology, and their adept use of it, just might be the thing that saves us all. While the film ends without giving viewers a resolution, it does show viewers that CJ refuses to be defeated by the anti-Black logic of the world. The "end" of the film shows us that she is still trying and that she will continue to find an outcome in which everyone survives, further implying that, as viewers, we should do the same.

### **3.5 Black Youth Facing State Violence & Death in Jordan Peele's *The Twilight Zone***

One of the biggest milestones in a young person's life is being accepted into college. It is also, in a sense, a coming-of-age moment. It is the precipice of adulthood in which they are old enough to live away from home, but they are still dependent on their parents. For parents of Black children, it can be difficult for them to let go of their children, allowing them to navigate the world on their own, especially with the knowledge and experience that parents have with institutional and interpersonal racism. In "Replay," a parent's nightmares are repeatedly relived on screen. Part of growing up and coming of age is hitting certain milestones in one's life: learning how to drive, traveling, etc. Unfortunately, for young Black people experiencing racism or race-related violence is part of that experience. Contemporary

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<sup>441</sup> Farah Jasmine Griffin, "On Black Girlhood," Public Books, December 7, 2016, <https://www.publicbooks.org/on-black-girlhood/>.

media is now addressing the fact that young Black people have a different set of obstacles that they are forced to navigate.

In the reboot of the classic television series *The Twilight Zone* (2019), Selwyn Seyfu, the writer of the episode, explores the complexities of police brutality. The episode opens by introducing viewers to a Black mother and son named Nina and Dorian as she helps him through a major milestone; it's move-in day at the college that he is attending, and his mother is going with him to help him prepare his dorm. As she is packing up her son's things, she finds a camcorder. While she is in a diner with her son, she pulls out the camcorder in an attempt to get it to work when she realizes that the dated tech has the ability to take her back in time. In the same diner, there is a racist state trooper who is also eating. As she leaves the restaurant with her son, the battle to save his life and get him to college safely begins. As they start driving, with Dorian in the driver's seat, they are pursued by the cop, who pulls them over, and Dorian is killed. Nina, reluctant to believe in the powers of the camcorder, tearfully presses rewind to bring them back to the diner and start the process over again. Her son has no memory of what happened, but his mother does.

This time, she gets into the driver's seat and takes a back road in an attempt to alter her son's fate, and checks into a hotel. The state trooper still finds them, knocks on the door and gets into an altercation with her son, killing him once more. She presses rewind, and they both return to the diner. Nina, despite being shaken up, is still determined to save Dorian. She sits next to the officer and befriends him, buys him a slice of pie as she converses with him. She tries to get him to see her and her son as human as she divulges the excitement of move-in day. As the conversation comes to a close, Nina and her son walk to the parking lot, and she believes that she has altered fate, but the state trooper approaches and stops them in the

parking lot. He does not believe that her car is hers and demands to see her pink slip. Her son, attempting to record the racist altercation with his phone, reaches into his pocket, and he is murdered again. Nina feels defeated, but she hits rewind one more time.

She asks for help from her estranged brother, forcing her to return to the neighborhood that she grew up in, which is in the process of being gentrified. He tells his sister that the camcorder belonged to their father (Nina's father, Dorian's grandfather) who was murdered in a racially motivated incident. Nina's brother functions as a guide to get Dorian to his HBCU by leading them through secret passages, alleyways, and abandoned buildings. This time, they finally arrive at the HBCU, and they run into the same state trooper at the university entrance. He singles out Dorian, but before he can strike all of the students, Nina uses the camcorder to record the officer as she tells him, "We are all witnesses."<sup>442</sup> He has no choice but to back down. The episode jumps to the future, Dorian is older, and he is a father. Nina is playing with her granddaughter, who accidentally breaks the camera. Nina is slightly sad because of the significance of the camcorder, but she realizes that she does not need it anymore. Dorian steps out to go to the store, and a few moments later, the lights from a police cruiser illuminate the living room, and Dorian doesn't make it back home.

"Replay," in the same vein as *See You Yesterday* (2019), examines the utility of time travel for Black people, but they depart from the genre, despite the fact that both are science fiction. "Replay" is the third episode in the *Twilight Zone* (2019) which adds an element of horror that *See You Yesterday* (2019) doesn't have since it ends with optimism, and "Replay" ends by reminding us that fate, for Black people, comes in the form of inescapable institutional oppression. "Replay" highlights the reality of racism and how it seems to follow

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<sup>442</sup> *Twilight Zone*, "Replay" (Paramount, 2019).

your every move as a Black person navigating public spaces. The police operate under a system in which they enforce "racial domination" that is "consistent and highly rigid in the United States," and it is imperative that "racism needs to be understood beyond individual prejudices."<sup>443</sup>

While racism is presented overtly throughout the episode's main narrative of police surveillance, racism is also presented in covert ways in the episode that brings attention to the fact that racism's reach goes beyond the police. When Nina reaches out to her brother, she is initially reluctant to return to her old neighborhood because of her experiences growing up there. Her memories of her neighborhood are unfavorable, and she is in shock when she arrives and sees that the neighborhood has been gentrified. Her brother is leading a community meeting for the remaining Black members of the community. This visual method of storytelling shows viewers that racism isn't just present in police interactions, but it is also present spatially, limiting Black homeownership and ultimately pushing Black people out of their communities.<sup>444</sup>

Postmemory is also highlighted in the episode's origin story of the technology that Nina possessed. Her father was also murdered during a racist incident, but he wasn't saved by the camcorder, which we learn was his possession. Whether or not he was aware of the powers present in the camcorder is not discussed, but the camcorder itself is an example of resistance. One of the first and most referenced videos of racially motivated police violence was captured

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<sup>443</sup> Sharon E. Moore, "A Critical Race Perspective of Police Shooting of Unarmed Black males in the United States: Implications for Social Work," *Urban Social Work* 2, no. 1 (2018): 33-47.

<sup>444</sup> Jesse Mumm, "The Racial Fix: White Currency in the Gentrification of Black and Latino Chicago," *Focaal* 79 (2017): 102-118.

on a camcorder.<sup>445</sup> The camcorder, at first, just seems like dated technology, but it symbolizes a pivotal moment of witnessing and historical racial reckonings; the Rodney King beating. It was important because police violence was something that people knew happened, but this was the first time that concrete evidence was presented by a civilian.<sup>446</sup> It was indisputable evidence of police misconduct, racism, and overall abuse of power. Nina's possession of the camcorder functions as a physical representation of a memory or racial/state violence as a legacy that is being passed down.

While her father might not have had anyone to bear witness for him, she is intent on protecting her son, and it is her father's camcorder that she uses to bear witness. The presence of the camcorder, as well as its function, reveals that Black people are forced to be dependent on technology in order to protect themselves and tell their stories. In the same way that so many of us know of Rodney King's beating by the LAPD, her father's death also represents an inherited legacy of racial trauma that Black people live with. Legacies like that officer that haunted Dorian are impossible to escape. The camcorder symbolizes both the necessity and utility of technology, as well as the importance of postmemory. The camera has the ability to bear witness by documenting the present, attempting to alter the past, and making the future possible.

"Replay" also codes the geography of the South using race. While lynching took place throughout the United States, the South has a very specific history stemming from slave

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<sup>445</sup> Greg Luft, "Camcorders: When Amateurs Go After the News," *Columbia Journalism Review* 30, no. 3 (1991): 35.

<sup>446</sup> Ryan Watson, "In the Wakes of Rodney King: Militant Evidence and Media Activism in the Age of Viral Black Death," *The Velvet Light Trap* 84 (2019): 34-49.



codes, Jim Crow, Reconstruction Era violence, and the South's dependency on the slave economy.<sup>447</sup> Dorian and his mother travel to the South in order for him to go to an unnamed HBCU. Police interactions with Black people can be and have been hostile across the United States, but the history of the South undergirds that legacy of violence and makes these interactions exponentially hostile since race in the South permeates even the most innocuous interactions.<sup>448</sup> Dorian and Nina are two black people driving in the South who are also grappling with the stigma and history of "driving while Black."<sup>449</sup> This very specific history of policing haunts Dorian and his mother. The most terrifying haunting overall is the inevitability of the violence that they both face on what should have been a joyous occasion. Their interactions with the officer attest to the futility of respectability politics. Nina is a professional, and her son is about to embark on a college education, but it is their Blackness that is criminalized,<sup>450</sup> and it is all the state trooper sees. Whether they run away from or attempt to socialize with the police, they are always approached with hostility.

In her final interaction with the officer before she reaches out to her brother for assistance, Nina is shocked by the officer's tone with her in the parking lot. She attempted to reconnect with him since they had just finished conversing in the diner, but he would not

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<sup>447</sup> Ryan Lavalley and Khalilah Robinson Johnson, "Occupation, Injustice, and anti-Black Racism in the United States of America," *Journal of Occupational Science* (2020): 1-13.

<sup>448</sup> Tina M., Harris, "Communicating Racism: A Study of Racial Microaggressions in a Southern University and the Local Community," *Southern Communication Journal* 84, no. 2 (2019): 72-84.

<sup>449</sup> John Lamberth, "Driving While Black," in *Race, Ethnicity, and Policing: New and Essential Readings* (New York: NYU Press, 2010): 32.

<sup>450</sup> Marcus Bell, "Criminalization of Blackness: Systemic Racism and the Reproduction of Racial Inequality in the US Criminal Justice System," in *Systemic Racism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 163-183.

allow it. Dorian was killed in front of his mother with his cell phone in his hand, which is reminiscent of the shooting of Stephon Clarke. Clarke was mistaken for a robbery suspect by the police and was approached by the police in his grandmother's driveway. He ran into the home, and they shot him multiple times in the backyard.<sup>451</sup> Clarke was only twenty-two years old. The deaths that Dorian experiences that compel his mother to hit "rewind" on the camcorder mirror some aspects of Stephon Clarke's final moments. Dorian was not safe in his mother's hotel, nor was he safe standing with her in a parking lot. Clarke could not find refuge from the police in the driveway of his grandmother's house, nor could he find refuge in the home. Dorian's shooting reveals that while Black people are dependent on technology in order to resist, our personal access to technology is not always guaranteed; we need the support of the community, and we need witnesses.

Dorian needed his mother and his uncle, as well as the surrounding community, to intervene to ensure his survival. The sci-fi aspect of the episode is clearly unrealistic, but it is a vessel that is used to communicate an important narrative; that the fear of parenting a Black child and not only losing them but being present as they experience police brutality and possibly death further reifies that parents are incapable of protecting Black children, and are subject to additional trauma when they are forced to witness the deaths of their children. This episode exposes the reality of parenting Black children by functioning as an extended nightmare, and this is the horror aspect of the episode. *See You Yesterday* (2019) ends with optimism, but "Replay" does not close with that same glimmer of hope because its intention is to show viewers the reality of Black life under white supremacy, and that is the real horror:

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<sup>451</sup> Susan A. Bandes, "Video, Popular Culture, and Police Excessive Force: The Elusive Narrative of Over-Policing," *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1 (2018).

A story is impelled by the necessity to reveal: the aim of the story is revelation, which means that a story can have nothing—at least not deliberately—to hide. This also means that a story resolves nothing. The resolution of a story must occur in us, with what we make of the questions with which the story leaves us. A plot, on the other hand, must come to a resolution, prove a point: a plot must answer all the questions which it pretends to pose.<sup>452</sup>

What makes the episode compelling is that it is direct, and it refuses to provide a resolution to the problem; it forces viewers to face the reality of race relations. The episode "Replay" recreates the atmosphere of the Black experience when engaging with social or mainstream media. When watching the news, so many of these deaths start to feel the same that the different names and situations bleed into each other, making it difficult to distinguish them from each other because of the frequency in which it takes place. It recreates that feeling of scrolling through your timeline and experiencing a type of déjà-vu and having this nagging feeling you have seen this incident before because, even if you have not, you feel as if you have. Witnessing racist police violence isn't new, but the mode of repetition that is mediated through technology is, giving users of digital platforms increased proximity and familiarity with disturbing scenes of violence.

Postmemory doesn't only include references to moments of tragic violence, but it also invokes historical moments of survival. Dorian's uncle's insider knowledge of the community, as well as his own (possible) experiences with racism as a Black man, leads him to utilize an alternate path in order to get his nephew to campus safely. He goes underground, guiding his sister and his nephew through abandoned buildings and secret tunnels that lead to the campus. Those secret tunnels and spaces that are only accessible and known to the Black members of the community reveal some parallels with the Underground Railroad. While the Underground

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<sup>452</sup> James Baldwin, *The Devil Finds Work* (New York: Knopf Doubleday, 2013).

Railroad was a network designed to bring enslaved people to freedom and its utility differed greatly from the circumstances presented in "Replay," it invokes situations that are an extension of the past metrics of racial dispossession, like the constant threat of state violence via slave catchers and their modern counterpart which are the police/state troopers.

Nina, her son Dorian, and his uncle, who functions as their guide (their conductor), discretely maneuver through tunnels and abandoned buildings, demonstrating how white supremacy develops over time. This highlights how freedom for Black people in the past and present has remained conditional. However, there is also a tradition of Black youth and resistance which is also an integral part of postmemory.

### **3.6 Rap & Resistance: Vic Mensa's 16 Shots (2016)**

Rap music has always been described as the voice of the youth. It provides listeners with a raw, descriptive view of the highs and lows in African-American communities. While contemporary streaming media's recent intentionality in addressing the proliferation of Black death that is circulated within the media by producing socially conscious content, rap music has always been intentional in how it addresses the experiences of the Black community.

While rap music is often depicted as being solely violent and sexually explicit, it is also a genre rooted in resistance against police violence. From NWA's *F\*ck The Police* (1988), Public Enemy's *Fight the Power* (1989), KRS-One's *Sound of Da Police* (1993), to the more recent release of Kendrick Lamar's *Alright* (2015), which became a mantra during BLM protests.

The video features Kendrick Lamar soaring in the air flying above Compton, The Bay Area, Oakland, and downtown Los Angeles. He soars above the Staples Center, rapping, "*and*



*we hate popo, wanna kill us dead in the street fo sho,"* and finally stands on top of a light pole, looking like freedom personified. An officer drives by in a police cruiser, and he sees Kendrick Lamar floating above the city, and he "shoots" Kendrick Lamar, forcing him to fall from the sky.



**Figure 3.3:** A still from Kendrick Lamar's *Alright* (2015) that features him flying above the city.

**Figure 3.4:** A still from Kendrick Lamar's "Alright" (2015) of the officer "shooting" him.

Kendrick is positioned as aspirational in the video as everyone below is in awe of his ascent, of the beauty of his freedom as he floats above the world and all of its ills. But that image is cut short as viewers bear witness to his on-screen "murder," revealing exactly how vast the reach of state violence is. Choosing to establish many of the video's most pivotal scenes in Oakland, California, references a historic power struggle between Black residents and a white police force (which also marks the color scheme of the entire video as well). This video invokes Black collective/critical memory. As previously discussed by both Alexander

and Raiford, these images reference a black consciousness and racial history that is situated specifically within California. Oakland is where Huey Newton and Bobby Seale founded the Black Panther Party in 1966, and it is also the city where the murder of Oscar Grant was recorded on an unidentified bystander's cell phone (it was one of the first accounts of police brutality captured on a cellphone that was widely circulated). Kendrick Lamar is from the West Coast, so it makes sense that the story of police brutality that he wants to tell features the landscape with which he is most familiar. Kendrick's video is filled with geographical markers of places historically and presently marked by police brutality, but in the middle of all of this adversity, Kendrick Lamar and everyone in the video chants *We gon' be alright!* As they dance through streets, despite being heavily surveilled and policed.



**Figure 3.5: Dancers performing in the street & on rooftops in Kendrick Lamar's Alright (2015).**

This song and video are a which is a direct response to the police's continued assault on Black life and an affirmation of Black people. Rap music has been and still is deeply insightful as it continues to address and respond to police violence that plagues the Black community. While rap music has often been criticized for the content being overtly sexual and explicitly violent,<sup>453</sup> when tragedy strikes Black people, rap music always responds to these

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<sup>453</sup> Kenneth Jones, "Are Rap Videos More Violent? Style Differences and the Prevalence of Sex and Violence in the Age of MTV," *Howard Journal of Communications* 8, no. 4 (1997): 343-356.

struggles and uplifts the community. For my analyses, I will not interpret the song and video separately, but I will analyze key points where the imagery and the lyrics intersect to reveal the presence and the use of Postmemory as resistance.

It has been established that Black youth culture (and contemporary youth culture overall) is heavily centered around Hip-Hop culture, and they are also the main consumers of rap music as well.<sup>454</sup> It is only natural that rap music responds and speaks to the struggles facing Black youth. Rapper Vic Mensa has been openly critical of the police in interviews as well as in his music. In order to examine his single and music video *16 Shots* (2016) as a response to anti-Black violence, I want to return to the murder of Laquan McDonald.<sup>455</sup> Laquan McDonald was a sixteen-year-old boy murdered by the Chicago police, which led to one of the biggest police cover-ups in Chicago history.<sup>456</sup> The police actively obtained and erased eighty-six minutes of footage from a nearby Burger King surveillance camera.<sup>457</sup> Some of the officers also intentionally damaged their body cameras.

Initially, the police stated that they did not have any video that they could use until an unnamed whistle-blower stated that "there was a video and it was horrific."<sup>458</sup> The report

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<sup>454</sup> Nkemka Anyiwo, "'They Can't Take Away the Light': Hip-Hop Culture and Black Youth's Racial Resistance," *Youth & Society* 54, no. 4 (2022): 611–634.

<sup>455</sup> The murder of Laquan McDonald was first mentioned in Chapter 2 as an example of police misconduct and coverups.

<sup>456</sup> Donald F. Tibbs and Tryon P. Woods, "Requiem for Laquan McDonald: Policing as Punishment and Abolishing Reasonable Suspicion," *Temple Law Review*, 89 (2016): 763.

<sup>457</sup> Somil Trivedi and Nicole Gonzalez Van Cleve, "To Serve and Protect Each Other: How Police-Prosecutor Codependence Enables Police Misconduct," *Boston University Law Review* 100 (2020): 895.

<sup>458</sup> Curtis Black, "How Chicago Tried to Cover up a Police Execution," *The Chicago Reporter*, 15 May 2017, [www.chicagoreporter.com/how-chicago-tried-to-cover-up-a-police-execution/](http://www.chicagoreporter.com/how-chicago-tried-to-cover-up-a-police-execution/).

describing the shooting stated that McDonald was the aggressor and that he charged at them; however, the video revealed something else entirely. In the recording taken from the police dash-cam, we see McDonald running in the opposite direction, away from the police. When the recording of McDonald's shooting was finally disseminated to the public, the city of Chicago was in an uproar. The video of the shooting was released on November 24, 2015, and the Black citizens in the city of Chicago protested from November 2015 to March 2016.<sup>459</sup> Once again, digital spaces provided Black youth with the space to mourn McDonald and criticize a racist police force. It was vital that the video of Laquan McDonald was disseminated, but the trauma that it caused is immeasurable. The frequent dissemination of Black death on digital platforms has impacted the content that is marketed towards Black youth, but it has also contributed to shaping their activism. Vic Mensa was twenty-three years old when he released *16 Shots* (2016), and the chorus of the song became a permanent mantra during police protests. His music spoke directly to Black youth because his words and his rage were things they could relate to. Most importantly, Laquan's death deeply resonated with Black youth because they saw themselves in him, and they knew that they could be subjected to a similar fate.

Vic Mensa, like the Black youth to whom his music speaks, has grown up witnessing Black death. His music is a simultaneous response to the police and to the people of Chicago. My analysis of Mensa's video is to place his art within the context of bell hooks' definition of "talking back."<sup>460</sup> While Black youth has grown up feeling powerless witnessing death up

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<sup>459</sup> Alison Hill, "Political Activism: Chicago Politicians' Silence When Black Lives Matter," *Public Interest Law Report* 21 (2015): 72.

<sup>460</sup> Hooks, "Talking Back."



close, in near-real time, Mensa is an example of how Black youth uses music as a response to the powerlessness that emerges when these scenes of violence frequently appear, further contributing to mental trauma. Mensa's music video opens with a five-second clip from the dash-camera video of the night of Laquan McDonald's murder. It's dark, and the lights from the police cruiser illuminate the video. We see Vic Mensa standing defiantly with his head slightly tilted. As the camera pans upward from his feet, we see him wearing a Black hoodie with white letters with the words "RESIST" as he walks towards the camera. Another clip from the dash cam is interwoven. As we quickly flash back to Vic Mensa on the right-hand side continuing his stride, we can see the feet of a young man dangling.



**Figure 3.6: A still from Vic Mensa's 16 Shots (2016). As Mensa walks forward, his image is blurred in the background, and the feet of young man are in the foreground.**

Directly after that scene, for about five seconds, there is a Black male dancer moving his body as if he is being shot as Mensa raps, "*you know it cause he Black, shot him sixteen times, how fucked up is that?*" As Mensa continues his defiant stride, the screen flashes between him and the police that are approaching. The chorus of the song simultaneously plays out as Mensa is brutally beaten by the officers:

One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight

Nine, ten, eleven, fuck 12<sup>461</sup>

One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight

Nine, ten, eleven, fuck 12

Sixteen shots, and we buckin' back

Sixteen shots

Sixteen shots, and we buckin' back

Sixteen shots<sup>462</sup>

Vic Mensa rises from the ground, and he grabs one of the officers' batons as he is being beaten, but he doesn't strike the officer. He throws it away, and he continues to stumble forward, injured but still walking away from the police.

In his second encounter, with a different group of officers, Mensa starts to walk forward once again, and as he approaches the officers, they tase him, and he falls to the ground. Once again, he slowly gets up and continues to walk forward defiantly. Mensa comes across an additional, larger group of police officers. They are standing outside of their police cruisers, all of them with their guns pointed in his direction. He continues to walk towards them, and as he approaches, they fire at him repeatedly, and he is struck by multiple gunshots. His body falls to the ground directly into a gigantic puzzle of chalk outlines all over the

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<sup>461</sup> "12" is slang for the police.

<sup>462</sup> Vic Mensa, "Vic Mensa-16 Shots," Genius, [www.genius.com/Vic-mensa-16-shots-lyrics](http://www.genius.com/Vic-mensa-16-shots-lyrics).

asphalt, and he fits perfectly into one of them. Mensa struggles to get up, but he rises once more, his face covered in blood, stumbling as he raps:



**Figure 3.7: A still from Vic Mensa's video 16 Shots (2016). Rapper Vic Mensa falls directly into a chalk outline after being shot. He is surrounded by multiple chalk lines.**

Somebody tell these mothafuckas keep they hands off me

I ain't a mothafuckin' slave, keep your chains off me

You better hope this 9-millimeter jam on me

Or get blown, I hope you got your body cam turnt on

Fuck a black cop too, that's the same fight

You got a badge, bitch, but you still ain't white

This for Laquan on sight, when you see Van Dyke

Tell him I don't bring a knife to a gunfight<sup>463</sup>

As Mensa is shot repeatedly, the chorus rings out simultaneously with the gunshots as they enter his body. He continues walking forward slowly toward an officer and places his

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<sup>463</sup> Ibid.

fingertips on the barrel of the gun and pushes it down, making the officer lower their weapon as all of the other officers follow suit. The only light that illuminates this exchange is the flashing red and blue lights from the police cruisers. Mensa turns around, walking away from them as the words "Murderer" are repeated. The scene cuts to a young Black man wearing the same exact outfit Laquan McDonald wore the night he was killed; a black bomber jacket, black jeans, and black sneakers. His dancing and movements are interspersed with the actual police footage of the Laquan McDonald shooting. The dancer performs a reenactment of McDonald's final moments. As he dances, we hear the voice of Jeffrey Neslund, the attorney that represented the estate of Laquan McDonald, narrating McDonald's murder as the outro of the video:

The video shows Laquan walking southbound down the middle of Pulaski. There are squad cars visible in front of him and also squad cars behind him. The shooter's squad car is visible as it drives past Laquan. Two officers then exit that vehicle with their guns drawn. At that point, Laquan begins to look away from the officers at a southwest angle toward the sidewalk. When Laquan is about 12 to 15 feet away from the officers, the width of an entire lane of the southbound traffic. One officer begins shooting. Laquan immediately spins to the ground, and the video clearly shows that the officer continues to shoot Laquan multiple times as he lies in the street. 16 seconds pass from the time Laquan hits the ground until the last visible puff of smoke rises from his torso area. An officer then approaches Laquan, stands over him and appears to shout something as he kicks the knife out of his hand.<sup>464</sup>

Jeffrey Neslund's narration of Laquan McDonald's death as the outro to Mensa's song functions as a moment of truth. The music video was released two days after the second anniversary of McDonald's death. The initial narrative surrounding McDonald's death positioned it as a "justifiable homicide," that McDonald's behavior was frantic and "crazed,"

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<sup>464</sup> Ibid.

that he "raised the knife across his chest;"<sup>465</sup> the dash-cam video completely refutes that initial police report, which did not include how many times McDonald was shot.<sup>466</sup> Police brutality has been a pervasive issue in the Black community, and Black youth are not just watching—they are actively involved when it comes to social justice efforts.<sup>467</sup> Like the Emmett Till Generation's organization and the role that the youth played in the Civil Rights Movement,<sup>468</sup> The Trayvon Generation, which includes rapper Vic Mensa, have grown up with and used their technological advancements to their advantage. They have maintained social movements and organized them in digital spaces and on the streets. Bearing witness to traumatizing racial violence in close proximity has not deterred their efforts and their labor as activists and citizen journalists.

"The hip-hop movement is rooted in a struggle for public space,"<sup>469</sup> and the interactions that take place in the video position Vic Mensa demanding a right to exist free from police harassment. This video and Mensa's personal work as an activist keep the tradition of resistance alive. Part of that resistance is transforming trauma into activism. The

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<sup>465</sup> Steve Mills, "Laquan McDonald Police Reports Differ Dramatically from Video," *Chicago Tribune*, December 14, 2015, <https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-laquan-mcdonald-chicago-police-reports-met-20151204-story.html>.

<sup>466</sup> Ibid.

<sup>467</sup> Ruth Milkman, "A New Political Generation: Millennials and the Post-2008 Wave of Protest," *American Sociological Review* 82, no. 1 (2017): 1-31.

<sup>468</sup> Harvey Young, "A New Fear Known to Me": Emmett Till's Influence and the Black Panther Party," *Southern Quarterly* 45, no. 4 (2008): 22.

<sup>469</sup> Martin Lamotte, "Rebels Without a Pause: Hip-hop and Resistance in the City," *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 38, no. 2 (2014): 686-694.

previous scholarship that discusses the work of Vic Mensa's discusses his overall activism<sup>470</sup> as it pertains to his public politics as a Chicago native,<sup>471</sup> but there has been little scholarship addressing the imagery in his music videos as it pertains to postmemory. Vic Mensa's *16 Shots* (2016) is both a plea and a response to the legacy of police brutality and murder that plagues Black communities across America. This video is also an example of African-American artistic resistance,<sup>472</sup> and Vic Mensa's use of the dash-cam footage of Laquan McDonald's murder is a symbol of visual resistance within the Black tradition of transforming pain into power. The image captured above (Figure 4.1) is from the opening scene of the video.

As Vic Mensa walks towards a small group of officers, he steps past a lifeless body dressed in men's jeans and sneakers. Since his body is in motion, he becomes blurred, allowing the stillness of the young man's body to be the focal point of the shot. The lifeless body symbolizes the legacy of lynching and anti-Black violence in the United States, which also forces viewers of the video to make the connection between state violence in the past and the progression of that violence in the present. Vic Mensa walking past that body and toward the police officers is demonstrative of how Black people carry these legacies within them when they are forced into confrontations with the police. The violence that Black people were

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<sup>470</sup> Bria Riley, "America's Mass Shootings and Hip-Hop: The History, Myths, and Hip-Hop's Invaluable Contribution to Mass Shooting Prevention," *North Carolina Central University Law Review* 42 (2019): 121.

<sup>471</sup> Jarrod Shanahan and Zhandarka Kurti, "Prelude to a Hot American summer," Brooklyn Rail, <https://brooklynrail.org/2020/07/field-notes/Prelude-to-a-Hot-American-Summer> (2020).

<sup>472</sup> Paul Von Blum, "African American Visual Representation: From Repression to Resistance," *Journal of Pan African Studies* 5, no. 8 (2012): 41.

forced to endure continues to shape their future politics and actions.<sup>473</sup> The Civil Rights movement laid out a template for activism that Vic Mensa activates as he engages with the police in the video.

In the visuals for *16 Shots* (2016), Mensa continues to experience multiple encounters with the police, and with each encounter, the violence intensifies. In his first encounter with the police, he is beaten by multiple officers with nightsticks. In the second encounter, he is tased, and in the final encounter, he is shot multiple times. After each violent encounter, Mensa stumbles around to find his way until he eventually encounters the next group of officers. Every time he engages with the police, he is subjected to gratuitous violence, and in each interaction, he responds nonviolently while reciting defiant lyrics. His lyrics are vengeful, and they are filled with (justifiable) rage. The juxtaposition of his peaceful actions with his lyrics reveals the complexity and the interiority of Black people's experiences with the police. "Hip-hop provides both a politics of recognition and rage and an aspirational focus for urban youth up against marginalization, isolation, and exclusion."<sup>474</sup>

Black people have had to bear witness to an accumulation of police violence. For as long as they have been alive, they have had to bear witness to police violence that is indiscriminate. Vic Mensa's lyrics are angry because when these events take place, at the frequency that they do, anger is justified, but it cannot be shown. Black youth are policed in their schools as well as in their communities, and, on top of that, they are forced to remain

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<sup>473</sup> Fredrick C. Harris, "It Takes a Tragedy to Arouse Them: Collective Memory and Collective Action During the Civil Rights Movement," *Social Movement Studies* 5, no. 1 (2006): 19-43.

<sup>474</sup> Lamotte, "Rebels Without a Pause."

calm in high-risk encounters with the police. The juxtaposition of his peaceful reactions to the police reveals the limitations that Black people have when engaging with the police.<sup>475</sup>

Black survival in these situations is predicated on placing the blame and the burden of racism upon Black people and calling for them to be "less threatening," but the video reveals that even if you are not a threat, it won't stop the police from committing murder.<sup>476</sup> They are able to examine their history and implement it in the present.<sup>477</sup> Vic Mensa never fought back, despite the fact that the song's lyrics describe a community that is tired of demanding justice; they want revenge. However, Mensa's actions show that revenge isn't possible when simply existing is enough to cause death. The song sounds like a battle cry, but combined with the music video's imagery, it is transformed into a plea: Stop killing us.

Another powerful scene from *16 Shots* (2016) takes place after Vic Mensa is shot by the police, and he falls directly into a chalk outline while being surrounded by multiple others (Figure 4.2). The chalk outlines can be interpreted in two ways: as preparation for the accumulation of bodies to come or as indicative of how many lives the police have stolen. With each altercation that Vic Mensa experiences in the video, he is never defeated. He falls, he stumbles, he struggles, but he always gets back up; he always survives. As the video comes to a close and the dancer mirrors the killing of Laquan McDonald, Vic Mensa's refusal to be

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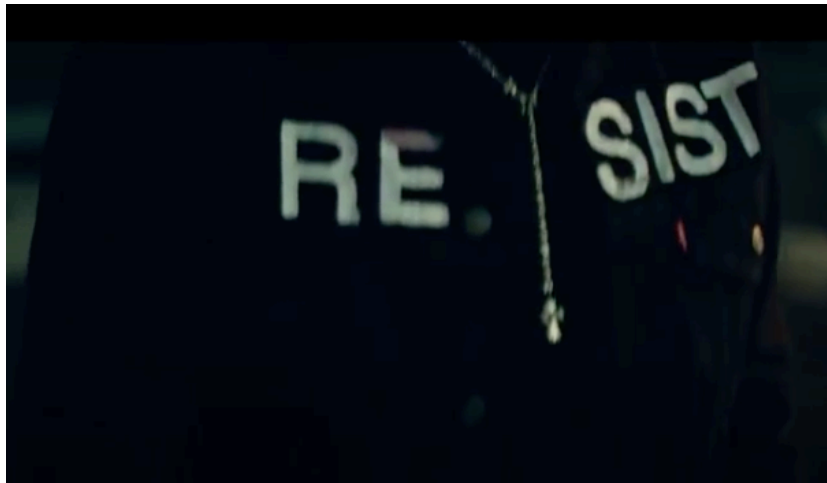
<sup>475</sup> Fredrick C. Harris, "Collective Memory, Collective Action, and Black Activism in the 1960s," in *Breaking the Cycles of Hatred: Memory, Law, and Repair* (2002): 154-69.

<sup>476</sup> Paul Butler, "The System is Working the Way it is Supposed To: The Limits of Criminal Justice Reform," *Freedom Center Journal*. (2019): 75.

<sup>477</sup> Ibid.



defeated in the face of state violence makes the message as clear as the word on his jacket:  
"Resist."



**Figure 3.8: A still from the opening scene of Vic Mensa's video with the words "RESIST" on the front of his jacket.**

As the dancer re-creates McDonald's death as the lawyer for the estate narrates the end of the video (which mirrors the end of McDonald's life), it becomes clear that Vic Mensa's actions were the inverse of Laquan McDonald's. Laquan walked away from the police, and Vic Mensa walked towards them, and both Vic Mensa's experiences in the music video and Laquan McDonald's final moments recorded on the dash-cam demonstrate that there is no "correct" way to engage with the police. The lawyer's narration of Laquan McDonald's murder further proves that there was nothing that Laquan could have done differently. He was shot sixteen times in thirteen seconds, which is where the chorus and the name of the song are derived from. Sixteen officers were also involved in the cover-up of McDonald's murder.<sup>478</sup> Vic Mensa's use of postmemory was revealed in an interview discussing the visuals for the song:

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<sup>478</sup> Jared Hamernick, "16 Shots and a Cover-up: Legal Remedies for Officer-Involved Conspiracies," *University of Illinois Law Review* (2021): 1845.

This record is like self-defense, Mensa said of his new EP:

Because to me, Laquan McDonald represents Emmett Till, which represents every name down the line, and since then, a lot of things have changed, but one main thing that hasn't changed is that our lives are not respected. All my earliest memories with police officers are like, 'Hey, get your fucking hands out that hoodie before I punch you in the fucking face!'" Mensa said. "'What the fuck did I do? What'd I do? What law did I break?' You live with that enough, and there's not really any turning back."<sup>479</sup>

Vic Mensa chooses to "talk back" to a system that refuses to value Black life by using his art. Black youth are fully aware of what it is that they have to face, but they also use their cultural knowledge to connect their experiences with the police to a history of anti-Blackness. Mensa's engagement with postmemory reveals how it has shaped his perspective when engaging with the police, his activism, and his music.<sup>480</sup> Black youth are using digital platforms and art to educate the masses.<sup>481</sup> Technology has been an important part of how young Black people stay connected and socially aware through their use of digital platforms.<sup>482</sup> "Within the current moment, however, some of the same technologies of surveillance used to criminalize Blackness are being repurposed by Black citizens, particularly Black youth, to resist the

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<sup>479</sup> Daniel Kreps, "Vic Mensa Takes on Police Brutality in Devastating '16 Shots' Video," *Rolling Stone*, June 25, 2018, [www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/vic-mensa-takes-on-police-brutality-in-devastating-16-shots-video-113259/](http://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/vic-mensa-takes-on-police-brutality-in-devastating-16-shots-video-113259/).

<sup>480</sup> Ruth García-Gavilanes, "The Memory Remains: Understanding Collective Memory in the Digital Age," *Science Advances* 3, no. 4 (2017): e1602368.

<sup>481</sup> Bettina L. Love and Regina N. Bradley, "Teaching Trayvon: Teaching about Racism Through Public Pedagogy, Hip Hop, Black Trauma, and Social Media," in *Racial Battle Fatigue: Insights from the Front Line of Social Justice* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2015): 255-268.

<sup>482</sup> Bonilla and Rosa, "# Ferguson: Digital Protest, Hashtag Ethnography."

criminalizing techniques of state power."<sup>483</sup> Vic Mensa's music video is another example of Black youth repurposing technology. His music video repurposes the state's technology (via the dash-cam) to reveal the oppressive nature of the Chicago Police Department."<sup>484</sup> While Vic Mensa's use of technology is different from the use of smartphones, the repurposing of the video is an artistic and political choice, as well as creative use of the state's technology. Digital culture is now an integral part of Black youth culture and activism. Only time will tell how technology will be further used to educate and resist.<sup>485</sup>

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<sup>483</sup> Marc Lamont Hill, "'Thank You, Black Twitter': State Violence, Digital Counterpublics, and Pedagogies of Resistance," *Urban Education* 53, no. 2 (2018): 286–302.

<sup>484</sup> Yvonne Liebermann, "Born Digital: The Black Lives Matter Movement and Memory After the Digital Turn," *Memory Studies* 14, no. 4 (2021): 713-732.

<sup>485</sup> Laura Schelenz, "Artificial Intelligence Between Oppression and Resistance: Black Feminist Perspectives on Emerging Technologies," in *Artificial Intelligence and Its Discontents* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, 2022), 225-249.

## Chapter 4: Speculative Black Futures as Critical Dystopia

While Black death via racism/state violence has been centered via streaming and films marketed towards Black youth, it has also been included in media depicting Black futures. This chapter will focus on one episode of speculative media titled the "Black Museum" from the *Black Mirror* (2017) streaming series, which depicts Black death via racism/state violence in the future at the intersection of race and technology. These future representations of Black life build upon contemporary and historical iterations of state/gendered/anti-Black violence, which reveals future anti-Black violence as being simultaneously both familiar and new. Anti-Black violence is exacerbated with the introduction of new technological innovations, with speculative versions of racist anti-Black violence that is to come. These speculative futures reveal the violent potentialities for state violence in the future. Speculative futures demonstrate the importance of analyzing the expansive reach of anti-Blackness and the implications that it has for Black life. How do we make sense of the emphasis that this particular media places on inescapable time loops of Black suffering and death? What do we make of the fact that there are no safe temporalities for Black people in which their proximity to death is not always present?

This chapter addresses the role of witnessing and Postmemory in speculative media by using critical dystopia<sup>486</sup> as an analytical lens. While this particular media genre provides us with the possibilities and the vast reach of technology via speculative futures, it is also rife with commentary on our existing relationship with technology and race. Critical dystopia examines contemporary issues and presents an imaginative rendering of what the future will

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<sup>486</sup> Meghan Hartnett, *The Future of Racial Classifications: Exploring Race in the Critical Dystopia*, Dissertation, Bridgewater State University, 2018.

be if we begin to work on addressing our current conditions. The futures presented by critical dystopian media are not presented as being inevitable, but they are presented as tangible possibilities if we refuse to grapple with issues presented by race/gender/sexuality in the present. When critical dystopian media addresses the future(s) of racism and technology, it also reveals advanced forms of policing, surveillance, and seemingly inescapable time-loops of anti-Black violence and death. Using critical dystopia as an analytic framework provides a path toward imagining a world where the permanence of anti-Blackness can become undone. I want to return to the genre of critical dystopia<sup>487</sup> introduced in the previous chapter as a framework to analyze the speculative futures presented in the final episode of the fourth season of *Black Mirror*, titled "Black Museum" (2017). While the series has been examined by scholars discussing the implications present in the aforementioned media when it comes to present and future possibilities for artificial intelligence,<sup>488</sup> mass incarceration,<sup>489</sup> revenge,<sup>490</sup> the consequences of technology,<sup>491</sup> and the continuation of medical racism,<sup>492</sup> the presence

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<sup>487</sup> Booker, *Dystopia*.

<sup>488</sup> Christine Muller, "We Have Only Ourselves to Fear: Reflections on AI Through the Black Mirror of 'White Christmas,'" in *Through the Black Mirror* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, 2019), 95-107.

<sup>489</sup> David Pierson, "Speculative Punishment, Incarceration, and Control in Black Mirror," in *The Palgrave Handbook of Incarceration in Popular Culture* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, 2020), 455-471.

<sup>490</sup> Moya Bailey, "A Radical Reckoning: A Black Woman's Racial Revenge in Black Mirror's 'Black Museum,'" *Feminist Media Studies* 21, no. 6 (2021): 891-904.

<sup>491</sup> Julie Ecurignan and François Allard-Huver, "It's More Like an Eternal Waking Nightmare from Which There Is No Escape. Media and Technologies as (Digital) Prisons in Black Mirror," in *The Palgrave Handbook of Incarceration in Popular Culture* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, 2020), 487-498.

<sup>492</sup> Sayantani DasGupta, "Visionary Medicine: Race, Health, Power, and Speculation," in *The Routledge Companion to Health Humanities* (New York: Routledge, 2020), 33-38.

and the role of witnessing and Postmemory invites further interpretation, as well as additional analyses concerning the presence of Black literary traditions in media.

#### **4.1 Black Witnessing & Media As Testimony**

While the media analyzed in this chapter is not consumed as written material, it comes to fruition from the written word as screenplays, scripts with dialogue and plots, etc., that revolve around some of the most painful aspects of the Black experience. From anxiety and fear-inducing interactions with the police to the inescapable punishment of the carceral system. Speculative fiction invites us, as readers, viewers, or listeners, to engage with what we witness within these stories. It has been previously argued and established that the call-and-response aspect sometimes present in Black literary traditions started with the Black church,<sup>493</sup> but beyond the church, these traditions are present in other Black spaces as well.<sup>494</sup> There are everyday iterations of call and response at play, from the lecture hall,<sup>495</sup> to the hair salon, to Black Twitter,<sup>496</sup> call and response can be wherever Black people are found. I contend that the feature of call and response is present in critical dystopias that center Black

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<sup>493</sup> Geneva Smitherman, *Talkin and Testifyin: The Language of Black America*, vol. 51 (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1986).

<sup>494</sup> Gillian R. Richards-Greaves, "'Say Hallelujah, Somebody'" and "'I Will Call upon the Lord': An Examination of Call-and-Response in the Black Church," *Western Journal of Black Studies* 40, no. 3 (2016).

<sup>495</sup> Patreece R. Boone, "When the 'Amen Corner' Comes to Class: An Examination of the Pedagogical and Cultural Impact of Call-Response Communication in the Black College Classroom," *Communication Education* 52, no. 3-4 (2003): 212-229.

<sup>496</sup> Brock, "From the Blackhand Side."

experiences. They invite a response from their Black audiences, or at the very least, a reaction to the grim futures that they present, by implying that these futures are avoidable.<sup>497</sup>

Often, speculative fiction that centers on the experiences of Black people functions as a testimony. It is a fictional story that is built upon realistic experiences of anti-Blackness. Testimonies also are part of larger Black religious traditions where Black people would share religious encounters that fortified their faith, but they are not solely defined by their proximity to religion. Testimony is also a form of empowerment for the storytellers who are able to connect their experiences to issues currently plaguing their collective communities.<sup>498</sup> Even though speculative fiction is, in fact, fiction, it provides storytellers the space that they need to tell the truth. They are able to draw from source material that is rooted in historic or modern iterations of anti-black violence and share that story with a larger audience, which will ultimately provide them with witnesses.<sup>499</sup> By viewing these depictions of speculative futures as testimonies, it invites readers and viewers to treat them as such, to respond to the material, to bear witness to the truth that these stories present because testimonies are meant to be heard, felt, and, most importantly, responded to.

The act of truly witnessing "occurs in how one persistently lives in relation to others and to structures in social life, including how one uses one's agency to help those in greatest

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<sup>497</sup> I understand that whether or not these futures are avoidable is dependent on the gravity of the social conditions. I don't think it is possible for an individual to "think" their way out of poverty, or other dehumanizing material conditions. However, critical dystopias call for sweeping institutional change.

<sup>498</sup> Rhea Estelle Lathan, "Testimony as a Sponsor of Literacy: Bernice Robinson and South Carolina Sea Island Citizenship Program's Literacy Activism," *Literacy, Economy, and Power: Writing Research Ten Years after Literacy in American Lives* (2013): 30-44.

<sup>499</sup> Ibid.

need."<sup>500</sup> Witnessing via speculative fiction reveals an urgency in addressing anti-blackness by revealing how monstrous racism can become and how it can develop with technological aid. This is not to imply that technology is this inevitable racist force, but to recognize that in an anti-Black world, there is always the possibility that it can and will be used as a tool to further advance the ways in which anti-black violence can affect Black people.

The work of speculative fiction that is being discussed in this chapter and the style in which the story is told speaks to the significance of the Black narrative tradition.<sup>501</sup> Dr. Geneva Smitherman's innovative text *Talkin and Testifyin: The Language of Black America* describes the importance of narrative in Black storytelling. Smitherman establishes storytelling as a rhetorical strategy employed by Black people to connect different aspects of the black experience into concrete narratives. These narratives are described by Smitherman as testimonies, which include multiple genres ranging from ghost stories, folk tales, etc., in which each retelling of these stories "recreates the spiritual reality for others who at the moment vicariously experience what the testifier has gone through."<sup>502</sup> This demonstrates that these stories are so much more than just simple commentary. Sharing these stories creates a community with those who are willing to listen. These stories are more than fiction. They are a "dramatic" narration and a communal reenactment of one's feelings and experiences."<sup>503</sup>

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<sup>500</sup> Rosetta E. Ross, *Witnessing and Testifying: Black Women, Religion, and Civil Rights* (New York: Fortress Press, 2003).

<sup>501</sup> While all the authors of the media/texts used in this chapter are not Black, the Black narrative tradition, and how viewers of this media are also witnesses is evidence of the presence and influence of this tradition.

<sup>502</sup> Smitherman, *Talkin and Testifyin: The Language of Black America*.

<sup>503</sup> Ibid.



Ultimately, the Black narrative tradition is embedded with truth in the tale, as Black storytellers draw from history, real-life experience, personal feelings, and imagination to create intricate testimonies for their listeners to witness.<sup>504</sup> There is a conversation within speculative fiction that centers Black experiences, where they are asking the audience to vicariously "experience" the story, or the testimony, that is being relayed. The audience, or the witnesses, are also tasked with the responsibility of *doing* something with what they have witnessed. While the viewers of Black speculative media are not only Black people, the experiences presented on screen require a specific type of cultural knowledge. While other viewers are present, the experiences on screen resonate with Black people because of their societal experiences and how race impacts and frames those experiences. They have a cultural understanding of what it means to be and act as a "witness." Testimony and the act of bearing witness can function "as weapons in wars against white supremacy."<sup>505</sup> By engaging with speculative fiction via media or text, the audience or the reader learns to bear witness, which is essential to the narratives produced by Black authors because their narrative literacies are "important humanizing projects in contemporary contexts that attempt to dehumanize, oppress, suppress, and annihilate Black bodies."<sup>506</sup> It is "the act of listening, writing, and conversing in one's cultural point of reference."<sup>507</sup> Their stories, whether told by them directly

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<sup>504</sup> Ibid.

<sup>505</sup> Danielle L. McGuire, "'It Was Like All of Us Had Been Raped': Sexual Violence, Community Mobilization, and the African American Freedom Struggle," in *The Best American History Essays 2006* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 123-150.

<sup>506</sup> Venus E. Evans-Winters, *Black Feminism in Qualitative Inquiry: A Mosaic for Writing our Daughter's Body* (New York: Routledge, 2019).

<sup>507</sup> Ibid.

or relayed by someone else that centers their lived experiences are necessary in order to destroy a system that seeks to not only silence or outright efface Black narrative voices.

When engaging with Black speculative fiction, or speculative fiction that centers Black experiences, it is crucial that we examine it from the perspective of a critical dystopia asking ourselves if we are able to recognize something familiar in these speculative futures. By locating the familiar, we ultimately see the contemporary problems that need to be addressed, lest the stories presented in speculative futures will come to pass without our intervention in the present. Critical dystopia functions as a useful genre for depicting issues related to race, racism, and technology because of its ability to elicit change from the audience. "The critical dystopia, on the other hand, is more nuanced; while critiquing certain negative practices or institutions, this type of dystopia retains a strong utopian dimension, emphasizing that there are alternatives to the dystopian conditions being portrayed"<sup>508</sup> The issues presented in the series are supposed to challenge us to not simply think about the future but to change it.<sup>509</sup> As a genre, critical dystopia examines and critiques pressing sociopolitical issues within speculative media. Speculative futures via critical dystopia transforms us into participants in these stories; our responses and our affirmations of them transform us into witnesses.

## **4.2 The Speculative Future of State Violence in Black Mirror's "Black Museum"**

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<sup>508</sup> Keith M. Booker, "The Critical Reception of Speculative Fiction," *Critical insights: Contemporary Speculative Fiction* (2013): 3-6.

<sup>509</sup> Tom Moylan, "The Necessity of Hope in Dystopian Times: A critical Reflection," *Utopian Studies* 31, no. 1 (2020): 164-193.

The 2017 episode of *Black Mirror*, titled "Black Museum,"<sup>510</sup> begins with the viewer observing a young Black woman named Nish who is driving through the desert where she visits the Black Museum at a gas station. The owner, Rolo Haynes, gives Nish an impromptu tour while he divulges the backstories to the museum's questionable artifacts, starting with a hairnet. Rolo's previous job prior to opening the Black Museum was that of a recruiter. It was Rolo's job to find candidates for experimental research related to medical technology. In a flashback, Dr. Peter Dawson tested an implant that would make him feel the emotions and sensations of the person that wore the hairnet. Initially, the intended use of the hairnet was that of a tool to help the doctor experience what his patients did so that he could diagnose them quickly. However, after experiencing the death of one of his patients, he was aroused by the patient's pain, and he became an addict. He starts to harm himself, chasing the initial high, which eventually leads to him murdering a homeless man, which ultimately causes him to fall into a coma.

The next scene jumps back to the present, with Rolo continuing the tour despite the broken air conditioner. Nish offers Rolo a bottle of water, which he accepts. They move on to a glass case with a toy monkey inside. Rolo continues to describe how he convinced a man named Jack to transfer the consciousness of his comatose wife into his brain so that she could experience what he feels and communicate with him. Both Jack and Carrie ultimately became irritated by this arrangement. They are essentially two people sharing a body, thoughts, and sensations, which leads to a lack of privacy and agency for both of them. Rolo continues with the story, telling Nish that he offered Jack the ability to put Carrie on "pause." Jack pauses Carrie for months, and after he eventually unpauses her, they come to an agreement where she

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<sup>510</sup> Specifically, this is the sixth episode from the fourth season of the *Black Mirror* series.

will only be unpaused on weekends, giving them the "space" that they need to have a healthy relationship. Jack eventually began dating a woman named Emily, who wanted his wife, Carrie, to be deleted. Rolo decides that instead of deleting Carrie, he transfers her consciousness to the toy monkey, which he gives to her young son. The toy monkey, which could feel sensations and was only capable of saying two phrases, eventually bored her son as he grew up, and he began to treat it poorly. This technology, and thus the toy monkey with her consciousness inside, became illegal, and Rolo was fired.

The main attraction of the museum is a holograph of a Black man named Clayton Leigh. Rolo (who is a white man) presents a narrative to Nish that paints Clayton Leigh as a criminal guilty of murdering a white woman, but Nish interjects, reminding him of the fact there was conflicting evidence that proved his innocence. Clayton Leigh, unable to afford an adequate defense, is sentenced to death. While on death row, Clayton is offered a deal that guarantees his wife and child would be financially cared for if he agreed to have his consciousness and likeness uploaded to Rolo's exhibit. The exhibit would allow visitors of the Black museum to pull a lever and subject a conscious hologram of Clayton to the electric chair. After visitors electrocute Clayton, they can purchase a souvenir copy of his consciousness being digitally murdered that plays in perpetuity on a keychain. This is the most popular exhibit in the Black Museum. Rolo starts to feel uncomfortable and expresses that was having difficulty breathing as he begins to choke. Nish continues the story from where Rolo left off since Rolo can no longer speak, ultimately revealing that she is Clayton's daughter.

After several public protests against the Black Museum, attendance to the exhibit decreased immensely, reducing it to sadists and wealthy white supremacists. Their consistent and repeated electrocutions reduced Clayton's consciousness/hologram into a vegetative state. His wife (Nish's mother), Angelica, overdosed the day after she saw him at the museum; she was completely crushed at the sight of him. As revenge, Nish sabotaged the air conditioning at the museum, which gave her the opportunity, unbeknownst to Rolo, to offer him the poisoned water. As Rolo is incapacitated, Nish transfers Rolo's consciousness into Clayton's hologram, then she electrocutes him, finally creating a souvenir of Rolo's perpetual suffering. Nish sets the museum on fire but not before taking Carrie with her (her consciousness remains within the toy monkey). We hear Nish conversing with her mother, whose consciousness is also inside of her head like Carrie's was with Jack.

The use of technology at the intersection of race presented in "Black Museum" highlights multiple contemporary and historical issues within our society. Following the previously outlined analytic of critical dystopia, which asks viewers or witnesses to find "the familiar" in order to locate contemporary issues that need to be addressed, ultimately reveals what will be held up for analysis within this episode. I will also add that the length of *Black Mirror* episodes is equivalent to that of feature films. So, to give adequate attention to the themes of state violence, speculative futures, race, and technology that are present, I will only analyze one episode from the series in this chapter. The episode addresses issues that are: historical, contemporary, and future modes of racism, the display of Black pain, and the role of witnessing. From a critical dystopian perspective, how does technology in the future further contribute to and aid racism? My analysis of this episode will address this question as well as what is implied in these speculative depictions of witnessing, postmemory, and perpetual

Black suffering. Building upon previous scholarship that has highlighted the relationship between contemporary digital instances of racism and a history of white supremacy,<sup>511</sup> it is also important to highlight how speculative representations of racism are functioning as terrifying predictions of racism's expansion and development with the assistance of technology, namely the consumption of Black pain. While the consumption of Black pain via visual media is not new,<sup>512</sup> "Black Museum" reveals "new" types of speculative racial terror on the horizon. The vision of the future presented in "Black Museum" is indicative of the contemporary issues plaguing our soc. One particular issue of importance is the continued presence and the speculative future expansion of anti-Blackness. Anti-Black racism, aided by a system of white supremacy which has remained as a steadfast pillar that continues to shape and structure the world that we live in,<sup>513</sup> has made these imaginative renderings of the future a possibility where anti-blackness and its speculative iterations continue to persist.

The story of Clayton Leigh does not only attend to the expansion of the carceral system<sup>514</sup> and the perpetual cycle of suffering that Black inmates have been continuously subjected to,<sup>515</sup> but his imprisonment provides a speculative vision of the future of mass

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<sup>511</sup> Sobande, "Spectacularized and Branded Digital (re)presentations of Black People and Blackness."

<sup>512</sup> Jennifer C. Mueller and Rula Issa, "9 Consuming Black Pain," in *Race and Contention in Twenty-First Century US Media* (New York: Routledge, 2016).

<sup>513</sup> Steve Martinot and Jared Sexton, "The Avant-Garde of White Supremacy," *Social Identities* 9, no. 2 (2003): 169-181.

<sup>514</sup> Pierson, "Speculative Punishment."

<sup>515</sup> Clarissa Carden and Margaret Gibson, "Living on Beyond the Body: The Digital Soul of Black Mirror," *The Moral Uncanny in Black Mirror* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, 2021), 141-152.

incarceration.<sup>516</sup> It reveals the future of mass incarceration by invoking aspects of the darkest period of America's racially charged violence via lynching.<sup>517</sup> "Lynching is not so much forgotten but is the inner side of a violence prefigured as an outer side, an entanglement; and this aesthetic and political arrangement is not an aberration of the political will but a practice of public sovereignty through a praxis of aesthetics."<sup>518</sup> Lynching's history runs deep, but for Black people, the memory and the brutality of it all remain close to the surface. I want to return to the concept of postmemory and how it functions as a proliferating archive of events and memories that attends to the legacy of violence that haunts Black life. All racialized/state-sanctioned deaths begin to bear resemblance within the scope of postmemory. What postmemory maps out is a consistent pattern of racial violence and exploitation so that every death that we continue to bear witness to is never a singular event but a chain of events, subsequently revealing inevitable moments of racial trauma. Postmemory contains not only the deaths of Black people but the unequivocal structure of the law, in which Black transgressors of white victims are always viewed as guilty. Clayton Leigh's conviction and the racial implications of the crime invoke the systemic implications of racism. The racial dynamics are also symbolic, considering the significance of race in mass incarceration,<sup>519</sup> the

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<sup>516</sup> Marcus Harnes, Barbara Harnes, and Meredith Harnes, "Popular Visions of Incarceration," in *The Palgrave Handbook of Incarceration in Popular Culture* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, 2020), 1-15.

<sup>517</sup> It is important to note that *Black Mirror* is a British series and the episode discussed in this chapter is the only episode that marks a clear geographical destination, since the Black Museum is revealed as a space in the American Southwest. This perhaps obfuscates Britain's relationship to slavery, by averting the viewers gaze elsewhere.

<sup>518</sup> Alfred Frankowski, "Spectacle Terror Lynching, Public Sovereignty, and Antiblack Genocide," *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 33, no. 2 (2019): 268-281.

<sup>519</sup> Loï Wacquant, "From slavery to Mass Incarceration: Rethinking the 'Race Question 'In the US,'" in *Race, Law, and Society* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 277-296.

death penalty,<sup>520</sup> and the history<sup>521</sup> of exploitation/commodification of prisoners.<sup>522</sup>

The speculative future of mass incarceration presented in "Black Museum" reveals terrifying developments in prisoner exploitation. While historically and currently imprisoned, Black people are often from a lower socioeconomic background, making them more susceptible to increased policing and more vulnerable to longer prison sentences due to racism and a lack of resources, which often foreclose the possibility of a defense.<sup>523</sup> In the future depicted, Clayton is still subjected to the same forces of racism and mass incarceration, as well as exploitation via commodification. Leigh's conviction and the financial toll that it took on his family is what led to him consenting to Rolo's exploitation by uploading his consciousness<sup>524</sup> *after* he is put to death by the state as the main exhibit in the museum, which is a futuristic take on a historical issue.

Exploitation in this future iteration of mass incarceration presents a complex scenario where imprisoned Black people can be imprisoned once again, posthumously. Not only can one be imprisoned after death, but Clayton Leigh's case reveals that in the future, after being murdered by the state, in the aftermath of their death, one can be repeatedly viewed for entertainment. After the event, in which one visits the exhibit, one can create a souvenir of the

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<sup>520</sup> Peffley, Mark, and Jon Hurwitz. "Persuasion and resistance: Race and the death penalty in America." *American Journal of Political Science* 51.4 (2007): 996-1012.

<sup>521</sup> Nold, Caitlin. *Commodification of Black Bodies: Convict Leasing and Prison Privatization in the United States of America*, Dissertation, University of Washington, 2016.

<sup>522</sup> Cecil J. Hunt, "Feeding the Machine: The Commodification of Black Bodies from Slavery to Mass Incarceration," *University of Baltimore Law Review* 49 (2019): 313.

<sup>523</sup> Mumia Abu-Jamal and Johanna Fernández, "Locking up Black Dissidents and Punishing the Poor: The Roots of Mass Incarceration in the US," *Socialism and Democracy* 28, no. 3 (2014): 1-14.

<sup>524</sup> It is important to note that Clayton Leigh is a sentient, speaking, and feeling hologram.



person they've murdered, revealing a recording of them in perpetual pain on a keychain. *Black Mirror* presents its viewers with a speculative vision of incarceration in the future being transformed into a high-tech lynching. Turning Clayton Leigh's death into a repeated spectacle reveals the relationship between capital punishment and the history of white pleasure in Black pain.

In the United States, public executions were events that would often draw crowds that consisted of thousands of people.<sup>525</sup> The government's initial intention was for these public executions to serve as cautionary, as a means of instilling obedience and even fear within the populace through the use of punishment or death as a spectacle.<sup>526</sup> However, in the nineteenth century, officials gradually became concerned that the spectators at public executions would often show up not to condemn the actions of the person being punished but to be entertained by the pain and suffering of others. Beginning in the Northeast during the 1830s and gradually spreading across the country, legislatures ultimately removed executions away from public spaces, moving them into jail yards and, finally, into the bowels of prisons, away from public view.<sup>527</sup> This was true, with one exception being the American south. Public executions continued there and lasted well into the twentieth century, sometimes beyond the geographic locale of the south.<sup>528</sup> This is because the lethal public punishment of African-American's had

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<sup>525</sup> Steven A. Blum, "Public Executions: Understanding the Cruel and Unusual Punishments Clause," *Hastings Constitutional Law Quarterly* 19 (1991): 413.

<sup>526</sup> Harry M. Ward, *Public Executions in Richmond, Virginia: A History, 1782-1907*(Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2012).

<sup>527</sup> Franklin E. Zimring and Gordon Hawkins, *Capital Punishment and the American Agenda* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

<sup>528</sup> Jack Blocker Jr., Sr., *Lynching Beyond Dixie: American Mob Violence Outside the South* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2013).

become a social event for white community building.<sup>529</sup> White southerners feeling undermined in the aftermath of the Civil War, specifically the progress that came with Reconstruction, which led to Black people obtaining political roles, made whites feel as if they had lost control of the societal order. Not even the presence of Jim Crow laws could restore the control that they believed they had lost. Working-class whites saw a free Black labor force as a direct threat to their livelihood. Their fears of Black progress resulted in an amplification of stories they had heard regarding Black lawlessness. Then came the stories of "licentious Black men" as rapists and white people, especially white women, as innocent, virtuous, and vulnerable.<sup>530</sup> This history is part of postmemory and what is embedded in the minds of Black people when witnessing racial injustice. When Black people engage with speculative media, these histories are *a priori* during their consumption.

The optics of lynching in America proved to be abysmal for a nation that wanted to be recognized as powerful and upstanding while simultaneously abusing its most vulnerable citizens. The public shaming of Americans for the barbarity<sup>531</sup> that they participated in eventually led to Southern officials trying their best to quell the lynching epidemic of the South. Public executions provided an "orderly" alternative that satisfied the "need" to execute

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<sup>529</sup> Amy Louise Wood, *Lynching and Spectacle: Witnessing Racial Violence in America, 1890-1940* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2011).

<sup>530</sup> Ida B. Wells, "A Red Record. 1895," in *Selected Works of Ida B* (New York: Oxford University Press (1991): 138-252.

<sup>531</sup> William L. Ziglar, "The Decline of Lynching in America," *International Social Science Review* 63, no. 1 (1988): 14–25. Theodore Roosevelt's address in 1902 in Arlington's National Cemetery comparatively examining the violence on American soil, with what was taking place in the Philippines struck a moral chord with Americans. Roosevelt stated "From time to time there occurred in our country lynchings... carried on under circumstances of inhuman cruelty and barbarity—cruelty infinitely worse than any that has ever been committed by our troops in the Philippines."

justice as long as it was out of public view. The research of historian Amy Louise Wood describes the nature of executions of Black people in the aftermath of lynching were able to avoid the public view and evidence of lynching while still offering whites a similar spectacle of black suffering and death for their entertainment. A local paper described the sale of "flying jennies" and other "side attractions" at one man's 1893 execution in Georgia. There were also vendors present selling soda and snacks at the double execution of two Black men in Mississippi in 1915. This seems way more civil than the photos, postcards, knuckles,<sup>532</sup> fingers, and bones<sup>533</sup> that they previously collected post-lynching. The mini reproductions of Clayton Leigh's consciousness that displayed his pain for the leisure of museum-goers were a direct reference to lynching memorabilia. Examining "Black Museum" as a critical dystopia reveals a troubling technological development of racism and anti-blackness that extends Black suffering beyond the precipice of Black life, demonstrating that, speculatively, a desire to posthumously cause Black suffering, entering into the realm of overkill.<sup>534</sup> The fact that they could possess a mini-copy of his consciousness, preserving the moment that he was electrocuted and in perpetual pain, is a futuristic recreation of lynching tokens, presenting a speculative future that resurrects a type of violence that is supposed to have passed.<sup>535</sup> The

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<sup>532</sup> Young, "The Black Body as Souvenir in American Lynching."

<sup>533</sup> Mark Simpson, "Archiving Hate: Lynching Postcards at the Limit of Social Circulation," *ESC: English Studies in Canada* 30 no. 1 (2004): 17-38.

<sup>534</sup> Eric Stanley, "Near Life, Queer Death: Overkill and Ontological Capture," *Social Text* 29 no. 2 (2011): 1-19. Stanley definition for overkill is "a term used to indicate such excessive violence that it pushes a body beyond death."

<sup>535</sup> Randall Collins, "Book Review: *Doing Violence, Making Race: Lynching and White Racial Group Formation in the US South, 1882–1930*," *Thesis Eleven* 154, no. 1 (2019): 134-137.

white spectators brought their lunch, making it a picnic," as one reporter wrote.<sup>536</sup> Today Black people are still overrepresented on death row. While Black people make up twelve percent of the U.S. population, they are thirty-four percent of the people executed since the 1970s. The research produced by social scientists continues to demonstrate that racism plays a crucial role in who receives the death penalty. And today, people are still able to participate in the spectacle of death in these chambers (although in smaller numbers). Modern and future iterations of Black people that undergo the death penalty cannot escape the history that precedes it. However, American media is invested in a project of either obfuscating or downright erasing that history.

American media in the 1990s effectively functioned as propaganda when it came to the subject of the death penalty. The movie industry's problematic framing of the death penalty, which refused to reference or acknowledge its racial history or its implications, allowed them to create a fictional narrative that did not align with the reality of what was happening during that particular moment. While the death penalty in the United States surged in the 1990s,<sup>537</sup> Hollywood capitalized on this moment by producing films that actively effaced race and the role that it played in determining which groups actually faced the death penalty. In *Dead Man Walking* (1996) and *The Chamber* (1995), the white protagonists are racist white men whose forthcoming executions force them both to have a moral epiphany which leads to them seeking salvation for their racial hatred instead of framing the death penalty itself as a white supremacist tool that has continually been used by the state.

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<sup>536</sup> Amy Louise Wood, *Lynching and Spectacle: Witnessing Racial Violence in America, 1890-1940* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2011).

<sup>537</sup> Joe Soss, Laura Langbein, and Alan R. Metelko, "Why do White Americans Support the Death Penalty?," *The Journal of Politics* 65, no. 2 (2003): 397-421.

The most famous and lucrative death-penalty movie of all time, *The Green Mile* (1999), did attempt to examine the racist origins of prisons and the death penalty, this time giving viewers a Black character that was wrongly accused and convicted of killing two white children. The character's name is John Coffey (portrayed by Michael Clark Duncan), and he falls into the unfortunate *magical negro* trope.<sup>538</sup> He is able to "absorb" and expel white people's pain by using his body, ultimately tormenting his mind because he "sees" their deepest, darkest secrets, taking on the physical and emotional weight of many of the racists and/or evil deeds that they have committed. Because he has been subjected to a lifetime of being used to "heal" white people, Coffey welcomes death with open arms. The film frames his execution via the electric chair as if it were a relief from anti-Black racism instead of framing both his conviction and his death as the result of it. The film also whitewashes a botched execution of Pedro Luis Medina, an Afro-Cuban who came to the United States during the 1980 Mariel Boatlift.<sup>539</sup> The brutal botched execution of Edward Delacroix in the film, a white man from Louisiana, served as the avatar for Medina's death. One of the corrections officers intentionally left the sponge dry, which was supposed to be moistened to conduct electricity to Delacroix's head. When the electric chair was turned on, his head burst into flames, and the death chamber was filled with the smell of burning flesh. Pedro Medina's execution took place in Florida on March 25 1997, two years before the film was released.

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<sup>538</sup> Matthew W. Hughey, "Racializing Redemption, Reproducing Racism: The Odyssey of Magical Negroes and White Saviors," *Sociology Compass* 6, no. 9 (2012): 751-767.

<sup>539</sup> Chris Greer, "Delivering Death: Capital Punishment, Botched Executions, and the American Press," in *Captured by Media* (New York: Taylor and Francis, 2005), 84-10. The Mariel Boatlift was a mass emigration from the Cuba between April-October 1980.

Medina's execution was also botched by "human error"<sup>540</sup> despite the fact that the initial report stated that it was a "malfunction"<sup>541</sup> of the electric chair (referred to as "Old Sparky,"<sup>542</sup> which was also the name of the electric chair in *The Green Mile* (1999)).

"Black Museum" differs from this because it confronts these racial dynamics and their impact on *who* actually gets put to death, further revealing the fact that race is still a large factor in determining who lives and who dies. This simultaneously reveals the public's perception of Black people and the fact that not only does the mainstream public believe that Black people *deserve* death, but they delight in it. When examining the speculative death of Clayton Leigh, his Blackness, his poverty, and how he was put to death (repeatedly) are all too familiar to Black American viewers. Clayton Leigh's execution is a reference to the 1998 conviction of Keith Tharpe. One of the white jurors in Georgia not only referred to Tharpe as a "nigger," and voted that Tharpe be put to death, but not before adding that he had sometimes wondered whether African Americans "even had souls."<sup>543</sup> In 1995 there was also an expert witness in a Texas trial that stated that the defendant, who happened to be Black, was more likely than not to be violent because of his race in comparison to inmates of other races.<sup>544</sup> The racist history of America, from policing, to lynching, and mass incarceration,

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<sup>540</sup> Dawn Macready, "The Shocking Truth about the Electric Chair: An Analysis of the Unconstitutionality of Electrocution," *Ohio Northern University Law Review* 26 (2000): 781.

<sup>541</sup> Ibid.

<sup>542</sup> Mona Lynch, "On-Line Executions: The Symbolic Use of the Electric Chair in Cyberspace," *PoLAR: Political and Legal Anthropology Review* 23, no. 2 (2000): 1-20.

<sup>543</sup> Darryl Barthé, "From Savages to Super-Predators: Race, Lynching, and the Persistence of Colonial Violence," in *Black Males and the Criminal Justice System* (New York: Routledge, 2019), 21-32.

<sup>544</sup> Latonia Haney Keith, "Cultural Competency in a Post-Model Rule 8.4 (g) World," *Duke Journal of Gender Law & Policy* 25 (2017): 1.

seeps into every part of the legal system. If this is the history that Black people must contend with in the event that they may have to experience the American carceral system, then these visions of new configurations/expansions of racial/state violence seem tangible, even if the speculative technology seems impossible.

Granted, our contemporary methods of administering the death penalty are not as technologically sound, but the similarities are still apparent. A significant reference in recent history comes from the name of the protagonist in the "Black museum." Clayton Leigh's name is a direct reference to Clayton Lockett, who was the victim of a botched execution in 2014.<sup>545</sup> The Oklahoma medical officials failed to realize that the needle that was being used for the execution had slipped out of Lockett's femoral vein. Instead of the concoction of chemicals entering his bloodstream, the needle was delivering the lethal chemicals into the surrounding tissue. He died "slowly and in apparent agony" as officials attempted to stop the execution. However, some of the onlookers took pleasure in seeing Lockett strapped down, in pain, dying over an extended period of time: "If there is ever somebody who deserved it, it was him," Lockett's prosecutor remarked.<sup>546</sup>

The dehumanization present in Lockett's execution is magnified in the "Black Museum's" speculative vision for future executions. While Lockett was unfortunately subjected to an inhumane death that provided pleasure for some spectators, at least his pain ended at the moment of his death. These representations of speculative executions build and expand upon that pre-existing dehumanization through the use of technology, revealing

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<sup>545</sup> Harvey Roy Greenberg, "Oklahoma's Botched Execution," *Psychiatric Times* 31, no. 8 (2014): 32G-32G.

<sup>546</sup> Sanjay K. Chhablani, "Bad Moon Rising: The Execution of Wallace Fugate," *Penn Undergraduate Law Journal* 1 (2013): 1.

methods of not only drawing from the racialized violence of the past but the metaphors for dehumanization are present in the expressions of race and incarceration. Clayton Leigh suffers in prison while he is alive, and then he suffers for all eternity after his death. There is no escape, there is no rehabilitation, and there is no refuge, all because he is not seen as human. He is recognized as an extension of himself, a mere copy of information, and ultimately treated as property within the confines of the museum.

The racial dynamic of the museum as a space where white supremacists pay not only to be spectators but to be actively involved in Clayton's repeated "murders." It doesn't only attest to the violent history of lynching, but it also sheds light on the commodification of Black pain and also Black people. Clayton's suffering is described by Rolo as that "conscious sentient snapshot of Clayton . . . perpetually experiencing that beautiful pain. Stuck forever in that one perfect moment of agony. Always on. Always suffering."<sup>547</sup> Rolo continued to describe the keychain copy of Clayton's suffering as "fun size!"

America has a long and tenuous historical relationship, and perhaps an obsession, with Black people's suffering and pain. Slavery was the genesis under which Black people were forcibly transformed into "human cargo that bled."<sup>548</sup> From the horrors of slavery<sup>549</sup> to human

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<sup>547</sup> Rolo's description of Clayton's pain also reveals the pleasure he takes in facilitating it, in bringing this experience to the masses. The series is simultaneously commenting on the legacy of slavery, and historical violence of the museum, as two anti-black institutions .

<sup>548</sup> Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe."

<sup>549</sup> Zora Neale Hurston and Robin Miles, *Barracoon: The Story of the Last "Black Cargo"* (New York: Amistad, 2018).



zoos,<sup>550</sup> to the circulation of lynching postcards/photography,<sup>551</sup> Hollywood's portrayal of Black people's narratives and stories,<sup>552</sup> as well as the history of minstrelsy, Black pain has proven to be financially lucrative for white people.<sup>553</sup> What the aforementioned atrocities have in common with the speculative suffering of Clayton Leigh is the role that capitalism has played and the role that it continues to play in capturing and capitalizing on representations of Black people in that "one perfect moment of agony." Not only is capital part of this structure, but the act of inflicting pain is also one of the main components. The glee that spectators partake in when pulling the switch in Clayton Leigh's speculative execution is experienced in contemporary comment sections of modern executions of Black inmates that receive live news coverage. While the scene isn't visible, the spectators wait for the moment of death and casually comment, "Who's next?"<sup>554</sup>

Our contemporary moment is in conversation with the speculative future presented in *Black Mirror* when it comes to the collective conditioning that mainstream America has when it comes to watching Black pain. Being immured to Black pain further normalizes Black death, and in this speculative future, the life of Clayton Leigh is parallel to Clayton Lockett's, offering a glimpse into the future where not only is Black pain being normalized and

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<sup>550</sup> Gilles Boëtsch and Pascal Blanchard, "From Cabinets of Curiosity to the "Hottentot Venus": A Long History of Human Zoos," in *The Invention of Race* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 185-194.

<sup>551</sup> Jessy J. Ohl and Jennifer E. Potter, "United we Lynch: Post-racism and the (re)membering of Racial Violence in 'Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America,'" *Southern Communication Journal* 78, no. 3 (2013): 185-201.

<sup>552</sup> Keffrelyn D. Brown and Anthony L. Brown, "Hollywood Histories: Examining Contemporary Depictions of race and American Slavery in Popular Film," *Teaching Difficult History Through Film* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 145-159.

<sup>553</sup> Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*.

<sup>554</sup> Jeremy H. Lipschultz and Michael L. Hilt, "Mass Media and the Death Penalty: Social Construction of Three Nebraska Executions," *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 43, no. 2 (1999): 236-253.

disseminated via keychains by white supremacists, but it is also the "innocent" tourists who engage with the museum as well. The future is being presented to viewers as a place where technology has the power to stage and reanimate the white supremacy of the past in new ways. The speculative future position of spectators in the spaces where Black pain meets technology becomes painstakingly clear; our technological advancements will create additional moral and racial dilemmas that our society is not equipped to address or handle.

### **4.3 Speculative Futures of Incarceration, Black Digital Capture, & Witnessing**

However, speculative technology also reveals that in the same way that citizen journalism and social media have become transformative tools for how we document and bear witness to anti-Black violence, witnessing in speculative futures is staged so that it will also experience technological improvements and transformations. The technological progression of witnessing in "Black Museum" is first introduced with Jack and his comatose fiancé Carrie's consciousness being transferred into his body, transforming them into one body inhabited by an additional consciousness. But it is the story of Nish that ultimately transforms this technology of consciousness implantation into a speculative futuristic mode of witnessing. The reveal in which Nish "carries" the consciousness of her "deceased" mother within her body as well further complicates postmemory and witnessing. Nish's mother experiences the world through the body of her mother, and she, too, witnesses Rolo's confession within her daughter's body. I want to return to the definition of bearing witness, which is described by scholar Geneva Smitherman as being synonymous with "testifyin."<sup>555</sup>

If we examine Nish's story (or, in other words, her testimony), which is fused with the testimony of her mother, it reveals that witnessing in the future takes on new depths and

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<sup>555</sup> Smitherman, *Talkin and Testifyin*.

layers, with the ability to physically carry the memories, the struggles and the pain of others. Nish's witnessing is significant because it is her story and her testimony that ultimately counters Rolo's account of events. Through Rolo's unsolicited confession via his narration of the exhibits, Nish is also bearing witness to the ways in which Rolo himself is an active agent of white supremacy in the ways in which he has aided and contributed to the racist punishment that her father was subjected to for his financial profit. I want to return to Nish's presence in the Black museum as she is led by her unsuspecting tour guide Rolo. After Rolo leads Nish to the "main attraction," the camera pans to the lifeless hologram of Clayton Leigh as Rolo reveals his reasons for choosing Leigh as the main exhibit. He states that Clayton Leigh is, in fact, the opposite of what he initially wanted for the museum. Rolo tells Nish that he really wanted to create a virtual "Madame Tussaud's" using uploads of celebrity consciousnesses, but the celebrities had "too many rights." The next scene takes us back in time to the moment that he approached Rolo, who was the perfect candidate: because he was convicted for killing a "tragically cute" white woman, he was deemed an enemy by the public, and as a convict, he legally had no rights that Rolo had to consider. When they first meet, Clayton is on death row, and immediately after Rolo introduces himself, they have the following exchange that is transcribed below. It is important to remember that, unbeknownst to Rolo at this moment, Nish is a witness to her father's exploitation. He divulges some of the information to her, but the information that he intentionally conceals plays out for the viewer to bear witness to Rolo's deceit and the multiple ways in which he takes advantage of Clayton:

Clayton: (American Accent) "They say you're in technology."

Rolo: (American Accent) "Uh, yes, that is true."

Clayton: "So you can look into this DNA thing? Prove it wasn't me?"

Rolo: "Um, yes, that's certainly a possibility, but that's not why I'm here."

Rolo: I have a proposal

Clayton: (*Clayton walking away with the corrections officer*) Goodbye.

Rolo: (*Screaming*) I can help! . . . I can help your family! (Clayton turns around)

(Flash-forward to the present)

Nish: (*British Accent*) How did you talk him into it?

Rolo: "He didn't need much convincing."<sup>556</sup>

The initial exchange between Clayton and Rolo reveals that technology in the future (or even our contemporary technology) isn't inherently bad, but it is the way in which technology is utilized, as well as who is wielding it. Their exchange highlights that there was an opportunity for Rolo to make a choice between helping Clayton and using his familiarity and access to this speculative technology<sup>557</sup> to help prove his innocence, or he could choose to exploit him. Their brief conversation also reveals that Clayton's knowledge of technology is somewhat limited since he references technology (DNA) that precedes the speculative technology that would be available at the time. Rolo's admission to Clayton that he could do something to prove his innocence, but his decision not to do so because of the possibility of profit speaks to the contemporary and future exploitation of prisoners.

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<sup>556</sup> *Black Mirror*, created by Charlie Brooker, Season 4, Episode 6 "Black Museum" (Endemol Shine UK, 2017). Dialogue from the scenes were transcribed by me.

<sup>557</sup> It is also important to note Clayton's understanding.

Scholars at the intersection of race and technology have analyzed how technology ultimately coalesces to further support and perfect anti-Blackness.<sup>558</sup> In these speculative futures, we see the possibilities of what anti-Blackness can become and how it can be used to enact racist violence in new ways. His refusal to help Clayton despite being capable reveals that his primary mode of concern was the narrative surrounding Clayton's guilt rather than his innocence. Rolo was aware of the contentious racial history and optics of a Black man, in his words, murdering a "tragically cute" white woman, and this story could be lucrative if he could provide an experience that brought back the feeling of these public rituals of violence.<sup>559</sup>

Rolo's decision to use technology is a choice that ultimately reveals who he truly is, which further implies that technological advancements, whether contemporary or speculative, have the potential to highlight the user's motivations. Rolo approached an incarcerated man (Clayton) with the sole purpose of monetizing his suffering and the public's perception of him as the murderer of a white woman while downplaying the process, as well as his reasoning, behind uploading his consciousness. The present dialogue between Rolo and Nish juxtaposed alongside past conversations between Rolo and Clayton reveals and further amplifies Rolo's predatory and racist nature:

*(Flashback)*

Rolo: So, really, it's just signing over your digital self . . . in case the worst happens, and I promise your relatives will receive the lion's share of any profits. So if you know, God forbid, if you do get sent to the chair, you know your family will be provided for, for life.

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<sup>558</sup> Benjamin, "Race after Technology."

<sup>559</sup> David Garland, "Penal Excess and Surplus Meaning: Public Torture Lynchings in Twentieth-Century America," *Law & Society Review* 39, no. 4 (2005): 793-834.

*(Flash-forward to the present)*

Nish: How did his family feel about it?

Rolo: They didn't give a shit. They abandoned him the moment he got locked up.

*(Flashback to Clayton and his Wife visiting him in prison)*

Clayton's wife: *(American Accent)* Clay, it's your soul!

Clayton: Ain't no such thing. It's just a computer simulation or something.

Clayton's wife: Then why does he need your permission!

Clayton: If my pardon comes through, it won't matter.

Clayton's wife: And if it doesn't?

Clayton: Then if they send me to the chair, this is gonna pay. It's gonna keep you and the kids above water, maintain a roof over y'all.

Clayton's wife: *(Cries)*

Clayton: Baby don't, this could be a good thing.<sup>560</sup>

Racism and capitalism are interlocking systems of exploitation, so the technological advancements produced in this environment "bring to light the inherent biases and prejudices embedded in the design of these pervasive technologies, illuminating how the technology was designed without input from or representation of non-dominant populations."<sup>561</sup> Clayton Leigh's value is effectively determined by the worth of his consciousness, posthumously. What makes Clayton Leigh's predicament an iteration of anti-Blackness is that his "value" within the logic of this speculative future's racial capitalism is that he is worth more as a digital entity, a posthumous attraction in pain that exists solely to bring other people pleasure than he is worth as an exonerated man.

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<sup>560</sup> "Black Museum."

<sup>561</sup> Kirsten E. Bray, "Radical Futures: Supporting Community-Led Design Engagements through an Afrofuturist Speculative Design Toolkit," CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems, New Orleans, LA, 2022.

The use of technology in his exploitation is an acknowledgment of how racism and anti-Blackness is also prevalent in STEM-related fields. The lack of Black people in STEM (as well as barriers to entry to the field) further contributes to a lack of Black voices and input when it comes to the formation, construction, and dangers of these technological advancements. The speculative futures that are presented here as it pertains to Black life, are not simply science fiction, but they are on the cusp of, if not completely intertwined with, the genre of horror,<sup>562</sup> and even more specifically, the horrors of slavery relived in Rolo's posthumous possession of Clayton's consciousness. Rolo's unethical possession reanimates the history of slavery "beyond the sheer exercise of power" it is also "the peculiar claim of possession of the other's body,"<sup>563</sup> but instead of the body, in this speculative future case, he possesses his consciousness, tormenting him for eternity beyond the grave.

These speculative futures present spaces where "Black bodies" are forced to survive and navigate spaces of "erasure of culture and critical memory."<sup>564</sup> This is the space that Nish is navigating in this speculative racial landscape during her interactions with Rolo in the Black Museum. Rolo's racism leads to him underestimating and manipulating Clayton in prison, but his racism also leads him to wrongfully underestimate Nish as well. He willfully withholds information about the process of his "digital self." His exploitation of Rolo is further cemented because of Rolo's position as an inmate that is marginalized in multiple

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<sup>562</sup> André M. Carrington, *Speculative Blackness: The Future of Race in Science Fiction* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2016).

<sup>563</sup> Orlando Patterson, "Trafficking, Gender and Slavery: Past and Present," *The Legal Understanding of Slavery: From the Historical to the Contemporary* 322 (2012): 359.

<sup>564</sup> Philip Butler, ed., *Critical Black Futures: Speculative Theories and Explorations* (New York: Springer Nature, 2021).

ways: he is incarcerated, facing the death penalty, poor, and Black. Not only does Rolo exploit Clayton, but he also exploits his family by withholding the profits from them as well. This is revealed in the exchange that Rolo has with Nish in the present when she inquires about Clayton's family (her father, unbeknownst to Rolo at the time), to which he responds, "They abandoned him . . . ." Having this present exchange with Nish placed alongside the past conversation between Rolo and Clayton reveals Clayton's trust/faith in the justice system despite his conviction. It also reveals Clayton's intentions to trust Rolo's exploitative technology within this masked "opportunity." Clayton's marginalization is further highlighted via a past conversation with his wife, which Rolo does not reveal to Nish during their present conversation. Viewers become witnesses to Rolo's present manipulation of Nish, as well as his past manipulation of Clayton. Rolo is insistent in peddling the same narrative that he monetized to convince Nish of Clayton's guilt, to demonstrate that he is *deserving* of perpetual punishment:

*(Flash-forward to the present)*

Nish: He never did get that pardon.

Rolo: Shit, no, 'cause he was guilty!

Nish: But wasn't there some doubt? You know, that documentary?

Rolo: *(With the vocal inflections of Trump)* Fake news, hatchet job.

Nish: What about the DNA tampering

*(Flashback to Clayton's execution onscreen, Rolo narrates)*

Rolo: Seriously?! There's no doubt about it. The day he got the chair was a great day for justice. Clay couldn't complain; he was going to be a pioneer. I was gonna slurp up his entire consciousness. He'd be the first guy on death row to survive his own execution. The transfer went beautifully. Before I knew it, Clayton was born again.

*(Scene change to the Black Museum and Rolo working on his laptop)*



Clayton's Hologram: (*Appears as a hologram, disoriented but in shock*) Am I a ghost?

Rolo: (*On his computer setting Clayton up for a test run of his first posthumous electrocution*) Something like that.

Clayton's Hologram: (*Goes from walking around, to instantly being seated in a virtual electric chair, he gasps then whispers*) What the fuck?!<sup>565</sup>

Rolo's proclamations to Nish reveal that he, too, derived pleasure, if not from pulling the lever to electrocute Clayton's consciousness repeatedly, then from profiting off of his pain and having power over what was left of his humanity.



**Figure 4.1: Black Mirror (2017) "Black Museum" Clayton's hologram after he is "uploaded" to Rolo's Black Museum.**

Rolo is presented in "Black Museum" as a kind of ring-leader peddling futuristic technology that often exploits the user, transforming them into possessions in his museum. He first possesses Carrie via the toy monkey, and then he acquires Clayton. Within the confines

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<sup>565</sup> "Black Museum."

of the *Black Mirror* universe, Rolo functions as a high-tech human trafficker; he facilitates a speculative futuristic type of slavery with his museum and his collection of human consciousnesses. Slavery and its impact still "lingers in the subconscious imaginations of the American populous in such a profound manner that it dictates how undeveloped technology will be employed in the future."<sup>566</sup> Rolo's ability to possess people via his manipulation and control of humans and technology attests to this futuristic mode of transubstantiation via the digitization of human beings, transforming them into technology to be bought and sold as well as exploited.<sup>567</sup>

There is no version of slavery, not even in speculative futures, in which its violence can be undone.<sup>568</sup> Clayton's surprise at his "resurrection" reveals that he was not fully informed of the stakes of his transformation and the fact that he would still be confined to a prison cell after his death, let alone tortured. He tells the entire tale from beginning to end with an air of enthusiasm and even excitement similar to the anticipation that spectators experience before a lynching. He created the idea of this posthumous exhibit, and he is the first one to electrocute Clayton's post-life consciousness. While he proclaims that Clayton's innocence is lacking, it becomes clear that Clayton's innocence, like so many of the Black

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<sup>566</sup> Gregory Jerome Hampton, *Imagining Slaves and Robots in Literature, Film, and Popular Culture: Reinventing Yesterday's Slave with Tomorrow's Robot* (New York: Lexington Books, 2015).

<sup>567</sup> Ibid. Gregory Jerome Hampton references the fact that slavery was considered a type of technology ". . . slavery was perceived by many to be a sort of technological tool required for social advancement and evolution."

<sup>568</sup> Ibid.

people lynched, incarcerated, and on death row throughout America,<sup>569</sup> is insignificant when white supremacy grants him the power to inflict pain and/or kill in the name of profit.

Rolo is completely comfortable believing that there will be no consequences for his actions because, historically, rarely have the facilitators of this kind of violence been subjected to the same violence that they have imposed. Furthermore, he is comfortable divulging his deeds to Nish because he believes that she is powerless, which works in her favor because "Nish plots and achieves revenge through appearing vulnerable and otherwise tricking her would-be predator." Rolo's sense of security in participating in and facilitating this kind of violence, especially racialized violence, comes from the protection provided to him by his whiteness, his access, and his knowledge of technology. He continues to braggadociously describe how he developed Clayton's exhibit and contributed to his "rebirth":

*(Flash forward to the present)*

Rolo: See, I knew just seeing the guy walking around captive. That was good, but that wasn't much of a draw. (excitedly) But pulling the lever yourself? Now that's an attraction!

Nish: *(Looks contemptuously at Rolo as he continues to speak, he becomes sweaty, has labored breathing. Nish drops the British accent and begins to speak in an American one)* You can take a seat if it's easier. *(Grabs a chair and commands him)* Sit down.

Rolo: *(Looks surprised and moaning in pain)*

Nish: You left some parts of the story out, Mr. Haynes. Why is that? You forgot to mention the protests. His wife started a campaign, got some momentum behind it. Guess you'd call it virtue signaling bullshit, but I know it hurt your attendance. And even the protesters got bored after a while as soon as it was clear the state wouldn't do a damn thing about clearing him; they just moved on to the next viral miscarriage of justice they can hang a hashtag off of. But they did their job, right? Your place was on

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<sup>569</sup> Maureen Moynagh, "Speculative Pasts and Afro-Futures," *African American Review* 51, no. 3 (2018): 211-222.

the shit list! Who was your core clientele after that? You lost the day trippers, the tourists, the fun family crowd. Who was left? Loners. Sadists.

The supremacist sicko demographic. And that crowd's not big enough; they don't keep the lights on. So if someone shows up, some classic race-hate rich guy with a hard-on for power, and slips you some extra for a longer time at the crank, you take it. Wasn't the same after that, was he? Not dead, but hardly alive either. Even the perverts didn't want to pull the lever on a vegetable. Where's the joy in that? But someone came to see him, right? She saw him.

*(Flashback to Clayton being visited by his wife, who is in shock at Clayton's current state. He cannot speak. He doesn't recognize her, he is drooling).*

She stood on this spot, seen what you had done to him. He was like a docile animal. God knows if he even recognized her. God knows if he even recognizes me. *(Nish puts her hand on the glass enclosure her father is in and whispers)*

Dad, Happy Birthday. *(Paces and cries)* What my mom saw that day was more than she could take. She had hoped during the whole fight to clear his name, but that just broke her. You know what she did when she came home? Bottle of pills and a bottle of Vodka. I found her. You fucking piece of shit!

Rolo: *(Grunts and strains, continues to clutch his chest).*

Mish: Whoa is it hot? It's humid, huh? I'm sorry. Stupid digital AC. Easy to hack. Never accept drinks from strangers. My daddy taught me that.<sup>570</sup>

Nish reveals her identity, which only further highlights Rolo's misogynoir and his refusal to recognize a young Black woman as an intellectual threat, which gives her the space to exact her retribution. Digital Humanities and Black Feminist scholar Moya Bailery asserts that Nish's character "subverts the Little Red Riding Hood fairy tale the episode sets up by besting Haynes' wolf before he can best her. Nish's technological savvy catches Haynes off guard because of his racist and sexist assumptions about her. When he realizes that the digital air conditioning system has "shit the bed," he remarks, "Never trust a guy in tech."<sup>571</sup> At the end

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<sup>570</sup> "Black Museum."

<sup>571</sup> Moya Bailey, "A Radical Reckoning: A Black Woman's Racial Revenge in Black Mirror's "Black Museum," *Feminist Media Studies* 21, no. 6 (2021): 891-904.

of the episode, Nish's retribution is swift, but her words reveal so much in regard to the speculative future of Black death via state violence. She mentions her mother's labor as an organizer on her father's behalf and how she worked to start a movement that gained some traction but unfortunately lost momentum. Nish states, "They just moved on to the next viral miscarriage of justice," which reveals that Black death, whether by racist and/or state violence, as well as a hashtag and physical activism, will be issues that exist in the future, along with these developing technologically assisted methods of anti-Black digital violence. Old and new modes of violence will still occur simultaneously. Bailey perceives Nish's retribution as being satisfying but incomplete<sup>572</sup> since it doesn't apply to the masses and it doesn't include other victims (specifically Black women)<sup>573</sup> of state violence. "This failure serves as a reminder of the limits of a redress that is one-to-one. The kind of justice that Leigh needs far exceeds the limits of one smote museum and one dead white man."<sup>574</sup>

Nish's actions to murder Rolo, thereby setting her father "free," provide a singular restitution for Nish and her family that is also infinitely compounded by American history and its contemporary possession and abuse of Black people from the Tuskegee experiments,<sup>575</sup> the carceral state's continued fracture of Black families,<sup>576</sup> and the continued gruesome modes by

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<sup>572</sup> Ibid.

<sup>573</sup> Ritchie, *Invisible No More*.

<sup>574</sup> Bailey, "A Radical Reckoning. Bailey also raises concerns over the mini souvenirs which are replica copies of Clayton Leigh's electrocution that are still possessed by prior patrons of the museum, which proves that there are limits to her revenge.

<sup>575</sup> George Yancy, *Black Bodies, White Gazes: The Continuing Significance of Race in America* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016).

<sup>576</sup> Ta-Nehisi Coates, "The Black Family in the age of Mass Incarceration," *The Atlantic* 316, no. 3 (2015): 82.

which the country still profits off of black pain.<sup>577</sup> There is some satisfaction present in the fact that she poisons Rolo, downloads and plants his consciousness inside her father's virtual body, pulling the lever that simultaneously executes Rolo and frees her father (which Nish describes as the first "double-decker" mercy killing). For her final act, Nish sets fire to the museum. While it does seem like a singular narrative that is incapable of being able to adequately encompass all of the pain and the extensive reach of the mass incarceration system, I believe that this is the point of the "Black Museum" episode. While we only hear about the protests through Nish's monologue, and they aren't visualized on screen during the episode, it is significant that this story is represented as a deeply personal one—that's the effect of the cruelty of the prison system. It is a massive and horrific enterprise, but it is also deeply personal. It affects millions of families, of mothers and daughters, and of sons and fathers, on an individual and collective level. It is most definitely a national crisis that is structured upon and feeds off of the private pains of people trying to navigate a legal system that makes it almost impossible for them to find their way back to their families and loved ones.

Brooker's speculative future world is a macabre creation, which, as time progresses, is proving increasingly true for us. With mass incarceration growing every single day, it does seem that for the time being we are all stuck in this loop, struggling to move beyond this "grammar of suffering"<sup>578</sup> in which we are bound to technological innovations that will continue to amplify hate and cause destruction. What if the only way to fight back is for us to

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<sup>577</sup> Cary Martin Shelby, "Profiting From Our Pain: Privileged Access to Social Impact Investing," *California Law Review*, 109 (2021): 1261.

<sup>578</sup> F. B. Wilderson, III. (2010), *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of US Antagonisms* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press).

do so figuratively or, like Nish, burn it all down?

While Nish is seemingly the last woman standing at the end of the episode, she is not alone. Nish's final testimony, which she delivers to Rolo as he dies, exposes the collective witnessing that she experienced prior to her mother's death. The "hashtags" that she mentioned are evidence of the fact that she has not only directly experienced the consequences of racialized death via her father, but she has also indirectly witnessed multiple deaths of Black people in her lifetime.<sup>579</sup> Her trauma, while it seems singular, is quite vast. Her mother's death is also an example of the far-reaching trauma of state violence and how it impacts Black families.<sup>580</sup> The technological progression of witnessing for Black people is important in our current climate as well as the one presented in speculative futures, especially "cumulative witnessing," which "is particularly salient in the current climate due to the increasingly high volume of racist and violent content made accessible through multiple forms of technological media and platforms."<sup>581</sup> Nish has clearly experienced a cumulative witnessing of racial violence, and the way that she bears witness to the violence in this particular timeline is clearly impacted by the speculative innovations available to her. Both Nish's and Rolo's use of "possessing" the consciousness of another reveals moral and immoral (as well as racist and non-racist) ways of using this technology at the end of the episode when it is revealed to the viewers that she also has been carrying the consciousness of her mother. Nish "carrying" her

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<sup>579</sup> Leslie A. Anderson, LaRen Morton, and Andrea N. Trejo, "To be Young, Conscious and Black: The Cumulative Witnessing of Racial Violence for Black Youth and Families," *Journal of Family Theory & Review*, 13, no. 3 (2022), 412-420.

<sup>580</sup> Sandra Lee Browning, R. Robin Miller, and Lisa M. Spruance, "Criminal Incarceration Dividing the Ties that Bind: Black Men and their Families," in *Impacts of Incarceration on the African American Family* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 87-102.

<sup>581</sup> Anderson, Morton, and Trejo, "To be Young, Conscious and Black."

mother's consciousness in this speculative future timeline and has interesting implications for the act of bearing witness and postmemory. Elizabeth Alexander has previously established that witnessing racialized violence is a vicarious individual and communal experience that impacts how we view newer instances of the same kind of violence.<sup>582</sup>

In the speculative futures, witnessing becomes literal in the way that technology has made it possible for Black people to *physically* carry the memories, trauma, and pain of others by carrying the entire consciousness of an individual. This complicates witnessing because Nish not only carries her own account of her father's exploitation and murder, but she also carries her mother's account as well, which ultimately connects and perhaps blends their experiences of witnessing together. As we watch Nish in retrospect, it becomes difficult to discern where her story ends, and her mother's begins, similar to the textual devices brought to life in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), where the voices of Sethe, Denver, and Beloved all come together at once. The act of "telling," or as it was previously discussed in this chapter, "testifyin,'" is expressed with layered experiences and voices of Black women:

The signals of "telling" as a survival strategy-dialect, narrative recursion, suspension of time and place are all in this text, especially in the compact and powerful passages where Sethe's, Denver's, and Beloved's voices are prosopopeic (re)memory. Morrison introduces this section with a particularly beautiful and haunting recollection of the elements of speech and the devices of narrative that Black women writers have used so effectively. Morrison's blending of voice and text privileges neither. Instead, they collapse into one another and

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<sup>582</sup> Alexander, "Can you be BLACK and Look at This?"



emerge as an introspective that enfolds the dimensions of both the mind and history in a visually rich and dazzling projection of a re-visioned time and space.<sup>583</sup>

Morrison's writing allows all of the characters' narratives to exist individually and to merge simultaneously. Like the implantation device that speculatively allows for Nish's narrative to be merged with that of her mother. Nish's ability to bear witness and access postmemory is amplified by the technology speculatively available to her. Postmemory is also aided by technology because Nish does not only carry her own memories of her father's conviction, trial, murder, and continued re-killing alone—so does her mother. Nish also carries the weight of her mother's memories. The end of the episode presents Nish's implantation as a surprise to viewers, which forces viewers to re-examine her testimony during Rolo's death as a dual or layered account. Awareness that Nish is using implantation technology makes it difficult for us as viewers and witnesses to discern what part of the narrative is her own versus her mother speaking through her. The end of the episode also makes reference to the complexity of witnessing and postmemory through the music. When it is revealed to viewers that Nish's mother is implanted in her consciousness, she is hanging the souvenir of Rolo's electrocution onto the rearview mirror as we hear an additional voice telling Nish that she did a "great job."

Nish drives away with the Black Museum burning in the distance, as Dionne Warwick's "(There's) Always Something There To Remind Me" (1967) is playing when Nish turns on the radio. We hear Warwick crooning, "*Oh how can I forget you, When there is always something there to remind me, I was born to love you, and I will never be free, You'll always be apart of me . . .*" This works on multiple registers during the close of the episode, as

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<sup>583</sup> Karla F. C. Holloway, "Beloved: A Spiritual," *Callaloo* 13, no. 3 (1990): 516-525.

it can reference Nish's mother, who is physically within her, the fact that this singular instance of revenge will not end all racist/state violence, so she'll "never be free," and also the bittersweet memory of her father's virtual death and suffering. Postmemory is what allowed her to reference the other deaths that quickly proliferated after her father, those who were transformed into hashtags, never to receive justice. Being able to physically access the memories of another person's implanted consciousness via speculative technology establishes an almost tangible archive of pre-existing events.

While postmemory references instances of anti-Black violence that have been communally or individually witnessed, it also speaks to contemporary sites of Postmemory that are accessed using social media/digital platforms.<sup>584</sup> If Nish were to witness additional acts of state/racialized violence, her witnessing would be amplified now that she shares a body with her mother, leaving her doubly traumatized. Witnessing is technologically amplified in this speculative timeline, allowing the dead not only to live again but to speak and feel through the living. From a critical dystopian viewpoint, "Black Museum" highlights that a binary approach to incarceration, and thus punishment, establishes that there are moral issues and implications awaiting us on the horizon that will produce compounding methods of racial exploitation.

#### **4.4 Black Media Reception of "Black Museum" vs. Mainstream Media's Dismissal**

*Black Mirror* is a British television series that explores the contemporary relationship that we have with technology as well as its consequences. The series has a large fan base, and

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<sup>584</sup> Marlon Twyman, Brian C. Keegan, and Aaron Shaw, "Black Lives Matter in Wikipedia: Collective Memory and Collaboration Around Online Social Movements," *Proceedings of the 2017 ACM Conference on Computer Supported Cooperative Work and Social Computing*, February 2017, 1400-1412.

it is beloved amongst critics as well. However, mainstream media outlets did not receive the "Black Museum" episode well. It was met with a lukewarm reception, if not an outright rejection of its themes and content. Media criticism reflects one of the theories presented by Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding in that we have an example of textual "decoding" of the visual media, and these interpretations reveal differing perspectives depending upon the race of the critic decoding this particular episode.

There was a clear discrepancy in the way that mainstream media outlets discussed, or at times completely missed, the overall themes of the episode in comparison to the way that those themes seem to have resonated with Black viewers. I bring up this point to argue that postmemory also impacts the way that Black people both receive and engage (or encode and decode) entertainment media that grapple with or include content that specifically affects Black people. The responses from critics such as Sonia Saraiya of *Variety* referred to it as the "worst episode" of the series.<sup>585</sup> Darren Franich of *Entertainment Weekly* said that the "Black Museum" episode was the "only outright stinker" of that season.<sup>586</sup>

Media criticism scholar Douglass Kellner argues how media highlighting racial issues often reveals an upsetting truth that most people don't want to accept: the fact that we are *not* a post-racial society.<sup>587</sup> Kellner states that the election of Barack Obama is what marks the genesis of the contemporary argument regarding America's supposed post-racial moment.

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<sup>585</sup> Sonia Saraiya, "TV Review: 'Black Mirror' Season 4 on Netflix," *Variety*, Dec. 29, 2017, [variety.com/2017/tv/reviews/black-mirror-season-4-netflix-tv-review-1202648385/](http://variety.com/2017/tv/reviews/black-mirror-season-4-netflix-tv-review-1202648385/).

<sup>586</sup> Darren Franich, "Black Mirror's New Season Boldly Riffs on Star Trek and Online Dating: EW Review," *EW.com*, December 06, 2017, [ew.com/tv/2017/12/06/black-mirror-review/](http://ew.com/tv/2017/12/06/black-mirror-review/).

<sup>587</sup> Douglas Kellner, "Cultural Studies, Multiculturalism, and Media Culture," in *Gender, Race, and Class in Media: A Critical Reader* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 2011), 7-18.

However, the criticism surrounding "Black Museum" reveals a clear bifurcation in terms of how the episode was decoded by critics. Caroline Framke of *Vox* stated that the progression of the series, which weaved multiple stories together and ended with the tale of Clayton Leigh, was uneventful and that "none particularly stand out."<sup>588</sup> Saraiya continued to describe the episode as "people repeatedly choosing to be stupid and/or evil." Handlen referred to it as being simply "mean-spirited."<sup>589</sup> Contrastingly, Ransome, a Black critic working for *Vice* magazine, found it to be the "most satisfying" episode of the series, commenting that many other reviewers "all seemed blind to the episode's overarching thesis on race."<sup>590</sup>

Miles Marshall Lewis' critique in *Essence* states, "as an allegorical deconstruction of American racism, 'Black Museum' doesn't present a far-fetched premise at all, given the many outrageous examples of modern history."<sup>591</sup> This blindness is indicative of a general lack of understanding of how anti-blackness is an integral part of American history and, thus, an integral part of our present. The collective mainstream response completely skirts how deep the roots of racism are, therefore blinding them to its presence in critical dystopian media such as *Black Mirror*. What does the blindness of mainstream media's critique of the episode reveal about the past, present, and futures of Black people in the United States? I compare these contrasting responses between mainstream media and Black media outlets to expose the

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<sup>588</sup> Caroline Framke, "Black Mirror's 'Black Museum' 'Tour Tells 3 Stories of Pain and Forced Symbiosis," *Vox*, Dec. 29, 2017, [www.vox.com/culture/2017/12/29/16822796/black-mirror-black-museum-recap-season-4-review](http://www.vox.com/culture/2017/12/29/16822796/black-mirror-black-museum-recap-season-4-review).

<sup>589</sup> Zack Handlen, "Black Mirror Ends Its Fourth Season with a Dud," *The A.V. Club*, July 20, 2018, [www.avclub.com/black-mirror-ends-its-fourth-season-with-a-dud-1821635228](http://www.avclub.com/black-mirror-ends-its-fourth-season-with-a-dud-1821635228).

<sup>590</sup> Noel Ransome, "I'm a Black Critic Who Dismissed the 'Black Museum' Episode," *VICE*, Jan. 5, 2018, [www.vice.com/en/article/59w53k/im-a-black-critic-who-dismissed-the-black-museum-episode](http://www.vice.com/en/article/59w53k/im-a-black-critic-who-dismissed-the-black-museum-episode).

<sup>591</sup> Miles Marshall Lewis, "Black Pain as Fodder: Digesting the 'Black Museum' Episode of 'Black Mirror'," *Essence*, Oct. 24, 2020, [www.essence.com/entertainment/black-museum-black-mirror-season-four/](http://www.essence.com/entertainment/black-museum-black-mirror-season-four/).

importance of Postmemory and Black history. Mainstream media critics refuse to grapple with the racial violence of the past that has shaped America, continues to influence its present, and, according to speculative media like *Black Mirror*, will continue to shape America's future.

Black media responses are necessary to counter mainstream media narratives that dismiss the relevance and insight of entertainment that addresses anti-Black racism. While the majority of the critics that work for mainstream media outlets are white, some of them are people of color.<sup>592</sup> Sonya Soraiya's critique of the episode as a woman of color is evidence of the fact that anti-Blackness is a very specific kind of discrimination and marginalization. This is not to make the assumption that one's race or gender are the sole ways people experience the world, but it impacts and shapes the way that we experience and navigate the world, even if we have access to certain privileges.<sup>593</sup>

I mention that Soraiya is a person of color to highlight the fact that this does not impact her analysis of the episode. In fact, her critique falls in line with the majority of mainstream critics' reception of the episode. She describes the episode as being "gruesome" and without direction. She makes no mention of mass incarceration or racism and, essentially, provides the entire episode with a one-line critique in which she says it's "the worst episode of the season," describing the plot twists as "cheap shots."<sup>594</sup> Darren Franich, a white critic for

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<sup>592</sup> They are people of color, but they are not Black. Black outlets with Black critics reference Black American history, and how that history deeply impacts how the themes of "Black Museum" are recognized and received.

<sup>593</sup> Christopher W. Munn, "Finding a Seat at the Table: How Race Shapes Access to Social Capital," *Sociology of Religion* 80, no. 4 (2019): 435-455.

<sup>594</sup> Sonia Saraiya, "TV Review: 'Black Mirror' Season 4 on Netflix," *Variety*, December 29, 2017. [variety.com/2017/tv/reviews/black-mirror-season-4-netflix-tv-review-1202648385/](https://www.variety.com/2017/tv/reviews/black-mirror-season-4-netflix-tv-review-1202648385/).

*Entertainment Weekly* called the episode "an easily ignored hour"<sup>595</sup> and made no reference to the themes of the episode, calling it once again the worst episode of the season. Caroline Framke, a white woman who critiqued the episode for the online publication *Vox*, describes the episode as "' . . . tell[ing] three stories, none of which are particularly memorable on their own merits."<sup>596</sup> Both Framke and Franich are able to reference the history of the episode,<sup>597</sup> but neither critic is able to reference (or refuses to reference) the actual history that the episode invokes. Critics of dystopian media such as *Black Mirror* make it clear that they are "fans" of the series, and that might be part of the problem. Fandoms<sup>598</sup> are not neutral spaces; they are spaces that often trend for their racist reactions to Black people or people of color being cast in roles that they believe that white people "deserve." I bring up fandom because race impacts the way we perceive and experience the world, so, of course, it impacts how we view and process media.

For non-Black members of the fandom, it is easy to simply view *Black Mirror* as a futuristic or speculative dystopian series. However, scholars like Simone Browne, Ruja Benjamin, and Andre Brock. Allissa Richardson, Safia Noble, Lisa Nakamura, and many others have demonstrated the importance of centering race and anti-Blackness in our discussions and analyses of technology, media, and digital platforms. While the critics that

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<sup>595</sup> Darren Franich, "Black Mirror's New Season Boldly Riffs on Star Trek and Online Dating: EW Review," *EW.com*, Dec. 2017, [ew.com/tv/2017/12/06/black-mirror-review/](http://ew.com/tv/2017/12/06/black-mirror-review/).

<sup>596</sup> Framke, "Black Mirror's 'Black Museum' Tour Tells 3 Stories of Pain and Forced Symbiosis."

<sup>597</sup> "Black Museum" references previous episodes in the *Black Mirror* universe that are not discussed in this chapter.

<sup>598</sup> Rukmini Pande, *Squee from the Margins: Fandom and Race* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press), 2018. Fandoms are communities of people that assemble in person or on digital enclaves to discuss, argue, etc. subjects or people that they are fans of.

work for mainstream media are often admittedly fans of the series, there is something amiss about their inability to recognize and discuss the overt racial themes of the episode, ignoring social commentary and leading to empty, flat critiques. They write for a living, and it is their job to deconstruct visual media, unearthing complex themes that would typically go over the average viewer's head. However, an episode such as "Black Museum" clearly invites additional inquiry, yet it was met with repeated dismissals from mainstream media.

The presence of Black media critics and the criticism that they provide has been necessary.<sup>599</sup> Black media outlets and Black writers had a completely different take on the episode. Jason Parham, a Black man and a critic for *Wired*, stated that the episode is "a victory, and an ending that defies the natural biology of the series—and in being so, it's a form of reparation not everyone will understand."<sup>600</sup> Parham also acknowledges the commentary that the episode makes on the present state and impact of race on mass incarceration.<sup>601</sup> Ashley Nikadi, a Black woman critic from *The Root*, not only referenced the history of Black pain explored in the episode, but she also included the origin of Black pain in America, which started with slavery, "the glaring beginning of this horrific legacy as it forcibly turned black people into things that could be purchased, exploited for labor, brutalized and raped. Yet history does not stop there. Human zoos, which put Black and brown bodies on display for

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<sup>599</sup> Elizabeth Reich, *The Power of Black Film Criticism* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2016).

<sup>600</sup> Jason Parham, "Why the Controversial 'Black Museum' is 'Black Mirror's' Most Important Episode," *Wired*, Jan. 6, 2018, [www.wired.com/story/black-mirror-black-museum/](http://www.wired.com/story/black-mirror-black-museum/).

<sup>601</sup> *Ibid.*

zoo patrons to laugh and jeer at, were prominent throughout the 1800s."<sup>602</sup> Nikadi also recognizes the racial themes of the episode exploring America's relationship with Black pain. The Black critical response to the episode reveals how stories that center (anti) Blackness function as testimony and the reactions of Black critics function as the response.

Black critics are in a unique position because they have a cultural knowledge and background that is activated<sup>603</sup> when engaging with this type of media, and "the act of listening, writing, and conversing in one's cultural point of reference" is clearly an immense strength in responding to this kind of media.<sup>604</sup> "While black film critics must continue to track the content, aesthetics, and methods of new media as they appear, and contextualize, theorize, and debate their impact—they now also struggle against being rendered moot by the increasingly prevalent belief that we live in a colorblind society."<sup>605</sup> However, the differences in media criticism reveal the truth about race relations, and that this "colorblindness" is a rejection, or a refusal to acknowledge the systemic issues facing communities of color: it is a refusal to acknowledge the systems and institutions that produce and cause death in Black communities.

When Black people examine, watch, listen to, or engage with media that centers on cultural trauma, they can't help but see an extension of their history brought to life via visual

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<sup>602</sup> Ashley Nkadi, "Black Mirror: 'Black Museum' Reckons with America's History of Commodifying Black Pain," *The Root*, Jan. 9, 2018, [www.theroot.com/black-mirror-black-museum-reckons-with-america-s-histo-1821814356](http://www.theroot.com/black-mirror-black-museum-reckons-with-america-s-histo-1821814356).

<sup>603</sup> Kelli Moore, "Allissa V. Richardson, Bearing Witness While Black: African Americans, Smartphones, & the New Protest# Journalism," *International Journal of Communication* 15 (2021): 4.

<sup>604</sup> Evans-Winters, *Black Feminism in Qualitative Inquiry*.

<sup>605</sup> Elizabeth Reich, *The Power of Black Film Criticism* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2016).



media. This highlights the importance and the necessity of Black critics when examining speculative media that attends specifically to the past, present, and future of Black people. This is what postmemory is: a knowledge of past socio-historical phenomena that informs and shapes how Black people engage with material that references these past events. Hirsch's definition states that it is "a structure of inter- and trans-generational transmission of traumatic knowledge and experience. It is a consequence of traumatic recall but (unlike post-traumatic stress disorder) at a generational remove."<sup>606</sup> This implies that the stakes are different for Black people when they engage with material that reenacts or activates trauma that they have experienced in person or either once or twice removed. This further reveals the importance of "the double consciousness into which black film criticism was born persists and continues to render black film criticism at once symptomatic and terribly necessary."<sup>607</sup>

Mainstream critics of the series lack the cultural competency to see the cultural significance because they either do not care to learn or outright refuse to engage with not just Black history but the issues facing Black people in the present. While they may be aware of major historical racially violent events, these events are not *etched* into their memory in the same way. Therefore, they don't carry the same impact.

Postmemory is necessary for Black people because it is how they learn from the past; it is also how they plan and prepare for the future. This impacts the way that Black people view and decode the imagery in the media that they engage with.<sup>608</sup> Significant cultural events

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<sup>606</sup> Hirsch, "The Generation of Postmemory."

<sup>607</sup> Reich, *The Power of Black Film Criticism*.

<sup>608</sup> Beretta E. Smith-Shomade, "Introduction: I See Black People," in *Watching While Black* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2013), 1-16.

do not carry the same weight as mainstream audiences because it is not a point of cultural relevance for them, so an episode with the themes that are present in "Black Museum" doesn't have the same effect or impact. In the same way that Nish carried the memories of both herself and her mother, Black people also carry historical events as "memories" that inform how they both navigate and perceive the world. Speculative media such as "Black Museum" is intended to be examined as a critical dystopia because it is clear that the future it presents demonstrates that we can and must intervene in order to prevent it. But how can we work to prevent what so many people fail to see?

## Conclusion

### From Emmett Till to Trayvon: Media Circulation, Tradition, & Digital Witnessing

The inescapable presence of Black death, even in the future, is an example of why witnessing and postmemory are necessary. As mentioned by the poet Moor Mother, who argues that when Black people include and incorporate past lessons from our ancestors, we become empowered to reimagine our current moment: "The hopes and dreams of our ancestors act as important metaphysical tools that serve as agents to help one discover hidden information in the present time."<sup>609</sup> If the world is predicated on the destruction of Black people, then it becomes imperative to our survival that we have to imagine the ways in which Black life can survive a world built upon Black destruction. Moor Mother's statement describes the benefits of embracing the simultaneity of Blackness, which functions as a site of possibility and destruction. Across the diaspora, Black people have drawn and pulled from their ancestors in order to forge a way forward in the world. But even as we imagine and attempt to build new worlds, we cannot escape what we know to be a constant in the one that we currently inhabit; that destruction, or the attempt to destroy Black life, functions as the thing that shapes the world. Tyrone Palmer describes the problem with worlding in relation to the fact that "Blackness is the very matter that the World sees as its aim to obliterate, and therefore Black existence is violently positioned out of the world."<sup>610</sup>

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<sup>609</sup> Moor Mother Goddess, "Forethought," *Black Quantum Futurism, Afrofuturist Affairs*, 2015.

<sup>610</sup> Tyrone S. Palmer, "Otherwise Than Blackness: Feeling, World, Sublimation," *Qui Parle* 29, no. 2 (2020): 247-283.

Unfortunately, Black death animates how digital platforms are a large part of the way that social movements take shape.<sup>611</sup> Technology is an important yet intrusive part of our lives that is changing and advancing daily. Studying how witnessing fits and functions within these digital social movements required investigation into past modes of dissemination. Through researching and interpreting pivotal historical moments of Black trauma, I was able to view how the youth in the aftermath of Emmett Till's death kept scrapbooks and how Black media was the only outlet that they could trust to tell them the truth. At that point, digital platforms functioned as an extension of these scrapbooking practices.<sup>612</sup> Digital spaces have streamlined the circulation and memorialization of Black people who have been slain, but the difference is that this contemporary mode of image dissemination does not belong to Black people, and that is where the harm lies. While Black people have transformed online platforms into a radical space that often becomes the catalyst for social change and justice, it is also a place where these deaths accumulate, where they have no control over how these images because "clickbait" and ultimately fund the platforms that exploit Black death.<sup>613</sup> In discussing the potentialities and the limitations of these digital spaces, it is important to recognize how they mobilize the community and how the hashtags and images shared by Black people are exploited along with their information,<sup>614</sup> along with the commodification of these social movements. Most importantly, when Black death trends on these platforms, it contributes to

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<sup>611</sup> Noble, "Critical Surveillance Literacy in Social Media."

<sup>612</sup> Rebecca Sherman, *The Emmett Till Generation: The Birmingham Children's Crusade and the Renewed Civil Rights Movement*, Thesis, Salve Regina University, 2017.

<sup>613</sup> Safiya Umoja Noble, "Teaching Trayvon: Race, Media, and the Politics of Spectacle," *The Black Scholar* 44, no. 1 (2014): 12-29.

<sup>614</sup> Ibid.

racial trauma. The developments in these platforms also have the ability to expose to additional trauma on digital platforms, which accumulates with the lived trauma of being Black and being subjected to racial trauma in both the digital and material worlds.

While the Emmett Till Generation didn't have access to this technology or these spaces, there was also a distance from the trauma, which is very different from the immediacy of notifications and autoplay features that inadvertently expose Black people to direct trauma. I do acknowledge that there are similarities, that back then and today, witnessing racial violence still shocks us into silence, it still catches us by surprise whether it's on our cellphones or what DuBois witnessed in the grocery store in Atlanta. Prior generations also had control over their curation of trauma because it was a physical scrapbook that they could hold. It was their personal possession that they chose to share with others. This agency is lost on digital platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook. Once these images are shared, they exist out in the open in perpetuity.

This body of work attests to the compounded ways that Black people experience racial trauma. While there has been much research into digital platforms, there is not much research that attends to the trauma-inducing experience of witnessing and engaging with digital platforms when Black death trends. Also, the history of how Black people have transferred traditions of circulation and image curation on digital platforms. Black people have created different possibilities with digital platforms via communal mourning and witnessing. When it comes to actually quantifying racial terror, we have to go beyond the field of Digital Humanities into the field of Psychology, where researchers are currently attempting to find a means of measuring racial trauma, but even this attempt to "measure" trauma has its

limitations.<sup>615</sup> Black people on digital platforms repurpose scenes of violence, as traumatic as they may be, with the intention of informing the masses. However, digital platforms do not belong to Black people, so racism will be exacerbated on these platforms as they are complicit in producing racist environments<sup>616</sup> within digital spaces. Regardless, digital spaces are still being used by Black people for social justice efforts, and as the platform progress and develop Black witnessing and the transmission of trauma, whether that be oral, textual, visual, etc., is an inextricable part of the Black experience. While the intent behind the sharing of these images/videos/livestreams cannot always be easily discovered due to the nature of social media, it is clear that organizing the public in order to resist racial/state violence takes precedence over Black death being presented in digital spaces as a spectacle. Not to understate the significance of the former, but we must also keep in mind the deaths that aren't recorded, those who rarely have their deaths prioritized and remember that this is where the lives of Black women are situated.<sup>617</sup>

### **Black Women, Community Building & Witnessing on Digital Platforms**

The amount of labor that Black women put into digital spaces to support their families and prioritize the lives of Black women killed by gendered/state/racist violence is remarkable.<sup>618</sup> For Black women, digital spaces are essential for both community building and activism. Their creation and use of hashtags in digital spaces give Black women's deaths

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<sup>615</sup> Keum and Miller, "Racism in Digital Era." The racism scale is determined to measure harm as "(a) personal experience of racial cyber-aggression, (b) vicarious exposure to racial cyber-aggression, and (c) online-mediated exposure to racist reality."

<sup>616</sup> Benjamin, "Race after Technology."

<sup>617</sup> Shatema Threadcraft, "North American Necropolitics and Gender."

<sup>618</sup> Catherine Knight Steele, "When the Black Lives that Matter are Not Our Own: Digital Black Feminism and a Dialectic of Self and Community," *Feminist Media Studies* 21, no. 5 (2021): 860-863.

visibility. Through the curation of digital images, the digital afterlives of Black women such as Sandra Bland, Korryn Gaines, and Oluwatoyin Salau are built from Black women's organizing and communal mourning on digital platforms. While they commemorate the anniversaries of their deaths, they also keep their names in the digital/public sphere by getting their names to trend. They focus on their lives and not just their untimely deaths. Black women's memorialization via communal mourning is also necessary to combat their erasure in digital spaces. Black women use digital spaces to labor as activists and resist the effacement of Black women. Black women's deaths are not prioritized in the same way that men's deaths are.

To combat this problem, Black women turn to digital spaces. But Black women's activism doesn't end on digital platforms. It also materializes in the world. The introduction of the hashtag #YouOkSis was created with the intention of Black women protecting other Black women in public spaces. In places where Black women might feel anxious or scared, it gives another woman as an outside party the opportunity to extend herself, to surreptitiously but openly offering assistance to other Black women in need. There were cases of women being harassed in public spaces by men, and a simple "You ok, sis?" allows the other woman to know that you are offering assistance or even an out of a potentially dangerous situation.

It is clear that this kind of intervention doesn't necessarily apply in all situations, but it does provide Black women with an "insider" language. We can only imagine if this real-world intervention could have impacted the life of someone like Oluwatoyin Salau. The problem with hashtags is that they lose their popularity and thus lose momentum. #YouOkSis trended four years before Oluwatoyin Salau's death. While digital spaces are crucial for Black women's organizational efforts and witnessing, I am interested in seeing how the potential for

material global intervention via hashtags can be revitalized because of the possible impact of community building outside of political/social justice efforts. This project also seeks for state violence against Black women to be recognized beyond police shootings, so a comparative analysis of Black men's experiences with state violence versus that of Black women isn't helpful.

We need to examine the state violence that Black women experience more capaciously, examining and including gestational, sexual, physical, and intimate partner violence.<sup>619</sup> Through this lens, how both Korryn Gaines and Sandra Bland experienced state violence and technological erasure reveals that the state is also able to enact state violence with its control over who gets to access social media, as well as the way state officials "perform" lawful behavior and language while obfuscating what is visible on dash/body cameras. State violence in the case of Korryn Gaines and Sandra Bland took shape in the way that the state controlled or limited their access to be viewed by the public. In the aftermath of the deaths of young Black women, whether it be by state violence or memorialization, often tends to project motherhood onto deceased women, perhaps as a means or a symbol of hope for the future. Unfortunately, the death of Korryn Gaines revealed that motherhood for Black women is not the answer because children are also witnesses and victims of state violence.

### **Black Youth's Resistance & Dominating Digital Spaces**

In December 2019, the Congressional Black Caucus released "Ring The Alarm: The Crisis of Black Youth Suicide in America" it was a wake-up call (to the National Institute of

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<sup>619</sup> Michelle S. Jacobs, "The Violent State: Black Women's Invisible Struggle Against Police Violence," *William & Mary Journal of Women & Law* 24 (2017): 39. Black women in violent relationships with police officers, military officials, etc.



Mental Health) to fund more Black scientists to examine the spike in suicides among Black youth.<sup>620</sup> The Congressional Black Caucus recognized that there is a cultural element that is necessary in order to handle the Black youth mental health crisis. The report demonstrated the importance of acknowledging that Black youth need a mental health assessment that speaks to the specific challenges facing Black youth. Young Black people witnessing and experiencing racial trauma is not new, but the difference today can be found in what scholar Elizabeth Alexander has named The Trayvon Generation.<sup>621</sup>

Witnessing today is not the same as it was then, and young Black people are inundated with racial trauma on digital platforms.<sup>622</sup> The major mental health issues that contribute to suicide are listed as trauma, anxiety, and depression.<sup>623</sup> Witnessing, while necessary, can exacerbate or even produce the aforementioned mental conditions.<sup>624</sup> Black youth today are deeply involved and knowledgeable of technology and digital spaces, and they have grown up watching death happen from their smartphones in near-real time. They are also citizen journalists, positioned as the truth-tellers of our time, as well as our protectors. Once again, I want to reiterate that while witnessing is a large part of what Black youth experience on digital platforms, it is not the sole cause of the mental health crisis. I do, however, believe that

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<sup>620</sup> Emergency Task Force on Black Youth Suicide and Mental Health, "Ring the Alarm: The Crisis of Black Youth Suicide in America," Congressional Black Caucus Emergency Task Force, 2018.

<sup>621</sup> Alexander, *The Trayvon Generation*.

<sup>622</sup> Brendesha M. Tynes, "Race-Related Traumatic Events Online and Mental Health Among Adolescents of Color," *Journal of Adolescent Health* 65, no. 3 (2019): 371-377.

<sup>623</sup> Sheftall, "Black Youth Suicide."

<sup>624</sup> Posick and Akiv Dawson, "The Health Outcomes of Direct and Witnessed Interactions with the Police."

it is a factor that contributes to the accumulation of social anxieties that Black youth are already facing, as well as the racism that they experience in the material world are all contributing factors.

Social media is a space where, despite difficulties in gaining access to the internet, and being part of a minority population, young Black people dominate digital platforms,<sup>625</sup> and their activism has been important.<sup>626</sup> An example of the difficulties that come with witnessing for Black youth is the labor of Darnella Frazier, who reveals the weight of witnessing through how it has changed her life on digital platforms. Scholarship pertaining to witnessing has been important for analyzing how these moments impact youth, specifically Black populations. Frazier's experiences as a witness on digital platforms are a necessary addition to the preexisting literature because her experience with witnessing reveals the reciprocal nature of digital dissemination. In the same way that we have access to digital platforms, the public also has access to those who disseminate content.<sup>627</sup> Darnell Frazier was a witness and citizen journalist that started a movement. She was also transformed into a target by the public. However, Frazier's use of digital platforms to defend herself and limit the public's access to her is important. Her refusal to talk to mainstream media is also significant. Frazier controls her narrative, and she maintains her power by using social media as her voice to "talk back" in defense of herself and her actions. Death and witnessing, via technology, have become

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<sup>625</sup> The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research, "Instagram and Snapchat are the Most Popular Social Networks for Teens; Black Teens are Most Active on Social Media, Messaging Apps," [www.apnorc.org/projects/Pages/HTML%20Reports/instagram-and-snapchat-are-most-popular-social-networks-for-teens.aspx](http://www.apnorc.org/projects/Pages/HTML%20Reports/instagram-and-snapchat-are-most-popular-social-networks-for-teens.aspx)

<sup>626</sup> Gross, "# IfTheyGunnedMeDown."

<sup>627</sup> Except for the cases where the person that submits a recording chooses to remain anonymous.

features of Black life. So much so that it is now the main subject in what I describe as the Black youth bildungsroman. The pervasiveness of Black death is tied to technology and witnessing. It is being presented as the threshold between adulthood and childhood in media depicting the futures of young Black people. It is exactly as Darnella Frazier stated in her online statement, witnessing death forces you to grow up.<sup>628</sup>

### **Speculative Media & The Future of Black Witnessing and Collective Memory**

The collective future of Black people includes allusions to modern ties to technology and witnessing death. My analysis of "Black Museum" *Black Mirror* (2017) captures the Black experience and America's obsession with Black pain simultaneously. Analyzing as a critical dystopia requires an understanding of postmemory. Through including the critiques of entertainment critics, the lack of cultural knowledge about Blackness becomes apparent, highlighting the importance of not only postmemory and witnessing but the necessity of Black critics.

My critique of the episode reveals that while Nish's narrative is an individual experience, it speaks to a problem plaguing the Black community, which is rooted in racist policing and surveillance. It symbolizes the problem of the racialization of mass incarceration and the commodification of prisoners. "Black Museum" reveals that technology in the future will find new ways to exact racism against Black people, but as always, Black people will find a way to repurpose the circulation of racist imagery or technology and resist. Nish's trauma, along with the death of her mother, is an example of how far state violence can reach. If it

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<sup>628</sup> Schwartz, "Police Brutality and Racism in America." Darnella Frazier was visibly shaken in the aftermath of Floyd's murder by the Minneapolis Police Department.

doesn't kill you in the streets,<sup>629</sup> in the hospitals,<sup>630</sup> in the schools, in the water,<sup>631</sup> the trauma of it all can kill you as well.<sup>632</sup>

When we think of state violence, we must not forget the trauma inflicted on prisoners' families.<sup>633</sup> This is how racial trauma accumulates, not just in digital spaces, but it is all-encompassing of Black life, reaching out at every angle. Nish physically "carrying" her mother's consciousness inside of her within this speculative future demonstrates how witnessing and postmemory are part of Black survival in an anti-Black world. The nature of witnessing is also something that witnesses carry with them; witnessing racialized violence is a vicarious individual and communal experience that impacts how Black people view future instances of similar violence.<sup>634</sup>

In speculative futures, witnessing is transformed into a physical process via technology as Black people are able to carry the memories, trauma, and pain of others by carrying the downloaded consciousness of another being. While witnessing anti-Black violence and death is not new, the way that it is experienced in these future depictions reveals terrible implications for Black people ranging from exploitation to loops of never-ending

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<sup>629</sup> David J. Leonard, "Illegible Black Death, Legible White Pain: Denied Media, Mourning, and Mobilization in an Era of "Post-Racial" Gun Violence," *Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies* 17, no. 2 (2017): 101-109.

<sup>630</sup> Ayah Nuriddin, Graham Mooney, and Alexandre IR White, "Reckoning with Histories of Medical Racism and Violence in the USA," *The Lancet* 396.10256 (2020): 949-951.

<sup>631</sup> Peter J. Hammer, "The Flint Water Crisis, the Karegnondi Water Authority and Strategic-Structural Racism," *Critical Sociology* 45, no. 1 (2019): 103-119.

<sup>632</sup> Michele P. Bratina, Amanda K. Cox, and Matthew D. Fetzer, "Racism and White Death Penalty Support: A Test of the Racist Punitive Bias Hypothesis," *International Journal of Police Science & Management* 18, no. 2 (2016): 140-154.

<sup>633</sup> Browning, Miller, and Spruance, "Criminal Incarceration Dividing the ties that Bind."

<sup>634</sup> Alexander, "'Can you be BLACK and Look at This?'"

death for the pleasure of white audiences. While this series is situated in the future, the repetition of racial violence makes it all the more prescient. Death is altered by the imagined technological advances depicted within these iterations of the future, but Black resistance and witnessing are constantly changing with technology as well. These future depictions of Black death are shaped by legacies of the violence of the past, building upon them to imagine the ways in which we will continue to be murdered in the future, but cultural knowledge of what happened then is how we recognize its future iterations. Even in imaginative renderings of the future, the violent racialized death of Black people is still depicted as inevitable. But our resistance is also dependent upon the way we repurpose the technology that intends to kill us.