My People: The Visual Origins and Viral Spectacle of Black Suffering in Digital Culture

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Abstract

For this study, I will explore the intersection between Black visual culture and digital landscaping. This research is primarily concerned with answering one question: how do contemporary technologies replicate and systematize the visual tradition of Black suffering in western political systems and digital landscapes? During the early days of the Internet, many theorized that the emergence of virtual environments and a culture of fantasy would preclude a mass cultural exodus into a digital sphere free from conceptions of race and the experience of racism. However, in reality, the Internet has not provided an escape route from either race or racism, and it has only amplified their existence. Race and racism persist online in ways both new and unique to the Internet, alongside vestiges of anti-Black visual traditions that exist both offline and on.

Within our contemporary moment, it has become critical to assess the extent to which digital landscapes act as a mode through which we engage with racism. In this paper, I analyze the literature on race and racism in Internet studies and venture into my own explanations as I wrestle with the visual nature of modern Black culture, which has left us with a digital landscape thriving off contemporary reproductions of racial slavery. My explanations focus on the broad areas of (1) visual culture and Blackness, (2) the visual tradition of brutality, (3) and a comparative approach to Black utopianism. Then, drawing on a range of theoretical perspectives from Saidiya Hartman, Darby English, and Susan Sontag, among others, I offer an analysis and critique of the new and expansive intersection between Blackness, digital and visual culture. My goal in this paper is to further the elusive conversation surrounding the meaning of visual culture and argue that the spectacle and aspects of the aesthetic nature of the Black body are recurring in a culture of white supremacy and racism. When placed within contemporary digital technologies, the visual image of Black suffering could be classified as trendy, placing visions of Black trauma back into our worldview in a manner conducive to an aesthetic form that has never truly disappeared, just evolved. In building on on previous research, this study examines how aesthetic racialization and white supremacy are salient factors in various visuals of Black suffering embedded within contemporary technologies.

Introduction

The question of the representation of Black people in western landscapes is not new, and contemporary Black visual ecologies is a complex field in which to pursue scholarly research. More so, the complexity and richness of Black visual culture continue to elude our art historical discourse. The reasons for this are several, but the most convincing of them is the dearth of a viable approach to critical Black art historical research and, more critically, our inability even to contextualize the haptics of Black visuals. This paper explores aestheticism and technology as it posits one critical question: how do contemporary technologies replicate and systematize the visual tradition of Black suffering in western political systems and digital landscapes? I respond to this call by grappling with: visual technology, aesthetic racialization and scholars each of which have written about emerging correspondences between virtual and physical worlds, human and machine processes, Black visual traditions, and their physical realizations. This work attempts a synthesis; rather than working with traditional archival material, I delve into a vast, virtually unexplored reservoir of digital material that has been amassed over decades by art historians, philosophers of science, and Black communities on the visual representation of the Black body in physical and technological practice.

We live in a culture reliant on fear and terror, and in my work and through my experience, I have recognized

recognized that Black bodies are in a perpetual state of suffering. To be Black is to be profoundly vulnerable. In understanding this, this paper explores the origins and continuing impact that terror has left on western cultures, with an emphasis on the digital reproductions of suffering. My primary focus is on photographic images, including but not limited to photographs of enslaved people, police brutality, and lynching victims, because they provide the unique opportunity to highlight that an integral portion of western culture is the hyper-visibility of Black suffering. And within this examination, this paper will look at the time period from the 19th century to our contemporary moment, highlighting key moments in Black history including but not limited to slavery, Jim-Crow, the death of Emmett Till, and the recent emergence of the Black Lives Matter Movement. This framework of thought highlights a wide range of significant political shifts in recent US history, with one common denominator being that despite the widespread belief that the condition of Black life is improving, anti-Black violence is continuing, hence the seemingly endless visual ecology of Black woundedness this project continues to expose me to. Moreover, I utilized the visuals I found through a rigorous digital search for both archival material and recently trending digitals, such as the murder of George Floyd, to continue the discussion of aesthetics and suffering. In reviewing the work of Courtney R. Baker, Susan Sontag, and Safiya Umoja Noble, among several others, their work each establish a unique foundation that each astutely questions the visual politics of suffering. Rather than being a neutral arbitrator, each scholar has found relevance in not only arguing that humanity's ethics of seeing are inherently flawed but also that our contemporary moment has allowed itself to forget the genealogy of the view of Black woundedness, because in confronting our politics of sight we must confront the root of anti-Blackness.

It becomes clear that at the forefront of this project is also the fact that representations of Black suffering are inherently political. Black hyper-visibility equals death and while this interrogation of sight is not inherently a critique of digital landscaping and online discourse, I wish for my investigation to examine the voyeuristic lure of suffering, how the gaze of anti-Blackness develops in technology and practice, and most importantly, how that gaze feeds into an even larger history of perception itself. Furthermore, despite these already powerful configurations, the repetitional nature of these painful visuals have co-opted the algorithms that dominate everyday life allowing contemporary technologies to replicate and systematize the visual tradition of Black suffering in western political systems and digital landscapes through the mechanisms of the body and visual repetition. Just as the visual is political, politics itself is visceral in the sense that experience arises from the physiological. The previous usage of the term "mechanisms of the body" references the paradoxes of body and idea as we position flesh as a material capable of retaining societal structures and values. This paper's goals are thus located on a meta-level as we both expose how racist visual traditions have been promulgated through the spectacle of wounded Black bodies and argue that such images only reaffirm that our visual interests remain unchanged despite political belief.

Visual Culture

Humanity has continuously grappled with the word 'culture' and its definition, practice, and embodiment. Visual culture is just a small understanding of the polemical word 'culture' as it regards images as central to the representation of meaning in the world. Rather than aligning itself with a distinct discipline, visual culture is hybrid, formed as a consequence of the convergence of various methodologies.[1] Eilean Hooper-Greenhill defines visual culture as the intricate way humanity can begin to grasp how we engage in looking. She states, "Visual culture works towards a social theory of visuality, focusing on questions of what is made visible, who sees what, how seeing, knowing and power are interrelated. It examines the act of seeing as a product of the tensions between external images or objects, and internal thought processes."[2] It is intertwined with everything we encounter daily that communicates through visual means. From the landscapes we encounter to the clothes we wear, all down to the advertisements and social media posts deliberately chosen for our liking, visual culture focuses on all questions of the visible and its spectator. Moreover, with these cultural intersections implicated within this form of culture, we are confronted

[1] Morra, Joanna. "Visual Culture: What Is Visual Culture Studies?," (Oxford: Routledge Press, 2006), p 21.
[2] Hooper-Greenhill, Eilean. "Museums and the Interpretation of Visual Culture," (Oxford: Routledge Press, 2000), p 14

not just with art history but also the social sciences and history itself, as sight, knowledge and power are all inextricably related. It is crucial to add that the term visual culture, which we often use as a contemporary mode of analysis to explain and give meaning to the complexity of the concept, did not exist before the 1970s. The emergence of visual culture studies as a field of inquiry began from a pedagogical and practice-based imperative as educators reckoned with a need in higher education for students to equip themselves with the interdisciplinary tools necessary to mobilize their craft. However, the purpose of 'defining visual culture' is undoubtedly expansive as the[3] terminology dates back to a line of ancestry that extends well beyond the beginnings of the canon of art history. Arguably, one of the first representations of visual culture was created by Neanderthals and dated back at least 25,000 years ago to rudimentary cave paintings, but that is a discussion for another time.[4]

Returning to the early 1970s, a new consideration of the role of the visual, adjacent technologies and the subjectivities that are embroiled in these relations became a critical emerging issue for scholars, thus forming visual culture studies. The late twentieth century is characterized as a time of epochal technological change. Within this moment, a new degree of saturation of social issues engulfed visual technologies, shifting their social function and inherent purpose.[5] Many art historians locate the emergence of visual culture to this sharp rise in use and access to visual technologies. However, the cutting edge of visual cultural studies understands that visuality and the visual technologies that mediate it are part of a larger social project that continues to transform how we behave, interact and communicate.

Moreover, since 1995, the world has shifted toward globalizing the Internet as a media and communicative visual form. Similar to the claims of Steven Shaviro, "the Internet and the World Wide Web are no longer places for pioneers to explore and stake their claims; they have been absorbed into the texture of our everyday life. If Barlow's exceptionalism with regard to cyberspace seems dated, this is simply because virtual reality is no longer an exception; today, it is everywhere and everything."[6] Despite being a powerful methodological phenomenon, visual culture is frequently restricted to being a mere subsection of art history when the concept deeply concerns media studies, history, psychology, and philosophy. At its core, it intervenes with nearly every facet of society implicated by the ramifications of symbolic pieces in the non-academic realm.[7] In sum, visual culture is a vast umbrella term that will consistently be utilized and reinvestigated throughout this paper to capture the visual complexity of Blackness and the technologies both utilizing and capitalizing upon it.

Empathy and Visualizations of Black Pain

Black has always been a complex, even contradictory color. It is a material substance, a method, mode, and way of existing within the world that necessitates complex thinking on the viewer's part. However, for this paper, we will formally view Blackness as an identity and self-naming of a diaspora as this is, arguably, the lens through which we interpret all aspects of Blackness.[8] It is crucial to add to this discussion that Black visual culture exists in two realms: one where we create solely for our consumption and cultural pride, in which Black people are the spectator of our narratives, and another in which we are the object up for contestation. This paper is primarily concerned with the latter as we encounter the reality that Blackness and its visually algorithmic reproductions have fundamentally sustained and arguably built themselves off the visual tradition of Black suffering. Furthermore, as expansive as visual culture is, this paper primarily concerns issues specific to that of Black visual culture and its contemporary reproductions within the twenty-first century. Historically, Black imagery has served not only for the use of scientific rationality regarding the myths of biological

[3] Morra, Joanna. "Visual Culture: What Is Visual Culture Studies," p 12.

[4] "A Brief History of the Internet: Sharing Resources," University System of Georgia Learning Center, https://www.usg.edu/galileo/skills/unit07/internet07_02.phtml.

[5] "Visual Culture," Encyclopedia, https://www.encyclopedia.com/history/dictionaries-thesauruses-pictures-and-press-releases/visual-culture.

[6] Nakamura, Lisa. "Digitizing Race: Visual Cultures of the Internet," (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), p 2.

[7] Hooper-Greenhill, "Museums and the Interpretation of Visual Culture," p 16.

[8] E. Patrick Johnson. "Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity," (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2003), 2-6.

inferiority but also for the tools of extreme bureaucratic rationale.[9] However, with the reality of external political and cultural pressures and such widespread socially interactive technologies, traditional patterns endemic to Black portraiture have never been so clear and widely accessible before.

With pain being one of the most poignant of human emotions, it can be nearly impossible to articulate precisely what pain feels like— let alone capture and reproduce the multitude of forms pain can take. However, art has a proven ability to influence people's views of suffering and death. Moreover, the creation and reproduction of images within digital landscapes also provide a platform to justify suffering. There is no contextualization of the visual cues of suffering in the canon of art history that does not relate to religion. This is unsurprising as the exploration of suffering in western art has historically been reserved for depictions of Christ and his willingness to subject himself to martyrdom. In both writing and art, the Crucifixion of Christ has become multifaceted rhetoric, and it is within Christ's display of ungodly pain and mercy that suffering has become a global vehicle for humanity's understanding of suffering, With Christ's head fallen to one side, revealing an expression of both lamentation and grueling pain as blood runs from his hands and head, we see an act of grief in its most basic form. The symbolic image of Christ's crucifixion has kept art historians busy for centuries. Furthermore, despite our contemporary shift away from devotional art, we continually engage with the subject of an identifiable and universally understood metaphor for martyrdom and human suffering in the more covert ways. Although a large portion of art history has become a mechanism through which we tell Christ's story, it also provides a platform to justify suffering, depicted through triumphant images.[10] Moreover, within this context, I argue that grief has become an amplifier of political alarm and less so a vehicle for religious belief as we now have come to understand that in grief exists terror, and at the heart of contemporary terror lies the Black body.

Tears, flailing arms, pain-stricken emotions plastered onto one's face, cries for help, and, more often than not, a body bound not by one's own emotions but by an external oppressive force are a few of the many signifiers of Black suffering. Instantly, we conjure images of Black bodies pinned against a floor, strung to a tree, pressing against a gunshot wound, flashes of red and blue across a face eclipsed by fear, and so on. We cannot grasp Black suffering as a symptom independent of violence and brutality. It is here where we draw the line between the fear of Blackness and the lack of value for Black life, and in this, I am forced to question the grievability of Black life when the Black body persists in a state of inconsequential mortality. The spectacle of Black suffering, whether by lynching, at the hands of state-sanctioned gun violence, or simply due to pure hate, in turn, incites a public performance of grief that confirms that even as a corpse, the Black body is mourned in a way that serves the ends of not only whiteness but pure digital engagement.[11]

Before encountering the spectacle of Black suffering in digital landscaping, it is crucial to explore the concept of suffering and empathy from a more formal context. It is here we must formally recognize various indicators of suffering and the real-world implications of considering what it means to be human and recognize the human body in pain. "Humanity is something that needs to be articulated and most important, to be recognized."[12] The interrogation of humanity is an essential component to making sense of the Black body's visual presence in the struggle for bodily integrity, equality and protection. While the discussion of humanity and our relationship to sight is not the primary subject of this paper, it is crucial to recognize that there is no guarantee that an individual's humanity is intact or protected, despite it being the norm to assume both.[13] The ethical implications of this conversation are immense, but a concept as fundamental as "the human" deserves

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[9] Johnson. "Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity," 8-9.

[10] Figes, Lydia. "Christ On The Cross: Depictions of the Crucifixion." Art UK. Last modified April 19, 2019. https://artuk.org/discover/stories/christ-on-the-cross-depictions-of-the-crucifixion.

[11] Mendes, Jan-Therese. 2021. "Black Death, Mourning and The Terror of Black Reproduction: Aborting the Black Muslim Self, Becoming the Assimilated Subject, Souls." A Critical Journal of Black Politics, Culture, and Society 22 (1): 1- 3. 10.1080/10999949.2020.1804803.

[12] Baker, Courtney R. "Humane Insight: Looking at Images of African American Suffering and Death," p 19.

[13] Ibid. p 13.

questioning when it is found to be foundational to nearly all theories concerning social ethics, political justice, and the universal condition— not only influencing our understanding of pain and death but also the proximity to which we believe one deserves their condition. It is within this unparalleled account of the human condition that argues, from a perspective similar to Afro-pessimism, that Black people do not function as political subjects; instead, our flesh has been instrumentalized for a greater societal agenda that does not include us. And whereas Afro-pessimism is a broader, more generalized argument with regard to this paper's investigation of visual woundedness, this argument positions Blackness as almost conceptually coherent, the obvious inverse to white supremacy but an example of what occurs if the positive attributes of what it means to be human are ever in doubt. On a theoretical level, the principal value of this conversation is in our attempt to paint an accurate picture of both our social world and the limits of humanity as it becomes clear that the spectacle of Black vulnerability is the only feasible response to the reality of the Black condition.

What is crucial, though, is the question that rests at the center of this idea of thought, why are Black people so persistently not recognized as human? As we return to visual culture, we are confronted with the reality that most, if not all, contemporary depictions of Black people emerge from a site of harm and suffering. However, we still have no language to describe this suffering and its virality. This idea forces us to introduce yet another grueling question: How do we begin to grasp the visual cues of Black suffering in visual culture if many believe Black people do not experience suffering? "At best, Black people are unequal participants in the projects of Humans, or mere tools for the furtherance of Human ends. At worst, Black people are objects or targets for sadistic anti-Black violence."[14]

In Susan Sontag's "Regarding the Pain of Others," Sontag surmises that the drive behind society's fascination with the visual all lies in shock value. The creation and widespread circulation of dramatic images is inextricably linked to "a leading stimulus of consumption and source of value. Furthermore, in questioning the photographs of Black people who are visibly beaten, mutilated, and inferred to be irreversibly traumatized, Sontag introduces a valid point to an already pre-existing site of rhetoric as she argues against images' ability to capture and successfully communicate suffering without bias. The pain we see within these images reiterates the fallacies of our political system, simplifies where our anger should be redirected, and, most importantly, agitates.[15] The spectacle of Black pain creates the illusion of consensus, and this is arguably the perfect equation for a social uprising, but to Sontag, this is further from the truth than we like to empathize with as we have already passed a point of visual oversaturation. Simply put, our contemporary moment has framed the visual ecology and discourse surrounding Black suffering as not enough to elicit a necessary reaction; anger was replaced by apathy long ago. We have arrived at a standstill in which our exposure to woundedness has long surpassed our humanity's need to recognize and empathize with the human condition of vulnerability.[16] Perhaps there is such a thing as too much pain but, in returning to the question of the photograph, Sontag approaches trauma from an explicitly ethical perspective, claiming that through the medium of photography, we can see the pain of others and readily identify vulnerabilities in the human condition. From this perspective, the photograph now becomes a means by which we may witness or be compelled to witness misery and suffering.

"These dead are supremely uninterested in the living: in those who took their lives, in witnesses - and us. Why should they seek our gaze? What would they have to say to us? 'We; - this 'we' is everyone who has never experienced anything like what they went through - do not understand. We do not get it. We truly cannot imagine what it was like. We cannot imagine how dreadful, how terrifying war is, and how normal it becomes. Can't understand, can't imagine. That's what every soldier, and every journalist and aid worker,

[14] Patrick O'Donnell. "Ontology, Experience, and Social Death: On Frank Wilderson's Afropessimism," (APA Newsletter: Philosophy and the Black Experience, Volume 20, Fall 2020), 1. https://philarchive.org/archive/ODOOEA

[15] Susan Sontag. "Regarding the Pain of Others," The New York Times, March 23, 2003. https://www.nytimes.com/2003/03/23/ books/chapters/regarding-the-pain-of-others.html.

[16] Baker, Courtney R. "Humane Insight: Looking at Images of African American Suffering and Death," p 13.

and independent observer who has put time under fire and had the luck to elude the death that struck down others nearby stubbornly feels. And they are right."[17]

Contrary to belief, documentation of Black pain does not elicit enough engagement for political activation, especially when met with visual apathy. To this end, we are all witnesses, even if our witnessing tends to occur at a spatial, temporal, or technological distance. We are implicated, morally and bodily, in the distant events of anti Blackness that we also choose to immortalize.[18] At this intersection between morality and visuality, we stumble upon the issue of empathy. Formally understood as the ability to understand coupled with the ability to share and critically comprehend the deeply felt feelings of another, empathy is a feeling the Black diaspora has never been granted. Saidiya Hartman's discussion of empathy from her book "Scenes of Subjection" is crucial to this conversation, as pain is arguably the common language of humanity. "As Black people, we often mistake this [pain] as the highest form of empathy and recognition."[19] To paraphrase Saidiya Hartman, it [digital circulation] is just an extension of the master's prerogative. We facilitate the imagination of people and worlds in which we play no part."[20] So now we return to the prevailing question, if to be Black is not to be human, how can we even understand the visuals of Black suffering we see even as depictions of grief? Visually we understand suffering to be depictions of tears, grief-stricken wailing, and an individual on their knees. But, recognition of this has proven itself to not be enough for one to understand and align themself with the ethical and humane analysis of Blackness and visual culture. "The nature and techniques of witnessing and of seeing have changed undeniably. but the basic mechanism for learning about humanity—the visual encounter with another being— remains."[21] The multilayered connection between the racialized structure of western society and the visual nature of contemporary Black culture has left us with a digital landscape thriving off contemporary reproductions of racial slavery. Though our contemporary moment prioritizes the digital, the ideological image of a brutal past is now endlessly recycled within our algorithms, recursing through an image of the Black body defined by its proximity to enslavement and death.

Notes on Black Suffering in the History of Art

The legacy of Black suffering, pain and vulnerability has been and continues to be a critical aspect of both American culture and the Black identity. The following section organizes the lineage of Black spectacle and death in the past century by grappling with both the rivalry between private pleasure and public disgust and by also questioning how visuals have come to shape humanity. In understanding these legacies, we can begin to lay the groundwork of our subsequent analyses keying into how we are conditioned to view Blackness as inherently wounded and deserving of this subjugation. And in understanding this framework of thought we can begin to visualize how such a significant part of the public psyche is conditioned to see Blackness as deserving of objectification, disfigurement, and degradation.

In the nineteenth century United States, visual imagery began to emerge as a powerful tool in normalizing the act of looking at the pain of another. The belief that enslaved Black bodies were made to dehumanize itself became more widespread, and it quickly became a social norm to dismiss Black expressions of pain despite the unethical conditions they were subject to. "If the slave is not human, the logic runs, he can not experience pain as a human, thereby eliminating the need or responsibility of onlookers to recognize those bodies as like their own."[22] ry began to emer And just as the enslaved were dismissed of their pain, sold and exchanged, so too were their visual depictions as there was no shortage of enthusiastic

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[17] Susan Sontag. "Regarding the Pain of Others," The New York Times, March 23, 2003. https://www.nytimes.com/2003/03/23/books/chapters/regarding-the-pain-of-others.html..

[18] Furstenau, Marc."The Ethics of Seeing: Susan Sontag and Visual Culture Studies." Postscript 26, no. 2 (Winter, 2007): 91-0_3.https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/ethics-seeing-susan-sontag-visual culture-studies/docview/232111418/se-2.

[19] Edited by Moon-Kie Jung, João H. Costa Vargas, "Anti Blackness," (Duke University Press, April 2021), p 41.

[20] Ibid., p 42.

[21] Baker, Courtney R. "Humane Insight: Looking at Images of African American Suffering and Death," p 15

[22] Baker, Courtney R. "Humane Insight: Looking at Images of African American Suffering and Death." (Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2015), p 3.

enthusiastic spectators interested in reproducing the same violence they looked upon. Slaves were repeatedly featured within paintings, woodcuts, and lithographs and were both positioned and rendered in a violating fashion. With chains tied to the hands and feet of the enslaved, iron collars buckled to their necks, and on their knees begging for their freedoms Black pain quickly became not only the leading profit-maker for western society but also the most engaging form of entertainment for onlookers.[23] A war between white depravity and Black vulnerability had been waged by white racists, as the imagery of Black woundedness reinforced the notion that the enslaved were subordinate, powerless victims not just devoid of humanity but deserving of their status. And with this war arrived the notion of sentimentalism, a term that can only be defined by its emphasis on a culture of sensibility.[24] As described by Courtney Baker, "this morality of pain and cruelty neither automatically nor necessarily bolstered the belief that Black bodies experienced pain as 'civilized' and implicitly white bodies did. The witnessing of another's suffering was by turns perceived as crucial to the elicitation of proper moral feeling on the one hand and as a reprehensible indulgence in cruelty on the other."[25] Sentimentalism fashioned the Black body into a site of ethical conflict as the notion was not only manipulated by proslavery advocates but also subsequently utilized in order to prove the inferiority of the enslaved. By deeming Black people to be inferior—primal even— sensationalism exacerbated the painful conditions onlookers subjected Black bodies to by maintaining the stance that the enslaved Black body response to pain was undeveloped and uncivilized. As stated by Courtney Baker, "Pain isn't really pain for the enslaved, because of their limited sentience…. The slave is happy and, in fact, his happiness exceeds our own."[26]

However, some abolitionists utilized the visual power of the injured Black body to lay a solid foundation for enacting social change. Abolitionists advertised wounded Black bodies in order to reveal the true depravity and insidiousness of slavery. The sight of Black suffering was proven to be more powerful than anyone's word, as if without these visuals the horrors of slavery could not be actualized for onlookers. In mobilizing imagery of wounded Black bodies, abolitionists quickly proved themselves correct, as "the wounded body of the enslaved was a key image in the fight to end slavery."[27] Only then could white spectators believe that pain and suffering ruined our past and could deform humanity's potential.[28] This assertion of Black humanity by both the enslaved and white abolitionists subsequently became a radical ideological intervention through which a small but willing portion of educated whites had to grapple with the moral implications of the white gaze. Although it is easy for one to look at suffering and see nothing of note, this ideological intervention maintained another more favorable route to be taken — one in which the white gaze is enough to instruct spectators to react as those who value human life should.[29] It became a question of if the Black body was truly as wounded as abolitionists vehemently stated, how could whiteness be capable of deforming humanity to such an extreme? The sensationalism of Black suffering stands in direct correlation with the institution of slavery and while this reality is unsurprising, it is this very institution that continues to undermine the concept of Black humanity leading many to have little to no care for the well being and survival of the Black identity.

As we begin to move forward in history, with the abolition of slavery codified in the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863 and later ratified by the US Constitution's Thirteenth Amendment in 1865, lynching quickly became the nation's most sensationalized threat against the Black body, second to capital punishment.[30] The lynching epidemic that swept the United States introduced a particularly insidious utilization of looking and aesthetics to the public sphere, placing Black vistims at the center for all to see.[31] These violent public acts were our earliest understandings of racial terrorism and they were not just limited to hanging Black men and women from trees but also involved other methods of torture such as mutilation, decapitation and desecration. For those unable to attend, or not lucky enough to obtain clothing or body

[23] Ibid., p 24 -25.
[24] Ibid., p 24.
[25] Ibid., p 25-26
[26] Ibid., p 27.
[27] Ibid., p 28.
[28] Ibid., p 28.
[29] Ibid., p 2.
[30] Ibid., p 36.
[31] Raiford, Leigh. "Photography and the Practices of Critical Black Memory." History and Theory 48, no. 4 (2009): p 115.

parts, photographs of the scene were the next best thing. These public spectacles quickly transformed the Black body into not only a fundamentally visible body but also a visual souvenir for white people to continually relish.[32] "If lynchings helped construct a unified white identity among those whites present and in the surrounding areas, then photographs of lynchings helped extend that community far beyond the town, the country, the state, the South… Now all whites, rich or poor, male or female, northern or southern, could imagine themselves to be master."[33] The spectacle of lynchings thoroughly complicated humanity's interactions with the politics of violent imagery as such persistent reproductions of lynchings by way of visual imagery prompted a powerful yet troubling archive of Black visuals that inextricably altered the ways in which we are able, allowed, and made to see Blackness, "and the value we attach to Black life because of this sight."[34] In sum, as the traditional framework of suffering in visual culture shifted itself from a broader understanding of pain and cruelty to a more specified lens on the ritual and performance of white dominance in relation to Black submission- pain was no longer independent from the throes of white supremacy.[35]

The display of not only a wounded but broken, often burned and decapitated Black body quickly became the face of racial subjugation. The extremity of Black suffering became marketable to white communities as many viewed the violent act as a family outing and for those who were unable to attend, photos of lynchings were widely circulated as souvenir postcards.[36] "The gap of space and time that separates [the] white mother [who received the card] and son [who sent it] will be sutured over the dead body of an African American man; sentimental white familial bond will be reinforced through Black death."[37] The growing ecology of lynching imagery, in which they were marketed, sold and profited from essentially became an act of non-intervention as visuals granted viewers distance from such evident suffering and violence. The medium of photography was essentially pornographic— a paralyzingly gruesome spectacle— that was frankly too repulsive and far too often circulated to elicit any emotion or action. And it is through the disturbing photograph of the 1930 Marion Lynching that we confront the paradigm through which all other lynching photographs are also viewed through— the collective gaze of white supremacy. Horror was transformed into a routine, highlighting not only the inevitable moral corruption that works in collaboration with white supremacy but also the full exploitation of Black victims that became seen as a common occurrence.[38] In this photograph, we are confronted with the mutilation and public lynching of Thomas Shipp and Abraham S. Smith, whose haunting presences are captured in their grotesque hanging from a maple tree in the town square of Marion, Indiana. On August 7, the teenagers, including another boy by the name of James Cameron, were held in the Marion jail for the accused murder of Claude Deeter and rape of Mary Ball. Before the three could stand trial, a mob of white residents broke into the jail hanging all three from a tree on the courthouse lawn.[39] Despite this, miraculously, with the rope already around his neck, Cameron survived and was later sentenced to five years in prison as an accessory to the murder of Claude Deeter.[40] The bodies of Shipp and Smith are the main focus of the image, but only to the extent that their death solidifies the presence of another, arguably greater, evil. This image is one of the most notorious lynching photographs in American history as copies were later sold by local photographer Lawrence Beitler to eager

[32] Baker, Courtney R. "Humane Insight: Looking at Images of African American Suffering and Death," p 64.

[33] Raiford, Leigh. "Photography and the Practices of Critical Black Memory." History and Theory 48, no. 4 (2009): p 115.

[34] Baker, Courtney R. "Humane Insight: Looking at Images of African American Suffering and Death," p 118.

[35] Baker, Courtney R. "Humane Insight: Looking at Images of African American Suffering and Death," p 37.

[36] "History of Lynching in America." NAACP, last modified 2022, https://naacp.org/find-resources/history-explained/history-lynching-america.

[37] Baker, Courtney R. "Humane Insight: Looking at Images of African American Suffering and Death," p 38

[38] Ibid., p 21.

[39] Poletika, Nicole. (2018, May 15) "Strange Fruit: The 1930 Marion Lynching and the Woman Who Tried to Prevent It." Indiana History Blog. https://blog.history.in.gov/strange-fruit-the-1930-marion-lynching-and-the-woman-who-tried-to-prevent-it/.

[40] Kaplan, Fran. "Dr. Cameron: Museum Founder and Lynching Survivor. Survivor." America's Black Holocaust Museum. https://www.abhmuseum.org/about/dr-cameron-founder-lynching-survivor/.

white community members for just fifty cents each.[41] Moreover, I wish to add that the gesture of including such a graphic depiction of The Marion Lynching grants us an analysis of pain that reflects more broadly on how lynching photographs have shaped popular consciousness, in part, because of the image's iconographic qualities. This photograph, like many images of the Black body in pain and death, has assumed the complex task of making pain legible whilst rendering the past into symbolic form. My decision to include this image, among several others, is not without disregard for the significance of the mental and emotional trauma victims have suffered and also is not without regard for the intimacy one deserves to be granted in pain and in death. However, this inclusionary visual process allows room for meaningful engagement with the ontology of Black pain. Lynching photography has long been crucial to the formation of Black historical memories of woundedness and socio-political and through this process of re-contextualization, I argue, that these visual encounters make it possible for readers to have a productive interrogation on anti-Blackness and humanity's struggle for sanctity.

In looking further at the haunting presence of J. Thomas Shipp and Abraham S. Smith, the two young Black boys who were murdered on a summer night in Marion, Indiana in 1930, they are still and no longer threatening. Despite the sharp image quality, we are still unable to see the faces of the men, or even identify them due to their bloodied faces. But, the photograph's composition suggests that they were meant to remain in the foreground, devoid of a recognizable identity, as mere vessels that confirm the inevitability of white supremacy.[42] However, it is crucial to note that our interpretations are reliant on all pictured subjects and more often than not veer away from the visual of a brutalized Black body and towards the swath of audience members. White onlookers occupied a space of dis-identification, a term that contextualizes the act of veering away from the subject of trauma. Within the context of lynching we are confronted with an onslaught of white spectators whose gestures of looking away from a lynched body in their foreground imply an innate refusal and embarrassment with this particular event of Black victimization.[43] We are instantly greeted with the faces of white spectators who revel in both their spectatorship and subsequent visual proof of their involvement. A group of white people smile and point as their delight is exemplified by the two hanging Black corpses behind them. What are we to make of this? This visual? These people? Above all, this image acts as a consolidation of whiteness and its proximity to depravity and terror— allowing an image of the white identity to emerge from an unkind spectacle of destruction,

In continuing our investigation of Black suffering in visual culture it becomes clear that these visuals are deserving of their place on a continuum of terror. As we continue to grapple with the power dynamics evident in these acts of racial terrorism that continue to be reinforced by memory, technology and the body in fear we stumble upon the public spectacle of Emmett Till. In August 1955, fourteen year old Emmett Louis Till was visiting relatives in Money, Mississippi during his summer vacation. And while details of this case continue to be contested even in our contemporary moment, at the time it was thought that Till had sustained an inappropriate interaction with Carolyn Bryant, a twenty-one year old shopkeeper. Just three days later on August 28, Bryant's husband, Roy Bryant; brother in law, J.W. Milam; and, according to several witness testimonies, by two others, including perhaps even Carolyn Bryant herself, drove to the home of Till's great uncle Moses Wright and kidnapped Emmett Till at just around 2:30 am.[44] Roy Bryant and J.W. Milam then went on to beat Till to death, shooting him in the head before tying a large metal fan to his neck with barbed wire and throwing his body into the Tallahatchie River. His body was soon recovered, on August 31, 1955 and he was so disfigured his body could only be identified by a signet ring that bore the initial "L.T." in reference to Louis Till, Emmett's estranged father.[45] Great efforts were subsequently taken by police officials

[41] Poletika, Nicole. (2018, May 15) "Strange Fruit: The 1930 Marion Lynching and the Woman Who Tried to Prevent It." Indiana 41 History Blog. https://blog.history.in.gov/strange-fruit-the-1930-marion-lynching-and-the-woman-who-tried-to-prevent-it/.

[42] Raiford, Leigh. "Photography and the Practices of Critical Black Memory." History and Theory 48, no. 4 (2009): p 116.

[43] Ibid., p 63.

[44] "Emmett Till." FBI. https://www.fbi.gov/history/famous-cases/emmett-till..

[45] Baker, Courtney R. "Humane Insight: Looking at Images of African American Suffering and Death," p 71.

to ensure that Till's mutilated body would never be seen; however, Till's mother- Mamie Till demanded her son's body not only to be returned to his home in Chicago but also for his tightly sealed coffin to be opened against police orders. "The revelation of Emmett Till's brutal murder and his horribly disfigured corpse drew a striking ideological line between those who refused to recognize Black life and victimization and those who recognized the violated humanity and unwarranted suffering that begat Till's death and their own haunted Black lives."[46] Mamie Till's desire to see and recognize her son's body was a fraught necessity, but in this process of identification, she was forced to reckon with the reality that her son was no longer a recognizable human being and now another undeserving Black victim mutilated by the gaze of white supremacy.

Jet Magazine. The Emmett Till Project, 1955.

It took fewer than four weeks for the case to go to trial. Roy Bryant and J.W. Milam were accused of the murder, and were each subsequently acquitted of all charges by an all white, all male jury. No one else was ever indicted or prosecuted for involvement in the kidnapping or murder. Bryant and Milam, though, later confessed to their crime on January 24, 1956 to Look magazine within an article entitled "The Shocking Story of Approved Killing in Mississippi." Both men are now long deceased, but it is crucial to draw attention to the political spectacle of Till's open casket public funeral. Mamie Till's decision in making her son's funeral open for public viewing was wholly intentional. She understood foremost the power of sight and just how irrefutable the act of viewing mutilation would be on the human spirit. Her belief was that in seeing her son's body, the public would be forced to confront themselves and the terror we have allowed the Black body to live with.[47] The spectacle of Till's deformed body in the casket showed not only his body but the visual display of a death no one admittedly wishes to encounter. The visibility of Till's woundedness was evidence of a universal human vulnerability not even whiteness is capable of escaping and for many that reality was fraught.[48]

In highlighting the cultural importance of the Black tradition of reclaiming one's kin, Mamie Till's radical reclamation of her son's body for public viewing created an additional perspective to our ongoing conversation of Black spectacularity. Contrary to our belief that death is the end-all-be-all for the human condition, Black suffering does not end in death, as "[white violence] was often as disrespectful to Black bodies in death as they were in life."[49] And in understanding this, Mamie Till's refusal to retouch her son's disfigured body introduces us to a new form of aesthetic politicization, one in which mutilated realism becomes the forefront of her activism. It is here that the grieving process, a mechanism notably compounded by humanity's fraught understanding of empathy, is met with the visual.[50] It is with Till's mutilated body that we begin to grapple with the complex interaction between the spectacle of Black suffering and the lengths through which we choose to ignore the humanity of the individual being looked at. It is clear that without Mamie Till's intervention the image of Till's disfigured body would have died in the same secrecy that whiteness thrives within and it is within this intervention that a new critical question emerges urging us to grapple with what could occur to the condition of Blackness when met with dignified resistance.

As we begin to move beyond the safety of the gaze used to cultivate such a capacity for humane insight towards representations of Black suffering, the occurence of such

[46] Baker, Courtney R. "Humane Insight: Looking at Images of African American Suffering and Death," p 69.

[47] Ibid., p 77.
[48] Ibid., p 80.
[49] Ibid., p 81.
[50] Ibid., p 83.

bloodied spectacles rapidly multiplied with the emergence of The Civil Rights Movement. The 1960s Civil Rights Movement introduced an unprecedented surge of chaos into an already potent visual ecology of Black suffering. However, this period was characteristically different from previous understandings and conceptualizations of violence as this chapter of history was distinctly characterized by public acts of Black resistance against segregation. However, now, rather than questioning the suffering whiteness precipitates on the Black body we begin to shift towards questioning the woundedness of the Black body when deliberately at arms. It is here that we begin to simultaneously account for the aesthetics of Black embodiment in the face of violence and political demand, as our visual field has shifted towards a battlefield.

Visuals depicting the abuse of lunch-counter integrationists, mixed-race travelers, and peaceful Black marchers widely circulated in both public and in print. And in contrast to the aestheticism of Emmett Till, this was no longer a period of passive nonviolent political action, Black protestors and their subsequent allies were no longer passive. "Nonviolent direct action seeks to create such a crisis and foster such a tension that a community which has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue. It seeks to dramatize the issue that it can no longer be ignored."[51] The planned resistance of the Civil Rights Era predicated itself on a frankly new and immeasurable mass visualization of news events in real time, providing a clear example of how viral and riveting the spectacle of black subjugation was for a viewing public. In fact, there was enough awareness among Black activists to correctly assume that the white violence that often quickly followed non-violent acts would serve to promote the cause for civil rights and simultaneously address the need for greater visibility. However, in order to make these sacrifices effective on a national scale, brutality had to be caught on camera and marketed as such. "The images of the Civil Rights Movement illustrate a black-authored narrative of self-determination and autonomy" that "confounded the conventional mainstream narrative of blackness in America."[52]

It is here that we begin to see a shift towards contemporary technologies as the systematization of cameras and print technology rapidly closes the disconnect between the public and racialized violence in the process of unfolding. "What looking at the images alongside an imagined community of fellow onlookers offers to the world is an identification of what constitutes the unacceptable treatment of a human being, starting with an identification of the unacceptable treatment of this human being depicted here."[53] At the crux of the Civil Rights Movement's engagement with visual culture was the latent hope that images depicting the suffering of others are in fact capable enough of provoking outrage by inspiring the very language and values of human rights that spectators can attest to seeing being violated. And as the nature and techniques of spectatorship and virality continue to change with the rapid twenty-first century emergence of digital landscapes and social networking, we are now confronted with an evolving technology that is capable of not only reiterating but essentially re-encoding our encounters with anti Blackness. In understanding this, it becomes clear that these brutal acts were not only a repeated violation against the physical but a vile manifestation of whiteness weaponized against the Black body—a demonstration that Blackness was worthless in the gaze of whiteness. And it is this way of seeing that allowed white communities to become emboldened in mutilating, lynching, at times eating, and otherwise killing Black people en masse.[54]

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[52] Ibid., p 108.
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