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Black Deaths Matter? Sousveillance and the Invisibility of Black Life

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Abstract: This article examines the shooting of Philando Castile, and his girlfriend, Diamond Reynolds', decision to film his death at the hands of the police, in order to explore the potential of live-streaming applications as a form of "sousveillance" that can expose white supremacy from below. In highlighting the political economy constraints that limit the dissemination of such images, we argue that the geographic and historical context of these videos as well as their integration into social justice movements, are critical for deploying them as effective tools that challenge racial inequality and make black life matter, not just black death.

Introduction

On July 6, 2016 Philando Castile, a 32-year-old lunch supervisor at a St. Paul Montessori school, was pulled over by police in Falcon Heights, a suburb in Minnesota. During this traffic stop he was fatally shot by police officer Jeronimo Yanez. Immediately after the officer opened fire, Castile's girlfriend, Diamond Reynolds, began live-streaming the event through Facebook's Live application.[1] The video opens with Castile slouched back, his chest covered in blood staining his white t-shirt. Initially, Castile is still partially conscious and is audibly groaning as the viewer witnesses him slowly bleeding to death. Eerily calm, Reynolds directly addresses the camera as the officer continues to point his gun at Castile:

> *Reynolds: "Stay with me … We got pulled over for a busted tail-light in the back … and the police just… he, he's covered – they killed my boyfriend. He's licensed, he's licensed to carry. … He was trying to get out his ID in his wallet out of his pocket, and he let the officer know that he was… that he had a firearm and that he was reaching for his wallet. And the officer just shot him in his arm."*
> *Yanez [shouting]: "Fuck … I told him not to reach for it. I told him to get his head up."*

> *Reynolds: "He had…you told him to get his ID, sir. His driver's license. Oh my God, please don't tell me he's dead…" [camera pans to show Castile not moving] (StarkS 2016).*

As Yanez yells at her to keep her hands where they are she responds in an obedient, yet firm voice: "I will, sir, no worries, I will." What viewers witness is Reynolds rehearsing a centuries-old script in which slaves were required to properly address and obey their masters. Reynolds understood that this traffic stop had turned into a matter of life and death: her own survival depended upon complete compliance and obedience to authority, evident in her recurring affirmations of "yes sir." When Reynolds does start crying in anguish towards the end of the nine-minute video, after she has been put in the back of a police car, her four-year-old daughter can be heard comforting her: "It's OK, Mommy. It's OK, I'm right here with you."

Even as Reynolds is forced to watch the killing of her boyfriend, she understands that the only way to assert that Castile is human whose black life did, indeed, matter is to document and film his death. Reynolds later told reporters that she recorded the video "so that the world knows that these police are not here to protect and serve us. They are here to assassinate us. They are here to kill us because we are black" (Domonoske 2016).[2]

Images of Death

Visual depictions of black death have long circulated in U.S. society both as a reinforcement and challenge to white supremacy. For example, between the 1890s and the 1940s spectator lynching became a form of entertainment for white Southerners. "Attended by thousands, captured in papers by reporters who witnessed the tortures, and photographed for those spectators who wanted a souvenir and yet failed to get a coveted finger, toe, or fragment of bone" (Hale 1998: 202) lynchings propelled images of black death into mainstream U.S. culture as a form of easily consumable amusement. On the other hand, in 1955 *Jet Magazine* published images of fourteen-year-old Emmett Till's severely mutilated corpse, which caused a nationwide outcry and helped to fuel the Civil Rights Movement. Thrust into the role of activist by her son's brutal lynching, Mamie Till's insistence that her son's body be brought back to Chicago for an open casket service ensured that 50,000 mourners witnessed how he had "been crucified on the cross of racial justice" (Bunch cited in Nodjimbadem 2015). In 1992, the brutal beating of Rodney King by Los Angeles police officers was recorded on a bystander's camcorder. While the recording documented the state-sanctioned violence against

King, a jury later acquitted the accused officers, despite the taped evidence, causing LA to erupt in riots. These examples demonstrate that the socio-political context in which media images of black death are created and disseminated determines their viability to expose and dismantle white supremacy.[3]

Video footage documenting state-sanctioned violence against black lives has now become ubiquitous: cell phones, security cameras, as well as body and dash cam footage have made the public a witness to the police killings of numerous black and brown people. This article highlights the circumstances of Castile's death, particularly Reynolds' use of Facebook Live, to explore the function of the camera and live-streaming applications for exposing and challenging white supremacy. We examine the affordances of these technologies that allow for the inversion of the institutional gaze and enable individuals who have historically been the subjects of racialized surveillance practices to engage in "sousveillance," a subversive surveillance from below.[4] Unlike past depictions, sousveillance engenders new modalities of visibility that can move beyond the double bind of witnessing and spectacularizing that often follow images of black death. Yet, whether sousveillant images can challenge us to make black lives matter and not simply reinscribe an association between blackness and death depends not only upon their circulation within social media but their contextualization within larger social justice movements, such as Black Lives Matter.

We begin by exploring how Reynolds' use of Facebook Live as sousveillance not only allowed her to document, but to invert and actively resist the racialized surveillance practices that she and Castile were subject to. In the following section we contend that it is also crucial to consider how the political economy undergirding social media platforms such as Facebook determines how and if these sousveillance practices are actually shared with millions of users. Finally, we contextualize Reynolds' sousveillant video within the specific geography and history of Minneapolis to highlight the ways in which mundane forms of systemic racism do not necessarily lend themselves to a visual framework.

From Surveillance to Sousveillance

Current public debates about police violence often lack a broader reflection on racialized surveillance structures as technologies of social control that are conducive to, if not directly feeding into, that violence. But racialized surveillance practices policing communities of color date as far back as the seventeenth century, with, for example, slave patrols and slave badges in the South. Citing "lantern laws" in New York City in

the 1740s, which functioned as ordinances "For Regulating Negroes and Slaves in the Night Time," Browne (2015) demonstrates that "Surveillance is nothing new to black folks. It is the fact of antiblackness" (10). For Browne it is necessary to conceptualize surveillance not as a product of modern technology, but "as ongoing" in order "to insist that we factor in how racism and antiblackness undergird and sustain the intersecting surveillances of our present order" (8-9). But just as Browne argues that racialized surveillance has a long history, so too does Hartman (1997) emphasize that there is a sustained history of black folks subverting those surveillance practices for their own means. According to Hartman, capitulation to the master was pragmatic, not just resignation to one's enslavement. During forced performances, for example, slaves would be "'puttin' on ole massa'" (8) to imitate compliance for covert aims. Just as slaves sometimes simulated compliance in order to challenge their subjugation, Reynolds' use of Facebook Live can be read as a similar inversion of racialized surveillance practices. By filming and narrating her horror, Reynolds actively participates in what Browne (2015) calls "dark sousveillance," an oppositional imaginary that actively resists and opposes the state's surveillant gaze.

While recordings of police violence are not new, the speed with which live-broadcasting applications allow individuals to instantly share these events with millions of users is unmatched. Facebook Live allows for the immediate, unedited and collective witnessing of police brutality and violence on an unprecedented scale. The recent recordings and unedited images of the killings of black and brown lives have the potential to challenge stereotypical perceptions of blackness as "thuggish," "dangerous," and "criminal," in ways that previous images did not. Unlike images taken after death, sousveillant technologies like Facebook Live, allow users to chronicle the process of dying and the experience of violent death from a unique point of view, namely directly from those individuals and marginalized populations who have historically been the targets of state-sanctioned violence and control. Moreover, these platforms allow those who witness police violence first-hand to disseminate counternarratives of black death (at least initially) by preemptively offsetting age old scripts of black dangerousness and criminality.[5] Reynolds' narration, overlaid onto the visual field, exposes the circumstances of Castile's death in a way that makes it difficult to extract the video from its larger context: racial profiling, white panic, and systemic racism. With the broad transmission of sousveillant images, previously ungrievable black lives are becoming grievable as victims of state-sanctioned violence. This occurs not simply because these images are consumed by a broader public, but because they are utilized by social justice activists, such as Black Lives Matter, to challenge institutional racism. Consequently,

these images have generated a much-needed debate about the persistent surveillance of communities of color and militarized police forces.

Facebook Live

But can the master's tools dismantle the master's house? While smartphones, live-streaming applications, and body cameras can be used as tools of sousveillance, they are still subject to the political economy of their production. After Reynolds' video accumulated thousands of views overnight, Facebook suddenly removed it. The company later apologized, alleging that the video was inaccessible for an hour due to a "technical glitch" (Peterson 2016). The video was then reposted with a warning label for graphic content and restricted to users over eighteen. The video's temporary removal, whether intentional or not, raises questions about the company's ethical guidelines for content regulation and moderation.

While Facebook originally used its Live application for entertainment purposes, recent events have unexpectedly situated the company as a prime platform for breaking news. Facebook has long vied to gain a foothold in the news business in its quest for new revenue streams that keep its 1.7 billion users engaged. The company has been hosting and linking to news content from various publishers for years. With unpaid users functioning as citizen journalists however, Facebook is now profiting as an active news production business itself.

In a statement released shortly after Castile's shooting, Facebook acknowledged the unique challenges of live videos "as a powerful tool in crisis" (Beck 2016). In its Community Standards, Facebook (2016) also stated that "context and degree are everything" and that users must share content "responsibly." Yet the language of responsibility evokes an unnamed commitment to neoliberal ideals in which individuals are required to regulate themselves, while the state and corporations are exonerated of accountability and systemic inequalities remain unopposed. The fact that Reynolds' video fell prey to Facebook's censorship illustrates the complex push and pull between the drive to monetize content for-profit and the insidious racial dynamics that marked Reynolds' video as "irresponsible" and "offensive," however temporarily. Butler (1993) argues that "the visual is not neutral to the question of race; it is itself a racial formation, an episteme, hegemonic and forceful" (17). For example, in her reading of the Rodney King incident, his beating was not interpreted as violence by many white viewers because the recording fixed and framed King as always already racialized and criminalized, as the danger from which whiteness must be protected. In the same vein,

the censorship of Reynolds' video illustrates how her choice to post the video was read not as a necessary exposure of white violence against African Americans, but rather as an "irresponsible" and "inappropriate" act that might offend the privileged sensibilities of whiteness.

Once the video was re-released, Facebook's founder Mark Zuckerberg, responded to Castile's death by utilizing the language of colorblindness. His statement counteracted any suggestion that the video was pulled as a result of its racial content: "The images we've seen this week are graphic and heartbreaking, and they shine a light on the fear that millions of members of our community live with every day. … it reminds us why coming together to build a more open and connected world is so important" (Zuckerberg 2016). Here Zuckerberg invokes the language of empathy to highlight the importance of community, yet one that is inherently deracialized and/or colorblind. But as Hartman (1997: 20) argues, empathy for white viewers is a double-edged sword: "if the scene of beating readily lends itself to an identification with the enslaved, it does so at the risk of fixing and naturalizing this condition of pained embodiment." Although Hartman is discussing nineteenth-century abolitionist writing, her point is equally applicable to the visuality of twenty-first-century sousveillant technologies that capture police brutality against people of color. While platforms such as Facebook Live do function to bring new levels of awareness to the realities of being a person of color in the U.S., they can also ironically evacuate the very humanity that these images attempt to attach to those lives by reiterating the ubiquity of black death outside of its context.

Minnesota (You Are Not So) Nice

In order to counteract this, we highlight the specific geographic and social context of Castile's death. The killing of Castile has brought to the fore what social justice activists and communities of color in Minnesota have known for years, namely that simmering under the surface of Midwestern prosperity, the state's racial and economic inequities are debilitating large segments of the population. Driven by a progressive (white) liberalism and branding itself as the hip "North" of the Midwest, Minneapolis, St. Paul, and their larger metropolitan areas have been booming since the 2008 recession. Yet, the "Miracle of Minneapolis" as *The Atlantic* (2016) recently called it, is really only miraculous for its white citizens. When it comes to racial differences regarding household income, employment, educational attainment, and poverty rates, government data shows that Minnesota does worse than most other states and often ranks last on these lists (Gee 2015). The Twin Cities remain deeply segregated and unequal. For example, North Minneapolis (home to Jamar Clark [6] and most of

Minneapolis' African American population) has been starved by a lack of resources for decades. As Anthony Newby, executive director of the local non-profit Neighborhoods Organizing for Change explains: "There aren't jobs. There isn't a restaurant within two miles of where I live. There is no investment. You can't buy a house because banks aren't lending money" (cited in Gee 2015). Similarly, the public school system shows a significant "achievement gap" with abysmally low graduation rates for students of color.

Under the mantle of "Minnesota Nice" – a local idiom that describes the tendency of Minnesotans to avoid direct confrontation by putting on a polite face that is seemingly tolerant and accepting of all kinds of differences – it becomes all too easy to ignore rather than challenge the implicit racial biases and systemic inequalities that plague the state. But does sousveillance necessarily help to expose these realities and push, particularly white, Minnesotans to acknowledge and change these inequalities? Without the sociopolitical context of the video, the death of Castile all too easily transforms into yet another violent spectacle that reduces blackness to suffering and misery – making black death matter, but not black lives. In other words, sousveillance alone does not spotlight the mundane ways that racism functions on a daily basis. Placed within the context of its production, however, the video can have an unprecedented power to expose the insidiousness of white supremacy. For example, knowing that African-Americans and Native Americans in Minneapolis are eight times more likely than whites to be charged with a low-level infraction, such as trespassing or loitering (ACLU 2015) changes the frame through which the video is viewed. Court records show that Castile was stopped for minor traffic violations more than forty times over the past thirteen years. Like many poor people of color, Castile was trapped in a cycle of fees and fines mounting up to $7,000 for misdemeanor tickets that he was unable to pay, which resulted in the revocation of his driver's license on numerous occasions (Stahl 2016).

Castile's forty-ninth traffic stop proved to be his last. A police audio recording indicates that Castile matched the description of a robbery suspect and officers stopped him because, "the driver looks more like one of our suspects, just because of the *wide-set nose*" (emphasis added, cited in Stahl 2016). The video, when taken in combination with both the racial implications of the officer's description and the persisting inequalities in Minnesota, evidences that in fact, tolerance and acceptance are not sufficient to combat white supremacy. Thus, sousveillant images, when digested in the context of their production, have the power to expose that underneath the state's claims of

colorblindness, diversity, and inclusion there remains a covert commitment to anti-blackness.

Conclusion

The mundane realities of racial injustice do not easily lend themselves to a visual framework. For Reynolds, who did not finish high school, has experienced homelessness, and currently works two jobs, Castile's death has increased her hardships: she is left without a partner to help cover rent, watch her daughter when she works night shifts, or drive her to look for an apartment in a safer neighborhood (Saslow 2016). The realities of Reynolds' life without Castile easily go unnoticed when the focus is solely placed on the spectacle of black men dying, rendering invisible the racial, gender, and class dynamics of systemic state violence.

Even though Black Lives Matter was founded by three queer women of color, Patrisse Cullors, Opal Tometi, and Alicia Garza, the mistreatment and deaths of women of color at the hands of state agencies are often not discussed and/or do not receive the same level of attention as those of men of color. The ubiquity of black death covered in mainstream media paradoxically renders invisible the very specificity of those gendered deaths because gender is consistently erased as an important vector of state violence. In order to combat these erasures social justice activists have instituted campaigns and hashtags such as #SayHerName and #TransLivesMatter to bring awareness to the ways police violence specifically affects women, queer, and trans people of color.

The sousveillant use of smart phones and live-streaming applications that document the killing of black and brown lives has the potential to change the framing of racialized bodies in public discourse, but only if these videos are contextualized and used as part of larger social justice movements. While encountering raw images of police brutality may create temporary acknowledgment that black lives matter, their consumption can also easily slip into a spectacle that focuses solely on black death. The problem remains that black and brown lives often only gain legibility as we watch them dying. The death of Castile and those of so many others demand that we – as citizens, scholars, teachers, activists, and critics – keep pushing back against systemic racial injustice and dismantle the structures that uphold white supremacy. This requires that we get out from behind our screens, especially those of us with white privilege. Only in context and in conjunction with coalitional movements such as Black Lives Matter will sousveilllant technologies actually result in material change.

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Notes

1. Similar to Twitter's Periscope, Facebook Live, which was launched in April 2014, allows users to instantaneously broadcast videos on their news feed where friends and followers can immediately watch it.

2. According to *the Guardian's* (2016) project, The Counted, 758 people – 343 of which were people of color – have been killed by police and other law enforcement agencies in the U.S. as of September 2016.

3. In her analysis of "about to die" images in the media, Zelizer (2010) argues that the meaning of images is essentially about contingency, imagination, and emotion. In other words, she emphasizes that images do not have a fixed meaning rather how they are circulated in mainstream media and consumed determines their interpretation.

4. Coined by Mann et al. (2003) "sousveillance" refers to the ways that wearable computing devices, such as cell phone cameras, are used as a means of sub/inverting the power relations that typically characterize surveillance.

5. Similarly, Bock (2016) argues that cop-watching disrupts traditional journalistic practices by giving voice to counternarratives.

6. Jamar Clark was shot and killed by police in November 2015. The circumstances of his death prompted major protests throughout Minneapolis.

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Footnotes (returns to text)

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5. Similarly, Bock (2016) argues that cop-watching disrupts traditional journalistic practices by giving voice to counternarratives.
6. Jamar Clark was shot and killed by police in November 2015. The circumstances of his death prompted major protests throughout Minneapolis.

BLACK LIVES MATTER DIAMOND REYNOLDS FACEBOOK LIVE PEER REVIEWED PHILANDO CASTILE SOUSVEILLANCE

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