ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: LIVING WITH DEATH: BLACK AMERICAN TRAUMA IN THE AGE OF THE SPECTACULAR

Kalima Yvette Young, Doctor of Philosophy, 2018.

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On September 15, 1955, *Jet*, a national Black magazine, printed the image of Emmitt Till's battered, disfigured corpse on its cover. Images such as Emmitt Till's corpse are visual testimonies of Black pain, wounding and death. This imagery has been used for racial control and subjugation since the era of lynching photography in the 19th and 20th centuries. However, Black pain, wounding and death imagery has also been used for Black liberation purposes, such as the photos and film of Black citizens in Birmingham being attacked by police dogs and sprayed with high-pressure fire hoses. These images helped spur anti-segregation and the voting rights activism in the Black American civil rights movement of the mid 20th century.

Contemporary videos capturing U.S. police officers killing Black Americans have forced many to acknowledge the disproportionate numbers of Black Americans targeted by state violence. These videos have sparked recent civil rights protests in

cities across the nation, including Ferguson, Missouri and Baltimore, Maryland, and have galvanized online social movements such as #BlackLivesMatter and #SayHerName, which illuminates Black women's experiences of police violence.

Living With Death: Black American Trauma in the Age of the Spectacular asks: What does it mean to be Black and to be the subject, witness and consumer of Black pain, wounding and death imagery? What impact do these images have on Black collective identity formation and Black cultural production? Using embodied image schema analysis, discussion group data, in-depth interviews, textual analysis, and auto-ethnography, this project examines viral videos of Black pain, wounding, and death and Black Cultural Workers' (BCW) responses to these visual texts. An afro-futurist examination, this project grapples with the concept of Black life in response to the anti-blackness that has structured the world (Wilderson 2010) since the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, framing Black life as existing in/and out of time. By unpacking the role of spectacle, surveillance, and consumption on Black Americans' witnessing practices, identity, and cultural production, *Living With Death: Black American Trauma in the Age of the Spectacular* illustrates the ways Black people navigate anti-Blackness to live fully and vibrantly under the specter of death.

LIVING WITH DEATH: BLACK AMERICAN TRAUMA IN THE AGE OF THE SPECTACULAR

by

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Dedication

To the ancestors, may our healing in the present make it back to you, wherever you are witnessing.

To Freddy, Eric, Philando, Marlene, Sandra, Walter, Dajerria, Alton, Ramsey, Kevin, Diamond, Brandon, Abdulla, and every Black Cultural Worker who holds our stories and validates our reality.

To my mom, Thomasina Young, for always urging me to “look it up.”

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In 2005, two years after the loss of my mother, whose wisdom graces these pages, I met my wife, Francine Housier. The years that have passed have been transformative in ways I believe only my DNA knows best. The only truth I can glean from this cosmic pairing of our souls is that I have found someone who sees all of me and accepts every quirky measure of it. Francine, thank you for pushing me, supporting me, holding me, and grounding me. Most importantly, thank you for editing me – always, all the time, even when I do not think I need it. This is ours.

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Chapter 1: *Can You Be Black and Look at This?* Yes, You Do it All of the Time

Introduction

On September 15, 1955, *Jet*, a national Black magazine, printed the image of Emmitt Till's battered, disfigured corpse on its cover. This now-iconic image sparked outrage and disgust among Black Americans across the country. Mamie Till Mobley, Emmitt Till's mother, gave *Jet* permission to print the image of her murdered son, and the image reflected the signature gesture of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, which was "illustrating southern atrocity with graphic images of black physical suffering and disseminating those images nationally" (Torres 26). Images such as Emmitt Till's corpse are visual testimony of Black pain, wounding and death. Black pain, wounding and death imagery has been used for racial control and subjugation since the era of lynching photography in the nineteenth and 20th century. However, Black pain, wounding and death imagery has also been used for Black liberation purposes, as in the case of the photos and film of Black citizens being attacked by police dogs and sprayed with high-pressure fire hoses in Birmingham. These images helped spur anti-segregation and voting right activism in the Black American civil rights movement of the mid-twentieth century.

In 1980s television, black pain, wounding and death imagery proliferated in news reports about criminality in Black communities and through reality television shows such as *Cops*. In 1991, video footage of Rodney King's beating at the hands of Los Angeles police was quickly broadcasted via television. With the advent of the

Internet, video interviews of traumatized and pained Black Americans have been manipulated into auto-tuned jingles, exemplified by Antoine Dodson's outraged testimony of his home invasion in 2010. Contemporary videos capturing U.S. police officers killing Black Americans has forced many to acknowledge the disproportionate numbers of Black Americans who are targeted by state violence. These videos have spurred recent civil rights protests in cities across the nation, including Ferguson, Missouri and Baltimore, Maryland, and have galvanized online social movements such as #BlackLivesMatter and #SayHerName, which sheds light on Black women's experiences of police violence.

Often, scholarship into Black pain and visual culture emphasizes the way white Americans use images of Black pain and wounding as a metaphor by which whiteness is made real. In "Reading the Rodney King Video," Elizabeth Alexander contends, "Black bodies in pain for public consumption have been an American national spectacle for centuries. This history moves from public rapes, beatings and lynching to the gladiatorial arenas of basketball and boxing" (77). Within this analysis, Alexander links white America's fascination with witnessing Black pain and wounding across history and across mediums. Saidiya Hartman further describes white Americans' enduring captivation with Black pain and wounding as a "convergence of terror and enjoyment" borne out of the spectacle of slavery. She suggests the,

> fungibility of the commodity [the slave] makes the captive body an abstract and empty vessel vulnerable to the projection of others' feelings, ideas, desires and values; and as property, the dispossessed body of the

> enslaved is the surrogate for the master's body since it guarantees the disembodied universality and acts as the sign of his power and domination (21).

While Alexander and Hartman offer very compelling analyses of the ways white people use Black pain, I am more interested in the way Black people use Black pain. Historically, what did it mean to the enslaved Black person to witness other Black people in pain? Contemporarily, what does it mean for Black Americans who must now do the same?

Living With Death: Black American Trauma in the Age of the Spectacular examines viral videos of Black pain, wounding, and death and Black Cultural Worker's (BCW) responses to these visual texts. Of interest to me is not how "America", often configured around the figure of the Slaver subject (white America), derives pleasure or power from consumption of viral Black pain, but rather the way Black people manage to live vibrantly and fully under the specter of death. This dissertation strives to show how Black people navigate their own pain through a complex interiority that informs the way they witness Black pain, process cultural trauma, and creatively respond to viral Black deaths.

Theoretical Frameworks

Black Looks From Black People

This project grapples with the concept of Black life in response to the anti-blackness that has structured the world (Wilderson 2010) since the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. Framing Black Americans as "post-slavery subjects" (Sharpe 2010) who are constantly negotiating the ramifications of slavery (the wake), this

dissertation is doing what Christina Sharpe refers to as "wake work". It explores the way Black people "insist life and being into the wake" and acknowledges the ways "the past that is not past reappears, always, to rupture the present" (2016). The wake work in this dissertation involves privileging Black American witnessing practices. I am committed to qualitative approaches that examine Black ways of seeing, being and responding to Black pain, apart from the dominant narratives set forth by whiteness. This dissertation looks for the productive possibilities inherent in the "rupture" by inserting an afro-futurist imaginary into the wake.

Ytasha Womack suggests "afro-futurists redefine culture and notions of blackness for today and the future" by combining "elements of science fiction, historical fiction, speculative fiction, fantasy, Afrocentricity, and magic realism with non-Western beliefs" (9). Afro-futurism acknowledges the ongoing impacts of the traumatic experiences of slavery/post-slavery while also illuminating the ways in which Black Americans use that trauma to create new avenues of creative expression. Afro-futurism also highlights the ways Black people straddle the past and the present by taking lessons from past histories and traditions to inform and imagine future Black lives. Each chapter of this dissertation wrestles with some aspect of the "both/and (ness)" of Black life. I do this by 1) placing the contemporary moment within the context of the past; 2) exploring lessons from intergenerational trauma; 3) mapping the creation of collective identity, and 4) looking for afro-futurist themes in the work of BCW. The theoretical underpinnings of anti-Blackness, wake-work, and afro-futurism help me to consider alternative ways Black Americans might read, consume and respond to viral videos of Black pain, wounding and death.

Organized using feminist research practices this dissertation seeks to 1) be interventional, 2) work within the situation at hand – meaning to use already given situations both as the focus of the investigation and as a means of collecting data, 3) pay attention to the everyday lives of the marginalized, 4) embrace affective responses, and most importantly, 5) employ reflexivity throughout the research process with particular attention to the will of the participant (Fonow, Cook 1985). As a Black, lesbian filmmaker living in Baltimore who regularly creates work that depicts Black pain, wounding and death, this inquiry is both personal and political. I am a creator, witness, subject and consumer of Black pain, wounding and death imagery as much as the Black Cultural Workers I interview in this project. Though I approach this inquiry with scholarly rigor, I also approach the question from a personal, subjective standpoint. I have been interested in the way people respond and react to Black pain, wounding and death for most of my life. I have always been fascinated by the way members of the Black community and those outside of the Black experience use Black trauma for entertainment purposes. Witnessing and experiencing Black pain was part and parcel of my life as a young woman growing up in Walbrook Junction, an under-resourced area of West Baltimore. As a child I paid close attention to the ways the single mothers in our apartment complex dealt with the traumas of poverty. Their responses could be seen in their negotiations with one another, the power dynamics between their spouses, boyfriends, landlords and bosses, their responses to the stress of living under constant surveillance, and their anxiety when dealing with government bureaucracies. I have always found myself paying attention to the ways the people around me react to and change in response to painful

situations. Anti-blackness creates a different conceptualization of public/private for Black Americans. I learned early on that, due to the hyper visibility of Blackness, personal pain is always public in some way.

For most of my adult life I have worked in the non-profit and higher education sector focusing on public health, education advocacy and the link between art and activism. For eleven years I directed an adolescent HIV program that focused on the needs of sexual minority youth. As a researcher, program director and HIV counselor, I witnessed sexual minority youth respond to the trauma and pain in their lives by either fashioning completely new identities for themselves, or expanding their risk-taking behaviors. In education advocacy, I helped launch campaigns that used visual imagery of impoverished, dilapidated schools to advocate for new and renovated school buildings. As an investigator of the links between art and activism, I spent four years highlighting the ways Cultural Workers in Baltimore respond to trauma through art making. These life-long experiences shape not only my dissertation question, but also my understanding of Black pain, wounding and death as socially productive. In moments of friction, encounters with conflict become productive spaces for the creation of new avenues for social justice and new modes of power (Tsing 2005). If the negotiation of being the subject-witness-consumer of Black pain, wounding and death are understood as moments of friction, it becomes possible to identify how black pain, wounding and death imagery structures Black American identity and, in turn, Black American cultural production. Essentially, it becomes possible to describe how Black Americans *live* with death.

Method and Design

This project focuses on the negotiations of being a subject, witness and consumer of Black pain, wounding and death in a society of spectacle and surveillance. Spectacle is created by the endless repetition of uniform narratives and images that render audiences passive. The society of spectacle works in concert with a surveillance society, "which function[s], in part, because of the extensive collection, recording, storage, analysis and application of information on individuals and groups in those societies as they go about their lives" (Zimmer 2015). A surveillance society refers to the growth of technologies that track, record and monitor our everyday lives. It also refers society's willingness to be monitored and to monitor one another (Lyon, 2014). In a surveillance society, the rampant sharing of viral images of pain through social media platforms becomes a part of a larger system of impression management. It reflects the need for users to immediately respond, be engaged, have an opinion and influence opinions in an online environment (Taschman, 2016). To define a video as viral, one must take into consideration the total views of the video and the spread of the video after its initial release (Rockett 2013). Viral implies less about the number of hits its receives, and more about its rapid spread across multiple media platforms (Battle, 2016). The videos engaged in this project originated as cellular phone footage. They were picked up by online platforms such as YouTube, Facebook and Twitter and then used as content for national news organizations and blogs. Viral videos of violent encounters between Black Americans and the police are examples of spreadable media "which travel across media platforms at least in part because the

people take it in their own hands and share it with their social networks" (Jenkins 2010).

This dissertation investigates how Baltimore-based BCWs consume viral video of Black pain, wounding and death, and explore the cultural products they create in response to these visual texts. Ricardo Levas Morales suggests that cultural workers are "activists who explicitly look to culture and human consciousness as the terrain upon which struggles for social change ultimately take place"(2). Cultural workers can be artists, teachers, producers, organizers, distributors, and social workers. Educated as artists, or sometimes framed as folklorists, cultural workers reflect an expansive pool of artists and artisans. Cultural workers use artistic methods to affect how people see themselves and the world around them to affect social change. Black Americans make up sixty-three percent of the population in Baltimore (U.S. Census Bureau V2016). Although there is no formal count of the number of BCWs living and working in Baltimore, the impact of these social change artists can be felt, especially in times of crisis. Through my job at the Maryland Institute College of Art and my experience as an artist in Baltimore, I have made connections with several overlapping networks of BCWs. In April 2015, Baltimore experienced a wave of peaceful protests and civil disobedience in the wake of the death of Freddie Gray, Jr. at the hands of the Baltimore police. During and after the uprising, in my work as Project Coordinator for the Baltimore Art + Justice Project, I tracked, mapped and promoted over sixty separate arts-based activities that emerged to help Baltimore communities respond to the trauma unfolding across the city. Out of those sixty events, BCWs led half of them. Their activities ranged from the

creation of an impromptu dance performance space in the Station North Arts and Entertainment District, to a call for visual artists to bring their canvases to the intersection of Pennsylvania and North Avenue to make art while the occupying National Guard patrolled the area with military weaponry and vehicles. The response of BCWs during this moment illuminates the tremendous work of artists committed to social change.

What motivates this query is the question of Black agency and interiority in the face of cultural trauma. These particular artists represent a cohort of Black Americans whose response to viral videos of Black pain, wounding and death manifests through their art. The process of art making takes that which is interior and makes it public. If memory is an "ongoing process of performance and response," (Smith 2009) then Black Cultural Workers not only make the interior exterior, they also create the archive of memory with which to understand this contemporary moment of cultural trauma.

Sources and Evidence

The viral videos analyzed in this investigation include: (1) Freddie Gray Jr.'s arrest, Baltimore, MD, April 2015; (2) Eric Garner's chokehold murder, NYC, December 2014; (3) Walter Scott's murder, Charleston County, SC, April 2015; (4) Marlene Pinnock's highway beating, Los Angeles, CA, September 2014; (5) Sandra Bland's traffic stop, Waller County, TX, July 2015; (6) Eric Casebolt's attack on a 15-year old Dajerria Becton at a pool party in McKinney, TX, June 2015; (7) Alton Sterling's murder in Baton Rouge, LA; and (8) Philando Castile's murder in St. Anthony, MN in July 2016. Each viral video provides insight though some lend

themselves to thicker readings. The full results of the analysis can be found in Appendix A. This dissertation asks BCWs how they schematize, consume and share these viral videos, as such, additional sources include the artists' work, discussion groups notes and interview notes. This combination of sources illuminates the relationship between schematization and collective identity that thrives in a society of spectacle and surveillance.

Methods

This research uses frameworks developed in social psychology to understand collective Black identity and relies on methods within the humanities to 1) contextualize this contemporary moment; 2) explore the framing of these visual texts as indicative of cultural trauma; and 3) place these texts within a society of spectacle and surveillance. An action-oriented research project, *Living With Death: Black American Trauma in the Age of the Spectacular* consists of discussion groups, in-depth interviews, visual analysis, and auto-ethnography to build multiple case studies of BCWs in Baltimore, Maryland who are responding to Black pain, wounding and death. This investigation asks *how* BCWs in Baltimore negotiate Black pain, wounding and death imagery in this contemporary moment. Although I firmly believe this research has wide implications for Black Americans as a whole, it is designed to wrest Black pain, wounding and death scholarship from abstraction by presenting a very targeted location and population of focus. I believe developing multiple case studies is the most appropriate way to conduct this research, as case studies are designed to unpack complex social phenomena and allow researchers to "retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events" (Yin 4). A case

study approach permits me to engage a full variety of evidence to help illustrate the operational links between cultural trauma, collective identity, consumption and cultural production over time.

Evidence

The discussion groups, referred to as Kitchen Table Talks, were designed to identify the perceptions, experiences, and practices of a diverse sample of Black Cultural Workers. Prior to meeting as a group, participants were informed of the viral videos being engaged and asked if they would like to receive a link to each. All participants declined. They then met at my home to synthesize their experiences. From the Kitchen Table Talks, I identified three BCWs willing to serve as case studies to further illuminate BCWs' cultural trauma, collective identity, consumption and cultural production. The face-to-face interviews and analysis of their art allowed for in-depth discussions about the role of Black Cultural Workers as survivors by proxy. Additionally, I conducted an auto-ethnography of my own witnessing to round out the discussion.

The following theories from social psychology and the humanities were used to develop my discussion groups and in-depth interview questions, as well as contextualize my analysis of the art produced by BCW.

1. *Centrality of Race:* Sellars et. al suggests the use of the Multi-dimensional Model of Racial Identity as a useful approach to understanding the multi-dimensional aspects of Black identity. This model proposes four dimensions of racial identity, including the salience of identity; the centrality of identity; the ideology associated with identity and the regard with which the person holds the group associated with the

identity. Identity salience examines how relevant a person's racial identity is to his or her self-concept, and centrality describes the extent to which a person racially defines himself or herself. The ideology measure in the Multi-dimensional Model of Racial Identity is used to examine attitudes, beliefs and opinions Black people have about how other Black people should behave. Soliciting BCWs' opinions about how Black people should collectively react to the cultural trauma of viral videos was essential to teasing out the interplay between Black identity, collectivity and cultural trauma.

2. *Collective Identity:* Citing Alberto Melucci, Owens (2003) states, "collective identity is an important conceptual tool for understanding the micro development of sociopolitical collective action and social movements." Melucci cites three components to collective identity, including: (1) the collectivity has continuity over time and tries to adapt to its social and political environment; (2) the collectivity is differentiated and distinguished with respect to other collectivities; and (3) the collectivity is able to recognize itself and be recognized by others (Melucci 1996). Owens posits that, "collective identity is not only derived from the process of interaction, but from the repeated identity activations a group undergoes as it negotiates its self-identification." Using this definition of collective identity, I crafted a series of in-depth interview questions to gauge both BCWs' baseline perception of their collective racial identity and to understand if witnessing trauma impacts their feelings of collective racial identity.

3. *Queer Identity:* How do queer BCWs define their Black queer identities and how are they connected to collective identity as a whole? According to Rosario et.al

(2003), empirical research on LGB identity suggests that racism from the larger white LGB community may lead many ethnic/racial minority individuals to avoid participating in predominantly white gay social activities. Does Black cultural trauma contribute to a Black social identity strong enough to block exclusion from the larger white LGBT community? I developed a series of questions about identity questions to tease out salience of LGBTQ identity during in-depth interviews of LGBT BCW.

Together, these concepts helped me develop questions that linked Black-witnessing practices to the creation of Black collective identity and Black cultural production.

Literature Review

This investigation draws on concepts from media studies, social psychology, cultural studies, trauma studies, and consumer culture theory to contextualize Black American witnessing, schematization, spectacle and surveillance, cultural trauma and Black subjectivity. This literature review is structured into five sections that situate my research as an expansion of ongoing debates in these fields and as an interventional response to gaps I have identified. Woven throughout are pertinent questions guiding my overall project.

The Witness vs. The Spectator

This investigation is interested in what "witnessing" provokes in the Black consumer. Unfortunately, trauma studies, cultural studies, and media studies have produced very little on Black American "witnessing" practices. Various investigations into the appropriation and re-use of found and archival images have shed light on the ethical considerations in witnessing. For example, trauma theory's

concept of false witnessing examines the intentions of those who actively witness violence against others. Coined by psychologist Robert Jay Lifton, false witnessing is the equivalent of circulating violent imagery against certain groups for the sake of coping with one's own fear of death (Caruth 2014). A discussion of lynching photography and slavery memorials helps to articulate this concept and illuminates the difference between witnessing and spectatorship.

In *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Susan Sontag explores representations of violence in a society of spectacle. She studies atrocity artifacts such as 9/11 news footage, photographs of the Civil War, lynching photography, and images of genocide to determine how images support dissent against or collusion with violent acts. Critiquing exhibitions of lynching photography, Sontag theorizes the concept of passive witnessing, stating, "lynching pictures tell us about human wickedness. About humanity. They force us to think about the extent of the evil unleashed specifically by racism. Intrinsic in the perpetration of this evil is the shamelessness of photographing it" (72). She then criticizes exhibit viewers (passive witnesses) as just as culpable as the spectators in the photographs who were watching the atrocities. Sontag believes that photography is a stand-in for actual memory – stripping away the visceral elements of connection that make the image real. In her view, the mechanical lens and the distance that is created in photography allows for bodies to be made abstract. Sontag's arguments hinges on her understanding of a media environment that is over-saturated with violence where, "an image is drained of its force by the way it is used, where and how often it is seen" (82). She laments the lack of sacred or meditative spaces in which to truly sit with images of atrocity and does not find art galleries or

television news reports appropriate for this kind of seeing. Sontag's understanding of media culture resonates with my dissertation project; however the notion of passive witnessing does not consider those viewers who have a culturally traumatic connection to these images, whose experiences of witnessing is characteristic of a memorial (Holloway 2002). Sontag's analysis is informed by her white identity. She does not investigate the perspective of the persons who are being lynched, nor consider those who racially identify with those persons. Her analysis does not account for those who do not have the luxury of emotional distance from lynching photography. Exhibitions of lynching photography are " profound acts of moral remembrance" (Linethall 2006). This dissertation argues that it is impossible be a "passive witness" when one is emotionally and historically connected to the events that are being witnessed.

James Polchin takes a different approach to witnessing and spectating. In his essay, "Not Looking At Lynching Photographs", he notes,

> To witness is to participate, to experience the event in some way, and then to testify to what you saw…A spectator [is] a viewer who is unable or unwilling, to speak about what she has seen. Indeed, the difficulty of becoming an active witness rests in being able to translate what one sees into language – to testify to ones' experience by communicating personal knowledge to a larger public (210).

Polchin's examination of the "Without Sanctuary" lynching exhibitions leads him to the conclusion "while each show asked patrons to look, they more importantly shaped an experience of not looking, of filling that ambiguous and complicated space

between event and representation, between witness and image" (220). This inability to see is wrapped in the tendency for these exhibitions to become collapsed into a generalized narrative about violence that has shaped America. Though both Sontag and Polchin's critiques are useful, they do pose some problems as it relates to this dissertation project. First, they both base their assessments on museum exhibitions; specifically still images of historical text. Stills are more abstracted than the social media images engaged in this dissertation. Additionally, Sontag and Polchin do not consider the role of collective memory in viewing traumatic imagery. They choose to ignore the way that museum exhibitions of lynching photography can become "a space for personal and spiritual reflections of loss and mourning" (Jackson 2013), especially for Black Americans who cannot distance themselves from collective memory.

Sontag and Polchin must be placed in conversation with collective memory and cultural trauma theory to identify how even still images have the potential to bridges the gap between collective memory and forgetting, a key intervention in healing from trauma. A photograph connotes more than it denotes. It suggests more than tells. Many visual culture scholars argue photographs of atrocity are voyeurism, the act of observing a person without their knowledge or consent while they have a reasonable expectation of privacy. But in a public gathering such as a lynching or in the front lines of a war, there is no reasonable expectation of privacy. In the *Civil Contract of Photography,* Arielle Azouley suggests images of conflict or atrocity constitute a power relationship between a set of actors (those being photographed and those photographing). This relationship displaces the question from one of voyeurism,

and even of empathy, to one of participatory citizenship. The photograph functions as a promise made by the photographer of the subject that: *I will bear witness to this.* Azouley's assessment creates a helpful counter-point to both Sontag and Polchin's analysis of photography. However, by solely focusing on the relationship between the photographer and the subject, her critique ignores the perspective of the viewer once the photograph is circulated.

Moving images have more potential to bridge the distance between the witness and the spectator than stills. Film studies scholars have found that medium plays a more significant role in differentiating witnessing from spectatorship. In analysis of *Blue*, Derek Jarmin's testimonial film about living with AIDS, Roger Hallas asserts that "the medium of film allows for the testimonial act to be preserved beyond its moments of enunciation, and the productibility of the medium permits a broad dissemination of testimonial address" (37). In documentary footage, techniques such as the medium shot of the talking head and voice-over narration are used to create a sense of intimacy with the witness. Witnesses are made to feel as if they are face to face with the survivor and inside the survivor's psychological process. Feelings of intimacy with the survivor develop through witnessing first-hand accounts of traumatic narratives. The techniques involved in a filmed documentary testimony are designed to shorten the distance between viewer and subject.

The surveillance footage from the dashboard camera of Sandra Bland's arrest and the cellular phone footage of Freddie Gray's arrest both function in ways not yet examined in film studies. In recent years there has been increased scholarship on surveillance cinema, which examines the role of surveillance technology in screen

narratives (Zimmer 2015). However, Sandra Bland's dashboard camera footage was captured as a part of general panoptic surveillance, where Gray's was captured as a form of "on the spot" truth-telling. These are not screen narratives; they are real trauma incidents. This investigation brings film studies concepts into the present moment by introducing surveillance footage and citizen witness media to broaden the field.

The word witness is derived from the root meanings "to bear in mind;" "to remember;" "to be careful." In a legal setting, a witness can be defined as one who has knowledge of something by recollection and experience and who can accurately discuss it. Bearing witness is a term that, used in psychology, refers to sharing our experiences with others, most notably in the communication of traumatic events (Spielberger 26). Bearing witness can be thought of as a performative act that affirms the reality of the event witnessed. This shift in the point of view closes the distance between the testimony and those witnessing it.

Capturing the reality or the truth of an event is complicated by the medium in which the trauma is captured: still images, moving images, or first-person accounts. Critiquing the hegemony of visual culture, Hallas and Guerin suggest that, "for all our reliance on images, we never quite believe in their revelations. Despite the privilege given to the authority and presence of the image, it is after all, just an image, a picture" (10). On July 17, 2014, Eric Garner died in Staten Island, New York City, after a New York City Police Department (NYPD) officer put him in a chokehold for about 15 to 19 seconds while arresting him. Citizen witness, Ramsey Orta, captured video of Eric Garner's death via cellular phone. Eric Garner's death was ruled a

homicide by medical examiners and charges were brought against the arresting officer, Daniel Pantelo. Despite the footage, the Richmond County grand jury decided not to indict the officer. When the authenticity of the visual testimony is discredited, such as the video of Eric Garner's murder, the distinction between seeing (the moment of recognition) and reading (the moment of conclusion) comes into consideration.

Cathy Caruth argues that those, who bear witness to trauma such as psychotherapists and first responders, experience vicarious or secondary trauma. The term "vicarious traumatization" (VT) refers to changes in one's worldview, inner experience, sense of safety, attitude toward work life, and possibly behavior after exposure to trauma narratives (Benatar 2011). Caruth argues those who experience VT become survivors by proxy (Caruth 2014). Proxy survivors rely on empathy to affectively bear witness. Empathy research began in the field of psychotherapy and counseling psychology and has been a fundamental concept in understanding how therapy works (Duan, Hill 1996). There are three general understandings of empathy. Psychoanalytic theory suggests empathy is an ability or personality trait. In this construct, an empathetic person has the ability to feel the emotions of other people. Some psychoanalytic theorists and social psychologists believe empathy is situational and that individuals may vicariously experience second-hand trauma on a case-by-case basis depending on the severity of the stimuli. Finally, empathy is understood as an interpersonal multi-stage process of identification. This can include contagion theory that suggests that crowds exert a hypnotic influence on their members (Gustav

Le Bon 1886) and role-taking theory, which suggests that children develop general cognitive growth by simulating the actions around them (Selman, Byrn 1974).

Much of the empathy research discussed above has used psychology to understand the phenomenon of empathy. Also applicable to this dissertation is the empathy research being conducted in the fields of neuroscience. Neuroscientists have used moving images and magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI), to suggest, "observing affective states in others activates brain networks also involved in the firsthand experience of these states" (Bernhardt, Singer 2012). The discovery of mirror neurons provides a promising area of investigation for this dissertation.

A mirror neuron, or cubelli neuron, is a neuron that fires both when a human acts and when the human observes the same action performed by another. Mirror neurons indicate, "when we witness the actions, sensations, and emotions of other individuals, we activate neural structures as if we were performing similar actions or experiencing similar emotions and sensations. These activations are stronger in more empathic individuals (Keyesers, Gazzola 2009). Humans have mirror neurons that respond to visual and auditory stimuli as well during the execution of certain actions (28). Studies have confirmed that the sight of pain of someone in pain activates the regions of the brain associated with processing one's own pain (Morrison, Lloyd, di Pellegrino, & Roberts, 2004). Though a vast majority of the research into mirror neurons involves primates, the existence of mirror neurons in humans suggests a deep connection between viewing and experiencing that shed light on moving images as a mechanism for meaning transfer.

The approach to the study of mirror neurons lends credence to research that seeks to identify the role of media in facilitating vicarious trauma. Many people encounter intense psychological trauma vicariously through media rather than directly through their life experiences. In *Trauma Culture: The Politics of Terror and Lose in Media and Literature*, E. Ann Kaplan explores the pro-social benefits of vicarious trauma through media exposure. First, she highlights the use of cinema language by therapists who treat trauma victims. For example, asking a patient to narrate their story as if it were a movie or to use visual images to gain clarity about a long forgotten memory. Kaplan finds these cinematic tools "confirms the power of visual media to trigger symptoms of vicarious trauma, at least when the viewer is primed by treating trauma victims or by having been a victim himself or herself" (Kaplan 2005). The notion of priming is particularly helpful in this dissertation as it alludes to what Sontag and Polchin obscure in their discussion of witnessing, which is the connection of the survivor by proxy to the trauma incident. The survivor by proxy must cognitively follow the story, decode the images presented and stay aware of the fact that they are an outside observer, not an active participant. Kaplan argues the same process occurs when viewing moving images, positing, "for most moviegoers, the cortex remains active, even if powerful emotions are being registered on the amygdala" (3). That being said, film spectators feel the pain evoked by empathy especially when they have some experience with the trauma being portrayed on screen. Kaplan's investigation also suggests vicarious trauma is tempered by the notion of empty "empathy". Empty empathy builds off of John Berger's discussion of the utility of Vietnam War photography in his essay, "Photographs of Agony". In

this exploration, Berger asserts that while war photographs are "arresting," and cause viewers despair, the suffering is to no avail if it is not tied to political action (Berger 1980). Kaplan takes it further as she explores still images from the war in Iraq and documentary footage of atrocities in Rwanda. She asserts empty empathy occurs when viewers are invited to empathize with individuals in the photograph or film without being provided the larger context for the existence of the trauma. Without context and a continuity that would bring events into our own lives, such images can only elicit empathy that in the end is "empty." Kaplan's empty empathy offers an avenue to see bearing witness as the act of wanting to change something. How does one change injustice without knowledge about how it came to be? Understanding the context of the images hinges on understanding narratives and their role in making sense of images of atrocity, whether still or moving.

Reading Black Pain (Schema Theory)

Stories tell us what is happening, what should be, which values to hold sacred and which ideologies to abhor. The lessons of stories resonate through a process of encoding, storing, and interpreting information referred to as a schema. In this dissertation, schema theory acts a bridge between trauma theory's concept of witnessing and cultural studies' understanding of Black subjectivity. A schema is a framework to perceive the world and understand information. Schema theory suggests that when a message is sent and then received by the audience, the audience evaluates this message based on "direct observation, interpersonally transmitted experience, [and] and generalizations"(Axelrod 1249). Types of schemas include object (function/expectation of an object); stereotypes (false assumptions about a

group); prototypes (idealized image); script (assumption of how an event must play out); role (assumption of behavior depending on where you are situated) and, self (personal perception). Schemas can hinder our understanding of new concepts, leading us to fall back on prior knowledge rather than encouraging us to try to understand a new idea. Schemas can "influence memories of events at the point of them being witnessed, affecting what our attention focuses on, therefore affecting the chunks of information available for encoding as long-term memories" (Tse D et, al 2007). This bias leads us to seek out information that supports existing schemas rather than those that contradict it. Schemas can help us to piece together memories but can also lead to false memories based on our impression of how it should have occurred, rather than how it actually happened.

In mass media, activation of a schema in the mind of the audience member may be triggered by some particular information in the program or article. If you provide context prior to exposing someone to new information, you provide some clues for the viewer or reader to categorize what they are witnessing. A schematically influenced meaning or interpretation may also be triggered by the content of certain formal features of the particular medium, for example, flashbacks, montage, or instant replays in television or film or online. Media audiences then filter their information through stereotypes, past experiences and familiarity with repetitive narratives. In *The Suffering Will Not Be Televised*, Rebecca Wanzo traces the invisibility of suffering Black women across media to illustrate the way Black women's pain, wounding and death have been excluded from narratives about social violence and victimization. Sentimental stories are "texts that represent history, events, people and/or conflicts in

simplistic emotional binaries, are designed to produce tears or joyful wistfulness in the consumer, and represent emotion in a way that is far from the complexity of how affect works in reality" (10). Similar to Kaplan's "empty empathy", sentimental narratives often flatten the complexity of traumatic events, erasing intersectional analysis and the traumas' links to history. Making Black pain, wounding and death legible in our popular imagination has political and cultural consequences for Black Americans. Stories carry utility strong enough to spark movements for equality and social change. For example, Black feminist narratives of sexual violence from the 1970s through the 1980s sparked the formation of the wider feminist "Breaking The Silence" movement to address sexual violence (Harkins 2009). Still, is the sharing of viral images, representations and narratives of Black pain making Black suffering legible or illegible? If legible, in what ways does this sharing combat sentimental storytelling? When pained images of Black female, queer or differently abled bodies appear on our televisions, laptops and cellular phones, the responses are telling. A prime example was the inability of media to read the assault of a 15-year old Dajerria Becton by police officer Eric Casebolt in McKinney, TX as sexual violence. On June 5, 2015, Casebolt was video-recorded drawing his handgun on young, majority Black teenagers and violently restraining Becton by placing his knees on the small of her back and grabbing her hair by the fistful. Becton was clad only in a swimsuit at the time. Casebolt was placed on administrative leave pending an investigation and later resigned. One of the most telling elements in the coverage of this incident was lack of analysis of the sexual and gender based trauma Becton experienced at the hands of Casebolt. Understanding whose pain carries weight in Black American communities

illuminates whose lives are elevated in Black social justice movements. It indicates whose Black lives are deemed culturally relevant. There is a difference between seeing and reading video evidence.

Seeing is watching an event unfold. It is a manner of discerning what is occurring visually. When light falls on the eyes, a process occurs which stimulates the visual cortex to detect shapes, colors and motion. Though a complex ocular process, we see but to see does not automatically mean to comprehend. Comprehension comes through the process of reading. *Reading* is process of filtering what is being seen through one's schema. Video evidence may show the entirety of an incident but the interpretation of what is being shown changes depending upon how one reads the bodies on screen. Examining video footage of Rodney King's assault, Judith Butler argues, "when the visual is fully schematized by racism, the 'visual evidence'… will always and only refute the conclusions based upon it; for it is possible within this racist episteme that no black person can seek recourse to the visible as the sure ground of evidence" (19). Speaking only of the White gaze, Butler believes white people' racist schemas prevent them from seeing Black people's pain. Therefore, Black people should not expect justice through video evidence. This dissertation asks: if white people have a racist schema that misreads Black pain, do Black people have a schematized empathy that validates what is on the screen? Is collective identity the key component in maintaining a schematized empathy?

The visual field cannot be neutral to questions of racism and white supremacy. Elizabeth Alexander's classic article "Can You Be Black and Look at This? Reading the Rodney King Video(s)" links collective Black identity to witnessing Black pain.

She presents an "archive of a series of cases [to] articulate the ways in which a practical memory exists and crucially informs African Americans about the lived realities of how violence and its potential informs our understanding of our individual selves as a larger group"(79). Alexander proposes that collective memories are transmitted through storytelling and play out in contemporary contexts. Christina Sharpe suggests that these familiar stories of violence and shame are produced and reproduced from one generation to the next and can be considered "monstrous intimacies" (Sharpe 10). The concept of monstrous intimacy is essential to considering how we negotiate images of trauma, as it speaks to the levels and desire and pleasure undergirding painful racist encounters. In *The Erotic Life of Racism*, Sharon Patricia Holland suggests that scholars heed the "call by queer theory for us to take care of the *feeling* that escapes or releases when bodies collide in pleasure and pain" (Holland 2012). American racism is rooted in the eroticization of Black people. Black pain has been an essential component in this eroticization. Naked bodies on auction blocks, sexual violence against the enslaved, and, anti-miscegenation laws all illustrate the intertwining of racism and the erotic. One need only read stories about lynching practices where Black men were castrated and even sometimes forced to perform acts of erotic auto-cannibalism to see these connections (Woodard 2014). bell hooks suggests that, "acknowledging ways the desire for pleasure, and that includes erotic longings, informs our politics, our understanding of difference, we may know better how to desire disrupts, subverts, and makes resistance possible" (hooks 40). Taking a cue from Holland and hooks, this dissertation queries a collective of Black American artists how viewing racist imagery may fulfill an erotic

desire to engage in racism. Sometime the desire to see and share Black pain, wounding and death is couched within the guise of raising awareness of the issues impacting Black lives. When Black Americans encounter familiar, painful images, do they respond to them with outrage, disgust, or a desire to see more? Do Black Americans feel the distressing images validate the reality that racism exists and is damaging?

Consuming Black Pain in a Society of Spectacle

In *The Society of Spectacle*, Guy Debord contends that a society of spectacle arises when social life has been replaced by mediated representations of life and uniform narratives are endlessly repeated. Though writing well before the advent of social media, Debord's argues these two conditions serve to render audiences passive. This process is exacerbated by the Wests' over-reliance on surveillance and surveillance technology that creates fodder for spectacle. *SuperVision: An Introduction to the Surveillance Society* posits: "virtually all significant social, institutional or business activities in our society now involve the systematic monitoring, gathering and analysis of information in order to make decisions, minimize risk, sort populations and exercise power" (Gilliom, Monahan 2). Within this society of surveillance, Dionne Brand claims the "Black body is one of the most regulated bodies in the Diaspora" (37). In this dissertation, I assert that the Black body *in pain* is the most regulated body, as it is recorded, remixed, reimagined and looped in a continuous media cycle of trauma. If people are accustomed to being under surveillance, the rampant sharing of narratives and images of pain become normalized. A society of spectacle and surveillance is fertile ground for

dehumanization. Thinking of someone as a human is assuming that being has some "essence" that all humans are supposed to possess. First articulated by Aristotle, the essence is that component that makes something what it is. Unlike appearance, which is skin deep, essence is makes up the core of a being. A dehumanized person is thought to lack that full "essence". They are subhuman animals (Smith 2011). Dehumanization is a tool used to override inhibitions against harming others. Technologies such as media and surveillance help to frame and fix some beings as subhuman and therefore open to violence. Dehumanization, whether driven by hate or indifference, sets the stage for brutality. When an individual is subject to dehumanizing practices, "victims become a de-individuated mass that lacks the capacity to evoke compassion" (Haslam, Loughan 23). Simone Brown' *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness* situates Blackness at the intersection of spectacle, dehumanization and surveillance in a way that is useful to my investigation. She discusses how Blackness was made hypervisible during slavery and post-slavery through the slave ships, ledgers, branding, lantern laws and other means of identification. Her text proposes that under surveillance, Black people's unruliness has always been used as a way to "mask the violence of the slave trader by displacing the violence of slavery onto the African" (96). Histories of racist surveillance practices complicate the reliance on dashboard cameras, police body cameras and Facebook live feeds as a means to garner justice. When paired with the concept of dehumanization and this understanding of a Black history of over-surveillance, spectacle becomes a powerful technology for erasing victim status from those affected by unconscionable acts. How do we consume the unconscionable?

Defining Black American Trauma

The term "trauma" can have different meanings, depending on the context. Generally, trauma refers to a distressing or disturbing experience; however, the term can be also be used to refer to an injury or the longer-term impacts and consequences of a troubling experience (Briere & Scott, 2006). Trauma theory "denotes a vibrant, interdisciplinary area of Western scholarship developed since the 1980s through cross-fertilization between psychology and the humanities" (Radstone, Walker, Shenkar 2015). Trauma theorists have concentrated on the representation of trauma through literature, film, and photography to understand how trauma manifests culturally. Grounded first and foremost in Holocaust studies, trauma theory often uses Sigmund Freud's conceptions of trauma and its effect on individual psychology to understand Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* is a foundational text in this field. She suggests that literature and film are the sites where the belated experiences of trauma bleed through. She posits that the "historical power of the trauma is not just that the experience is repeated after its' forgetting, but that it is only in and through its inherent forgetting that it is first experienced at all" (17). The "forgetting" suggests that a key component of trauma is its latency, meaning, those who experience trauma, even first hand, do not immediately register the experience as traumatic. It is only through half-remembered experiences and the acknowledgement of later impact of the experience on one's life that the incident registers as trauma. Caruth's work emphasizes the importance of narrative in articulating traumas that we have no other means to access. Since trauma theory is grounded in psychology, most of the

literature, even when focused on historical events, centers individuals' experience within a medical discourse.

In recent years, there has been a shift to understand trauma from a collective standpoint. Collective trauma is thought of as an "aggregate of trauma experienced by community members or an event that impacts a few people but has structural and socially traumatic consequences" (Pinderhughes, Davis, Williams 5). Jewish communities like other ethnic groups, experienced trauma long before the Holocaust. If the field of trauma theory has its roots in the Holocaust, how does one situate Blackness in trauma theory? African-American people have a legacy of trauma that spans from the Transatlantic Slave Trade to the current moment of continuous police brutality. This history of trauma is tied to numerous structural consequences that trauma theory has not incorporated. To understand trauma prior to the Holocaust it is necessary to turn to cultural trauma as a framework for this investigation.

Cultural trauma not only highlights trauma at a community level but also the necessity of community-level intervention to collectively deal with trauma. The Center for Advanced Studies in the Behavioral Sciences suggests trauma is not solely about the group members experiencing each other's pain; it is about the group viewing the traumatic event as fundamental to their collective identity. Collectives "represent social pain as a fundamental threat to their sense of who they are, where they came from and where they want to go" (Alexander 10). It is both the collective's recognition of the trauma as detrimental to their wellbeing and the subsequent narrative created around the trauma that defines the roles of cultural trauma.

Redress activities such as the #BlackLivesMatter campaign, call for online activism such as the #ICan'tBreathe challenge and the African American Policy Forum's #SayHerName, and the movement to end sexual violence via #MeToo, highlight a current environment of cultural trauma. Still, Black trauma does not begin with Ferguson, MO and end with Baton Rouge, LA. By adding a discussion of anti-blackness and Black futures to the Center for Advanced Studies in Behavioral Sciences notion of cultural trauma, it becomes possible to recognize Black trauma as historical, ongoing and generative, i.e. capable of producing cultural norms and practices. Black Americans carry the resonance of historical trauma into modern life. This is a consequence of the multigenerational oppression of Africans and their descendants resulting from centuries of chattel slavery and strengthened by institutional racism that persists into the present. This traumatic legacy of slavery lives in the foundation of the United States. Psychologist Jane Flax further argues that since this country has never properly mourned slavery, we are locked in a mode of race and gender based melancholia (Flax 2010). Melancholia is "the condition of having to incorporate and encrypt both an impossible ideal and a denigrated self" (Cheng 2001). Race and gender based melancholia has a continuing impact on notions of American citizenship and politics. I believe it is also a psychological state that colors the way Black Americans read, witness and consume Black pain. Key to these ideas of trauma is the unknowable, unacknowledged nature of historical Black pain, wounding and death on Black Americans in the current moment. Historical Black trauma is the stuff of "ghostly matters", signifiers of what is missing and what *must* be in cultural texts (Gordon 2008); and, if unacknowledged traumas appear

our cultural texts, they also manifest in Black cultural production and collective Black identity.

The Pained Subject as an Abstract Body

The vast majority of scholarship on Black pain, wounding and death emerges from the examination of cultural texts, including literature, film, popular culture, music, and visual art. These media present an avenue for literary and cultural scholars to tease out the way Black pain, wounding and death have been used to theorize Black life in the U.S. Very few of these texts focus on Black people as living, breathing beings that experience, internalize and become traumatized by racialized pain. Instead, there is a propensity to render Black bodies in pain as abstract, even when exploring the uses of Black pain, wounding and death in the creation of Black subjectivity. This very process contributes to the dehumanization of Black people by separating individuals from the lived experience of that pain.

Key texts in cultural pain studies such as David Morris's *Culture of Pain* and Elaine Scarry's *The Body in Pain* do not "focus specifically on black bodies or racial marking as it relates to pain" (King 7). Morris describes how "the experience of pain is decisively shaped or modified by individual human minds and by specific human cultures" (Morris 10). Scarry articulates the way pain makes and unmakes language and cultural artifacts. Both investigations provide insight into the cultural dimension of pain however neither considers racialized pain from the perspective of Black people. Debra Walker King's *African Americans and the Culture of Pain* counters this approach. King examines cultural texts to reveal how the Black body in pain functions as a rhetorical device and as a political strategy. She posits that in the

United States, the body in pain is as much a construction of social, ethical, and economic politics as it is a physiological phenomenon. King's theories on Black pain as metaphor, soul wounding and racial hurt fill in the gaps in cultural pain studies left by Morris and Scarry, and additionally, her discussion of Black interiority offers avenues for my project's intervention. King suggests Black people in pain use silence "as a defensive strategy, a mobility that allows torture victims some control over the way they experience and navigate moments of pain and racial hurt. It is a way of rising above victimization, if only symbolically" (93). Evidence of this type of stoicism was paramount in the Civil Rights movement where images of "violent confrontation between activists and opposition…were documents of chaos in the face of black self-control" (Baker 2015). Civil Rights activists were trained to remain stoic and non-confrontational while being abused. Religious teachings suggest that human life is sacred and that the dignity of the human person is the foundation of a moral vision for society. Evidence of self-control was designed to illustrate the contrast between the state's inhumane violence and Black people's inherent dignity – their full human essence. However, King's analysis fails to discus the detrimental role silence plays in Black psychic life.

Black silence is also associated with "cool pose", a psychological defense against the stressors of structural racism. Defined as a "ritualized form of masculinity that entails behaviors, scripts, physical posturing, impression management and carefully crafted performances that deliver a single, critical message: pride, strength and control" (Majors, Bilson 1992), presentation of cool can be linked to educational, criminal and mental health systems which fail to understand cool performance and

thus resort to prejudiced and discriminatory practices when encountering black males. Though Black woman also adopt the cool performance, Black female silence is both a response to the external stressors of structural racism as well as sexism and sexual violence. Studying the historical degradation and abuse of black women during and after slavery, Patricia Broussard suggests with no legal protection and no one to confide in, silence for the sake of survival, was the only option for enslaved black women (Broussard 2013). The consequences of Black women not being silent in the face of violence is evident in each video of Black women's encounters with police explored in this dissertation. This is especially true in the case of Sandra Bland, who, was pulled over for a traffic violation on July 10, 2015 by state trooper Brian Encinia. The exchange escalated, resulting in Bland's arrest and charge for assaulting a police officer. Bland was later found dead in her jail cell from an alleged suicide. Bland did not practice stoic silence in the face of violence and her arrest and death are stark testimony to the way silence becomes a dangerous utility. In this cultural landscape of viral video and Black people's immediate, political, vocal responses to social injustice via social media, there is an urgent need to more fully examine the spectrum of Black Americans' responses to pain.

Black American subjectivity has been shaped through a mixture of terror and resistance to terror. Examination of Black pain, wounding and death informs scholarship on the creation of Black subjects in the U.S., but in making their claims, scholars often do not consider "subject and agent as the passive and active dimensions of the same process" (Pope 4). Sharon Patricia Holland's *Raising the Dead: Readings of Death and (Black) Subjectivity* contends that Black subjectivity is

connected intimately to social death. The disfigured black body functions as an undesirable figurative indicator of social worth, which define what (white) America supposedly is not. The danger in reading the pained Black body as purely symbolic is the abstraction of lived, embodied Blackness. Black people are actually dying, not only by physical violence but also by poverty and racism, which shortens the lifespan of Black people in America. Black people are actually being wounded. Black people are actually being traumatized. To frame Black Americans as subjects without regard to this agency strips Black Americans of their complex interiority. The black interior is the space where Black Americans are able to define themselves outside of the limited expectations of "what black is, isn't or should be" (Alexander 2004). It presents a useful avenue to explore how Black people are capable of navigating their own pain in complex and contradictory ways.

As a counter to Debra Walker King's silence as resistance concept, Kevin Quashie's *The Sovereignty of Quiet: Beyond Resistance in Black Culture* presents a useful exploration of Black culture focused on the interior. Bucking against conventional, mainstream understanding of Black culture as expressive, dramatic and defiant, Quashie explores the concept of quiet as a form of expressiveness that emphasizes Black interiority. He describes 'quiet' as the space of a person's desires, ambitions, hungers, vulnerabilities, and fears (Quashie 62). Quiet is the metaphor for the inner life, and as such, enables a more nuanced understanding of Black culture. Where King's silence is a defined by its relationship to external, often oppositional stressors, Quashie's quiet is defined not as a response but as a part of a process that illustrates the Black essence, which fills the black interior.

Black performance theory provides additional ways to consider Black interiority and "excavates the coded nuances as well as the complex spectacles within everyday acts of resistance by once known objects that are now have always been agents of their own humanity" (Defrantz, Gonzales 3). The work of Black performance theorists provide useful avenues to articulate the interior processes, desires, vulnerabilities, and fears involved in witnessing and consuming narratives of Black pain and wounding. Black people are sharing images of Black pain and also producing images of Black pain. This dissertation is an attempt to reclaim Black identity from the abstract by investigating the ways Black Americans read images and narratives of this trauma.

Living With Death: Black American Trauma in the Age of the Spectacular begins with the recognition that Black Americans have been reading and consuming Black pain, wounding and death from varied perspectives for years, even if this fact has rarely been acknowledged. The closest investigation into specific Black American pain wounding and death reading practices can be found in Courtney R. Baker's recent work, *Humane Insight: Looking at Images of African American Suffering and Death.* Released in 2015, Baker's work is a corrective to arguments claiming representations of Black pain disempower Black communities. Examining still images of Black suffering through the years, Baker's "humane insight…is an ethics-based look that imagines the body that is seen…merits the protections due to all human bodies. [It] describes a decision to identify the body being looked at as a human body, a gesture that is integral to the formation of our social interactions" (5).

This dissertation acknowledges the usefulness of Baker's framework while adding a critical analysis of viral videos with a specific anti-black and futurist lens.

American Studies Research Contribution

In his address of the American Studies Association Conference in 2009, Phillip Deloria argues for American Studies as both a method and a site of intellectual interaction. He states, "[o]ne may enter a project at the level of the text, the context, or the theory. In other words, questions may come from registers ranging from the material to the abstract, and one can weave analyses among these three registers. In doing so, one utilizes different disciplinary methodologies, blurring them together in true interdisciplinary form" (2009). There is no standard canon of trauma and pain research associated with American Studies scholarship. *Living With Death: Black American Trauma in the Age of the Spectacular* is helping to develop this canon by exploring Black pain from all "three registers" through interdisciplinary scholarship. Viral cellular phone footage is a newer text that reveals cultural meanings about this contemporary moment in American life. From a textual level, this project applies a film analysis approach to viral videos of Black American's encounters with law enforcement. As of yet, there has been no established approach to textually analyzing cellular phone material aside from forensic analysis of surveillance footage used primarily by the legal system. This dissertation's textual analysis is designed to suggest innovative approaches to consuming Black pain, wounding and death imagery. *Living With Death: Black American Trauma in the Age of the Spectacular* reveals how Black Americans live fully and vibrantly under the specter of death both

physically and ontologically. To provide context for this assertion, this project elucidates how this contemporary moment of viral Black deaths is indicative of a burgeoning cultural trauma for Black Americans. Through discussions with Black Cultural Workers, this project reveals the interrelated conditions that link collective identity formation, witnessing practices and cultural production. This process demonstrates the way viral videos of Black pain, wounding and death simultaneously create and reflect cultural trauma. From a theoretical perspective, theories of social death and afro-futurism are newer scholarly standpoints filtering into American Studies scholarship. Ongoing debates about anti-blackness as an ontological framework versus a distinct method are common across many disciplines. Afro-futurism is even more fluid, as it is associated more with an aesthetic approach or a philosophy than a scientific method. This dissertation uses both frameworks to suggest a specific Black American way of seeing and consuming Black pain that rejects post-racial progress narratives while suggesting uniquely Black American schema unconstrained by whiteness.

Finally, this dissertation adheres to American Studies' interdisciplinarity by bringing American Studies methods and Social Psychology theories to bear on our understanding of Black trauma, Black identity and Black cultural production. Cultural studies, social psychology, trauma theory, media studies and consumer culture often overlap, but they do not often engage one another. By deploying key concepts in each field to define the subject-witness-consumer model, this research attempts to strengthen each area of engagement. By understanding how Black Cultural Workers in Baltimore negotiate constant exposure to Black pain, wounding and death, I

believe this research articulates various interventional approaches for Black Americans who are living with death, opening up a new field of scholarship within American Studies.

Chapter Outlines

Chapter Two: The Suffering Is Televised, Shared, Remixed and Auto-Tuned

This chapter situates the contemporary moment as indicative of a people living in a society of spectacle and surveillance. One of the key tenets of a society of spectacle is media saturation. Media saturation is complicated by a surveillance society that favors video images as truth. Locating the current moment as such is important for framing the viral videos engaged in this dissertation. This chapter employs embodied image schema analysis of each viral video to demonstrate that although spectacularization often leads to dehumanization, embodied image schema viewing counters the numbing aspects of watching and acts as a politics of interruption.

Chapter Three: Group Pain Is Not Group Think

This chapter's analysis of discussion group data is an attempt to determine: 1) Do Black Americans have a specific method of schematizing, bearing witness and consuming Black pain, wounding and death? 2) If so, does this method counter the spectacularization of Black American pain in the contemporary moment? 3) What roles do personal experiences of racialized cultural trauma play in this schematizing? 4) Does collective identity help Black Americans negotiate Black pain, wounding and death imagery? This chapter describes my method for recruiting discussion group participants, explores the development of discussion group questions, and reflects on

the successes and challenges of leading the discussion group. After describing the process, I develop a portrait of BCWs. I construct a framework to describe how members of this group think and *creatively* respond to the viral texts in this research.

Chapter Four: Survivors by Proxy

This chapter consists of three in-depth interviews. Participants represent different artistic mediums and vary by age and sexual orientation. Participants were chosen with an eye to their unique histories and a variety of cultural values and traditions. Using these interviews and a textual analysis of two of the artist's works, I operationalize what it means for Black Cultural Workers to be survivors by proxy.

Chapter Five: The Periscopic Gaze

This chapter uses auto-ethnographic exploration of my childhood trauma to further articulate the productive possibilities that comes from experiencing trauma. The three childhood stories provide a framework with which to examine my own understanding of trauma and identity as it relates to my viewing practices.

Conclusion: Towards an Afro-Futurist Witnessing

I conclude this dissertation ends with a final meditation, which theorizes ways to operationalize trauma from an afro-futurist perspective. I then take the results from the previous chapters to articulate the subject-witness-consumer model, discuss the project's limitations and provide potential avenues for further exploration.

Summary

This dissertation explores the generative possibilities that come from being Black and a subject, witness and consumer of Black pain, wounding and death imagery. It is an attempt to articulate uncomfortable and painful trains of thought I

have had as a Black lesbian filmmaker living in a traumatized city. Through the years, these thoughts about pain's utility and the various ways Black pain is bound up in pleasure and even sometimes desire, have spoken back to me through the art of other Black Cultural Workers in the city. I have participated in dialogues with other Black people where, even though the subject of our conversation is a horrific cultural trauma, positive feelings of kinship arise that are noticed by all involved. Black pain in America is rhizomatic- it is continually "spreading towards available spaces or trickling downwards towards new spaces through fissures and gaps" (Deleuze, Guattari 1980). As it spreads, Black pain establishes connections between organizations of power, culture, sciences and the arts in complex and non-chronological fashions. American Studies is the proper location to situate this project because it encourages scholars to engage the full complexity of their subject through several lenses. Because it is an American Studies project, *Living With Death: Black American Trauma in the Age of the Spectacular* does not lead with the limited methodology of a specific discipline, it leads with the needs of the topic in question. This dissertation engages painful cultural texts, conceptualizes various notions of black interiority, and combines collective identity, collective memory and collective trauma, to theorize Black American witnessing practices. Though this dissertation does not offer definitive answers, it does pose definitive questions I believe are important for expanding Black pain scholarship in the field of American Studies. By doing so, this dissertation grows the canon of Black pain research in the American Studies discipline.

Chapter 2: The Suffering Is Televised, Shared, Remixed and Auto-Tuned

Introduction

"Everybody was here to see the shit...I know everything. I got the whole thing on camera boy, it's a wrap." – Ramsey Orta

Ramsey Orta makes this statement while using his cellular phone to document the arrest and eventual murder of Eric Garner at the hands of police officers in New York in the summer of 2014. At a press conference following the death of Philando Castille in summer 2016, when Diamond Reynolds is asked why she chose to Facebook live stream her boyfriend's death, she states that, "I did it so the world knows the police are not here to protect us". Orta and Reynolds believe Black and brown people in America historically and systematically experience excessive violence at the hands of state agents. The declarative nature of their statements provides a telling glimpse into their presumptions about the power of video to provide evidence of these injustices. Documenting evidence of injustice is complicated by the use of the cellular phone as a recorder. Recent scholarship suggests cellular phones are perceived as extensions of the self (Kim, Kim 2017, Davel 2017, Clayton, Leshner, Almond 2015), suggesting Orta and Diamond believed their cellular phone evidence would clearly translate their understanding of injustice. Documentation is further complicated by the medium in which the event is captured, whether it is still images, moving pictures or first-person accounts. Knowledge of the way images are constructed reinforces a level of skepticism about any image (still or moving). Not

only are images manipulated through technology, images also "flicker past our eyes in a moment too ephemeral to allow us to test their substantiality" (Hallas, Guerin 2007). Images fill up our visual landscape when driving, watching, surfing and texting. Our environment is saturated with split seconds of visual information. Recent research shows that humans can process an image in 13 milliseconds (Potter et al. 2014), however researchers have not been able to discern if humans can recognize the way that image has been manipulated. In the case of Orta, his commentary while filming suggests an attempt to add a layer of undeniable proof about what he is witnessing. Diamond Reynolds' assertion speaks to the same belief. When the authenticity of the visual testimony is discredited, the distinction between the moment of recognition (seeing) and the act of interpretation (reading) comes into consideration. The Eric Garner footage seemed to capture the undeniable act of police brutality but was discredited by the judicial system because of the presumption that police officers are to be believed (Taub 2014) regardless of video testimony.

Society of Spectacle

A society of spectacle and surveillance create the conditions by which images of Black pain, wounding and death go viral. Videos of violent encounters between Black Americans and the police spread because viewers take an active role in the movement of media from platform to platform (Jenkins 2010). I believe viral videos are a product of media consumption and surveillance that complicates the way Black bodies in pain are recognized in the larger cultural milieu.

Though writing before the advent of social media, and from a specifically Western perspective, Guy Debord's society of spectacle helps me to frame this

assertion. Critiquing consumption in modern Western society, Debord suggests that everything that we consume embodies a mixture of distraction and reinforcement that serves to reproduce the capitalist mode of society and economy. Debord contends a society of spectacle arises when 1) social life is replaced by mediated representations of life, and 2) uniform narratives are endlessly repeated. Similar to Hallas and Guerin's critique of visual hegemony, Debord's theory sees image saturation (an excess of visual stimuli) as critical to the creation of a spectacle society.

Viral video consumption is a contemporary example of image saturation. Viral videos emerge based on the total views of the video and the social media spread of the video after its initial release (Rocket, 2013). The act of "liking" and "sharing" viral video might seem to contradict Debord's link between image saturation and passivity, as social media users actively share media content. Studying the difference between explicit participation (producing social media text and artifacts) and implicit participation (sustaining social media connections), Villi and Matikainen claim liking and sharing is both explicit and implicit participation (110). Social media participation is motivated by users' desires to stay connected to one another and by media companies' desire to connect to users/consumers for data collection that leads to profit. Liking and sharing content is often more about staying plugged into a conversation than actively shaping and molding that conversation (Domingo et.al. 2008) for a particular purpose. The uniformity of the images and their repetitive reception contribute to passive interactions. I believe that videos of Black pain, wounding and death can be categorized as viral media. As of April 2016:

- the New York Daily News' Youtube video of Eric Garner's death generated 326, 552 views, 361 likes, 133 dislikes and 613 comments.
- CNN footage of Freddie Gray Jr.'s Baltimore arrest garnered 2,287,510 views, 2,267 likes, 631 dislikes and 2,240 comments.
- ABC News' video of Philando Castile's death generated 452,385 views, 1,939 likes, 257 dislikes and 2, 528 comments.

These numbers result from a brief glance at the reach of national media outlets. As large as they are, they do not even include private sharing histories, international viewing, and re-edited versions for various websites and blogs. Of note is the low number of comments and likes/dislikes in comparison to the number of views. If we understand liking/disliking as passive interactions, these differences support the assertion that viral videos are symptomatic of a society of spectacle where images saturate the landscape so much so that it renders audiences passive.

Mediated Representation

Spectacle is created through media convergence: the overlap of media programming, production, and distribution. In the U.S., media content is available on radio, television, computers, tablets, mobile devices and video game consoles. The majority of Americans spend over two-thirds of their day involved in media use and report engaging two or more media simultaneously (Papper, 2016). Through the Internet, visual entertainment and a twenty-four hour news cycle, media convergence helps to create a sense of global human connection. Convergence contributes to a feeling of overall knowledge about subjects, peoples, politics and cultural customs far removed from our everyday lives. Convergence has a different effect depending on

the medium. Film theory provides a fitting example to further explain the impact of convergence.

Theatrical film has long been powerful because of its ability to produce images, movement and sound in a realistic way. Film, whether it is narrative or documentary, influences our cultural understanding by its immediacy and its ability to create the illusion of reality. Hollywood studios produce an average of six hundred films per year (Motion Picture Association 2016). These films circulate globally due to the technologies of media convergence. Films are distributed in theaters around the world, discussed on television news programs, and, critiqued on social media platforms. These mediated representations of everyday life contribute to a feeling of human connection. When a film shows an area of a city that one has visited, an immediate connection to that location is sparked even if the events on the screen are completely fictional. When a location looks different in the film than it is in actuality, one immediately recognizes the false reality. Film is "a contest of representations over what social reality will be perceived as being and indeed what it will be" (Ryan, Kellner, 1988). It is not either/or but circular. Films pull from and also shape social history and collective memory.

Fictive representations of events have been shown to influence our collective memory, even when elements of the event have been modified for better storytelling (Everding, 2009). That fact that an event becomes fictionalized indicates that someone wishes to draw attention to that moment in social history and to make it important, and/or rewrite it. For marginalized populations, fictionalized accounts of historical periods are often the only time their stories appear in history texts since

most history taught in school favors the dominant culture (Stoddard, Marcus 2006). Due to media convergence, these social histories and collective memories saturate the landscape. In a society of spectacle, we emphasize the visual. Debord claims that since

> the spectacle's job is to cause a [Western] world that is no longer directly perceptible to be seen via different specialized mediations, it is inevitable that it should elevate the human sense of sight to the special place once occupied by touch; the most abstract of the senses, and the most easily deceived, sight is naturally the most readily adaptable to present day society's generalized abstraction.

We believe what we see and we develop applications and social media that reinforce visual primacy. Within this framework, media convergence makes media makers out of consumers. Video applications on cellular phones allow children to make fairly high quality home videos. Successful Hollywood films have been captured on two-hundred dollar 4k cameras such as GoPro.[1] Media is viewed on phones, televisions, computers and gaming consoles. As writer Todd Leopold notes,

> the blur of communications has progressed from letters and e-mails to texts, tweets and Instagram pictures. Excerpts from speeches have been modified into clips, then sound bites, then Vines, Snapchat and animated GIFs. Yes, we're adjusting to an image-intensive, brevity-favoring world, a world as close and available as our smartphone. It's a fast-growing, hugely popular world that rewards short attention spans (Leopold 2013).

[1] Hardcore Henry, Ilya Naishuller (dir), 2016. IMDB

I believe media consumption, media convergence and an affinity to visual culture contribute to a society of spectacle where we 1) make what we see, 2) we believe what we see and, 3) we believe what we document with our cellular phones supports *our* specific understanding of injustice.

Mediated representations of Black experiences have been used for both the liberation of Black people and their continued oppression. Representational violence committed against Black people on screen often normalizes the systemic cultural and physical violence Black Americans experience in real life. For example, mass mediated images of roaming young, Black men fueled the persecution of the Central Park Five in the 1990s (Bumiller 2008). Within this paradigm, America's deliberate racial segregation has concrete consequences for Black and white Americans. Segregation ensures that Black Americans experience "heightened exposure to environmental hazards, relegation to under-resourced schools, increased and continued surveillance by law enforcement and eventual death" (Gilliam et.al 2002). Sociologists studying racial proximity contend that, "the persistence of racial segregation means that impersonal influences such as the media are likely to play a significant role in the development of racial attitudes" (Martin et.al 2017). Segregation ensures that the majority of interactions non-Black people have with Black Americans occur through mediated representation. Reliance on mediated representations of Black life opens the gateway to contested definitions of Blackness. Blackness is always in constant conversation with itself, defined not just by what Black people see as authentic and familiar but also, "in stark difference against that which it is not" (Madison 2014). If Blackness is based on representations of

Blackness, when "white-identified subjects perform "black" signifiers- normative or otherwise- the effect is always already entangled in the discourse of otherness" (Johnson 2003). In a society of spectacle where media is all consuming, our primary ways of understanding the world are through representations of that world and the stories we tell to make sense of it. These discourses of otherness create narrative schemas that distort the way Black pain, wounding and death imagery are read.

Uniform Narratives

The videos of violence enacted against Eric Garner, Philando Castile and Freddie Gray Jr. reflect different encounters, but incorporate uniform elements. First, each encounter is between a Black man and law enforcement officials. These videos reflect a legacy of Black American enslavement, legal inequity and repression. This scenario resonates with a specific American history that contributes to their national and international notoriety. The American police force developed out of slave-owners' need to control enslaved Black Americans (Campbell 2013). In the colonial era, southern slave patrols trailed roads and pathways. Under the authority of county governments or militias, these patrols spent their days, "interrogating slaves and whipping those who could not furnish passes or adequately explain their business" (19). By the time of the American Revolution, these patrols transformed to night watches and paramilitary units that later transformed into what we see as the modern police force (29). After the Civil War, several slave patrols transformed into Southern police departments, many with links to the Klu Klux Klan (McAndrew 2017). A contentious history between Black Americans and the police provide context for why these viral videos carry cultural weight.

The uniformity of the narrative is also a product of a media convergence that frequently pairs Blackness with criminality. Even before television and the Internet, Black people in the United States were equated with criminal behavior via media representation. For example, Minstrel-era posters linked Black people to chicken thievery (Taylor, Austen 2012), equating Black bodies with criminal activities. The history of lynching photography illustrates how mediated images suggest proper punishment for alleged Black criminality. Sasha Torres and other scholars of the Civil Rights movement found that in the 1960s, Black American activists such as Martin Luther King Jr., used television news reports that showcased the violence of police against the bodies of peaceful Black protestors to further the gains of the Black civil rights movement. In the aftermath of the protests in Selma in 1965, King is even quoted as saying, "we are here to say to the white men that we no longer will let them use clubs on us in the dark corners, we're going to make them do it in the glaring light of television" (Madrigal 2018). By forcing the viewer to empathize with the peaceful Black body, activists were able to effectively shift the view of Blackness as inherently criminal. But in the 1980s, the conservative Right used television news and fictive narratives to shift the empathetic gaze back to the state. News programs about Black gangs, crack addiction, crack babies, broken families and poverty became paired with television shows like *Brooklyn South* and *Cops*. Sasha Torres points out that in shows about law and order, audiences enter the narrative through the eyes of the police. She suggests that these dramas elevate law and order to produce "disciplined subjects": viewers who may be acculturated by repetition to identify with the police, even when the criminals on the screen look like kin (11). In

our society of spectacle, mediated representations link Blackness to criminality while glorifying law enforcement.

Surveillance Society

Surveillance means to watch over, to observe. Personal data is collected by the state through social security numbers, census data, tax documents and certificates of birth, marriage and death to manage and control segments of the population. The most obvious example of this is the U.S. Census, whose mission is to is "to serve as the leading source of quality data about the nation's people and economy" (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017) to allocate federal resources to states and address specific demographic needs. To remain a valid citizen of the state, it is necessary to submit to data collection and forms of surveillance – from filling out your tax forms to completing census questionnaires. Referring to these activities as examples of a "surveillance society" Michel Foucault suggested these types of measures create disciplined subjects, essentially internalizing the need to be monitored. This process helps maintain social control (Foucault, 1975). More recently surveillance society has been used to refer to the way surveillance has become societally pervasive. Surveillance "function[s], in part, because of the extensive collection, recording, storage, analysis and application of information on individuals and groups in those societies as they go about their lives" (Lyons 2010). A surveillance society speaks not just to the growth of technologies that track, record and monitor our everyday lives, it also speaks to our willingness as a society to be monitored and to monitor one another (7). I believe that a surveillance society works in partnership with a society of

spectacle to influence how we encode mediated representations of Black pain, wounding and death.

The concept of surveillance is an acknowledgment that one figure observes the actions of another and by observing/watching, contributes to the control and management of the figure that is being watched. Social scientists David Troitter and Christian Fuchs developed a theoretical model for social media surveillance. They first suggest that social media collapses Hegel's three tenants of social life (cognition, communication, cooperation) into an integrated sociality. A person posts, people comment, the content is then remixed and reimagined by multiple authors as it is shared. Next, social media allows humans to collapse their social roles in society (father, teacher, artist, activist), blurring the line between what we perceive as public identity and private identity. As a surveillance technology, social media makes visible the convergence of social life and social activities to institutions that strive for social control of the population, such as corporations and the state (Fuchs, Trottier 2015).

Black Surveillance

Disaporic Black bodies serve specific societal functions. If surveillance means to observe or to watch over, then it becomes necessary to see *Black* surveillance as not only about collection of data for social control, but also about the hypervisibility that comes with being Black and being perceived as different. For Black people in the United States, this difference is often interpreted as deviance, making the actions of Black people hypervisibile to those who are not Black. As Harvey Young insists the:

> black body, whether on the auction block, the American plantation, hanged from a light-pole as part of a lynching ritual, attacked by police dogs with the Civil Rights era, or stage as a "criminal body" by contemporary law enforcement and judicial systems, is a body that has been forced into the public spotlight and given a compulsory visibility (12).

Black people have been targets of surveillance technology (various methods of tracking, recording and identifying) since the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. For example, one of the first databases of Black bodies in the U.S. is the Book of Negroes, a historical record of the names and descriptions of 3,000 enslaved Africans who escaped to British lines during the American Revolution. Vagrancy laws and physical branding were all surveillance technologies designed for social control of Black people. These laws limited the movements of Black people by making them hypervisible in any space that was not the plantation. Simone Browne proposes that under surveillance, Black people's "deviance" has always been used as a way to "mask the violence of the slave trader by displacing the violence of slavery onto the African" (96). This becomes further evident when one considers the contemporary surveillance of impoverished Black people in the U.S.

State concerns about the unruly and violent poor contribute to an over-surveillance of poor Black communities. From child-welfare systems to monitoring programs for domestic-abuse offenders, large swaths of data are routinely gathered by the state. To receive welfare benefits, low-income Black Americans have little recourse but to submit to invasive monitoring of their private lives. This practice is widely supported by the American public and internalized as the norm by the

recipients themselves (Gustafson 2011). Surveillance of those receiving state benefits continues to expand as surveillance technologies deepen. For example, since 2009, seven states in the U.S. have enacted mandatory drug testing of welfare recipients. Out of seven states reporting data on welfare drug testing, only one had a usage rate of above 1% (Covert, Israel 2015). Often, data from excessive monitoring of the impoverished Americans is fed back into police systems that support a cycle of surveillance and punishment (Waddell 2016).

On April 12, 2015, officers in the Baltimore City Police Department arrested Freddie Gray, Jr., a 25-year old Black man who grew up and lived in West Baltimore. Gray suffered injuries to his neck and spine while being transported in a police vehicle. Gray's arrest was caught on video by Kevin Moore and garnered 2,287,510 views on CNN alone. Peaceful protesting began April 18, 2015 in front of the Western district police department. Freddie Gray, Jr. died April 19, 2015 and two days of rioting occurred, followed by what is referred to as the Baltimore Uprising, peaceful demonstrations that called attention to Baltimore's history of racialized inequality. In August 2016, it was revealed that the Baltimore City Police Department began conducting "wide-area surveillance" of Baltimore City residents in the wake of protests. This system of aerial surveillance in a predominantly Black city used megapixel cameras on a Cessna aircraft that circled the city for up to 10 hours at a time, "photographing a 30-square-mile area and giving police the ability to retroactively track any vehicle or pedestrian within that area" (Stanley 2016). The data from these activities were fed to the FBI, continuing an ongoing American legacy of monitoring Black social justice movement activities (Joseph 2015). These

surveillance activities were conducted in secret without the consent of the Baltimore public.

Covert state surveillance activities raise concern about privacy rights as well as the reach of government agencies to interfere with the lives of protestors and activists fighting for equity in Black communities. After the 9/11 terror events, Closed-Circuit Television (CCTV) has become a permanent fixture in urban spaces. According to the ACLU, CCTV has "(a) the to potential change the core experience of going out in public in America because of its chilling effect on citizens, (b) carries very real dangers of abuse and 'mission creep', and (c) would not significantly protect us against terrorism. Given that, its benefits - preventing at most a few street crimes, and probably none - are disproportionately small" (ACLU 2017). For Black people in the U.S., a society of surveillance means the combination of historical tracking of Black bodies and their movements during and post-slavery. It means the surveillance of poor communities seeking legal benefits from the state, the deployment of new technologies to monitor Black social movements, and the ongoing tracking of Black people touched by the carceral system. A society of Black surveillance also means the spread of CCTV and video surveillance of Black neighborhoods. Because of the overt saturation of this authoritarian technology, the normal, everyday actions of Black citizens are seen as deviant, impacting how Black people perform their daily lives (Ragsdale 2000). Surveillance enforces a social and moral order on Black bodies through both an expectation of surveillance and an inability to control what is done with the data that is collected.

Viral Black Pain

A component of social media surveillance that directly contributes to the spread of viral images of black pain, wounding and death is impression management. A society of surveillance conditions people to the fact that they are being surveilled while urging people to surveil themselves and those around them. Social media surveillance drives users to habitually "make parts of their profiles and content visible to the public and to laterally observe what others are doing and posting" (Marx 1988). To make themselves relevant, social media users "discipline themselves…by divulging as much as possible about their lives and thoughts" (Gilliom, Monihan 2013). Impression management is a process of cultivating an idealized performance of self that is continuously tweaked to meet the expectations of the audience. A key component of impression management is front-stage and back-stage identities. The front stage involves a rehearsed, carefully crafted manipulation of the audience by the actor, while the backstage allows the actor to practice techniques of impression management while being their "authentic" self (Goffman 1959). The "authentic" self is an individual's subjective sense of who they are, what they are and what they believe about themselves, as well as the individual's subjective emotional experience of being true or untrue to those aspects. Determining one's "authentic" self is an ongoing self-reflective and emotional process. In order to engage in meaningful interpersonal interactions, social media users strive to monitor and control how they present themselves in order to maximize the positivity of others' perceptions. According to sociologist,

> Social networking sites allow users to create identities for themselves that emphasize those qualities, which are either desirable or noteworthy, in some cases allowing people to develop entirely new personas that depict them favorably. To this end, Facebook users who are seeking optimal levels of self-portrayal may rationally engage in online practices that create the epitome of idealized self-presentation (Tashman 2016).

Online impression management hinges on staying relevant to your audience and continually willing to participate in image cultivation. Viral videos can be thought of as carriers of emotional contagion as they indicate the mood of the sharer. Viral videos "can signal to others when they are forwarded how they should feel or what may be acceptable to share within certain contexts or groups" (D'costa 2016). When people consume online content, such as viral videos of black pain, wounding and death, they take on the emotional state of that content – sadness, rage, disgust, intrigue and outrage. By sharing viral videos, participants increase their connections to others in an online world.

Our society of spectacle and surveillance creates the conditions by which violent images of black pain, wounding, and death go viral. The primacy we place on the visual is again a factor. Media convergence, in which media consumers are also media makers, creates a false global connection whereby mediated representations become stand-ins for lived experiences, even the experiences of violence. The second factor is the various modes of surveillance we live under. The cyclical nature of being surveilled and surveilling one another on social media intensifies the viral nature of the images. This is compounded by racialized surveillance, which ensures

Black Americans have very little control over mediated representations of their lives and their deaths. Plainly speaking, in a society of spectacle and surveillance we privilege visual evidence, we care about what others think, we think we know because we see, and we share because we want to feel connected.

Citizen Witnesses As Media Makers

Spectacle is a powerful technology for erasing victim status from those affected by unconscionable acts. For some, the process of watching and sharing viral videos turns Black bodies into a de-individuated mass. Even the most "truthful" accounts of injustice against Black people are repeatedly distorted by histories of racist reading practices and endless media spectacle. This complicates reliance on dashboard cameras, police body cameras and Facebook live feeds as a means to garner justice. Still, citizen witnesses are compelled to document.

The viral videos of Eric Garner, Philando Castile, Freddie Gray Jr., Sandra Bland, Marlene Pinnock, Walter Scott, Alton Sterlin and the McKinney Texas Pool Party reflect the same maker and medium– a citizen witness with a cellular phone. Stuart Allan defines citizen witnesses as people who, "find themselves at the scene of an event by chance and spontaneously record, photograph and write about it, posting directly to the public via social media" (Allan 2013). He argues that, as technology makes amateur newsgathering easier, it has become a more integral and accepted part of newsgathering. Citizens who capture events on their phones often do not see themselves as journalists but as people who have the presence of mind to capture the events. These citizens may or may not have the audience in mind during capture. For news organizations, it is faster and cheaper to monitor and process citizen material

than to actually employ their own network of journalists to gather news independently. Many news organizations, especially print newspapers, have trimmed their staff in recent years (Grieco 2018). Citizen witness footage is inexpensive and readily available. To flesh out their regular programming, news sources regularly mine social media sites and online platforms for stories that are trending. According to the Pew Research Center:

> 12% of social media users have posted their own videos of news events on social networking sites. Further, 11% of online news consumers have submitted their own content (including videos, photos, articles or opinion pieces) to news organizations or blogs…This translates to 7% of U.S. adults posting their own news videos to social media and 7% submitting content to news sites (Olmstead et.al 2014).

The ready use of citizen witness material reflects a society of spectacle and surveillance where everyone is a media maker and corporations are willing to mine citizen media to further their profits. News organizations are more willing to take footage that has some aesthetic quality; however, they will edit, polish and trim lower quality citizen footage before posting it on the air (Pew Research Center 2012).

Discussing television depictions of African Americans over the years, Sasha Torres suggests that American television has always had "a certain documentary or ethnographic impulse, an imperative to "authenticity" in depictions of African Americans"(Torres 2003). Television programming such as *Cops* have certainly helped fuel this quest for live, realistic depictions of Black monstrosity as has footage of mass protests against racist injustice such as those in Baltimore following the death

of Freddie Gray Jr. Liveness in media studies refers to both the temporal nature i.e. experiencing something as it is happening and the spatial structure i.e. being in the location where something is happening. Underlying the notion of liveness is that some mediums lend themselves more to liveness than others. Television news represents liveness while a narrative film or documentary does not. However, this a false differential as people discuss "watching something live" when they actually mean "watching as it is being filmed". Nothing is "live" unless you are there to witness it as it is occurring. I believe this approach to capturing Black lives in media reflects a surveillance impulse to document predators. This impulse is in conversation with what Nicole Fleetwood describes as racial iconicity, the tendency for Black Americans to be both venerated and degraded in visual production. In visual media, Black Americans represent both the trauma of American history while also symbolizing evidence of America's liberal democracy. Viral videos represent a unique moment in American visual history that blends the surveillance, liveness and racial iconicity to create a new way of consuming Black pain, wounding and death imagery.

Cellular phone footage of Black people's encounters with the police have become increasingly more common in the last fifteen years as cellular phones with video taking and sharing capabilities have become more readily accessible to wider numbers of the US population. Most Americans born since the 1950s have been exposed to digital media (Lewis, Luciana 2004). The aesthetic rules of cinema simply build upon the aesthetic guidelines of still photography that owes its principles to classical visual art. Often citizen media makers know the rules even if they have

not formally been educated in filmmaking or photography. In a society that cherishes visual primacy, we all know what looks and sounds good. Framed by the notions of spectacle and surveillance, I will address two questions in the remainder of this chapter: 1) what were the citizen witnesses attempting to do? and 2) what was their aesthetic approach to capturing their truth? I've turned to a process of embodied schema analysis to understand the choices of citizen witnesses as they capture images of Black pain, wounding and death.

Embodied Image Schema Analysis and Viral Videos

As discussed in Chapter 1, human beings use image schemas to make sense of the world around them. Embodied image schema theory takes into consideration the physical and cognitive dimensions of aesthetic experience. Of use in this chapter are the four specific image schemas used in analysis of moving images: (1) the *container*- what is inside, outside and on the border of the visual field; (2) *Source-Path-Goal*- camera movement as a vehicle to conceptualize time (duration, frequency, order);(3) *center-periphery*- the body as center of the frame; and (4) *balance* – visual symmetry that creates a pleasant aesthetic experience even if the content is jarring. Filmmakers often rely on image schemas to make abstract concepts meaningful to the viewer. This "requires the viewer to relate to the embodied aspects of the image schemas on screen—whether this occurs consciously or not" (Coegnarts, Kravanja 2012). The body then becomes a medium for the transfer of abstract meanings. Mirror neurons illustrate a deep connection between viewing and experiencing that shed light on moving images as a mechanism for meaning transfer. This perhaps accounts for the emotional contagion apparent in response to viral videos. Because of mirror neurons

"when we see another person performing an action, we are mentally performing the same action" (5). Embodied image schema theory sees experience as made up of emotional, social, linguistic and historical dimensions that provide meaning to visual texts.

I chose to analyze videos found on YouTube since YouTube is the leading video-web sharing platform. YouTube allows users to upload, view, rate, share, add to favorites, report, comment on videos, and subscribe to other users (youtube.com). Owned as a subsidiary of Google, YouTube videos easily link to other social media platforms to enable videos to go viral. To be able to fully immerse myself in the content without additional visual noise, I chose to use a combination of video sources from traditional news sites such as CBS and the New York Times as well as sites such as HLN that that curate news stories from corporate sites. In searching out specific viral videos, I had no idea how hard it would be to find unedited footage on the Internet. Footage that deems itself unedited uses advertising and marketing language such as "raw", "uncut", "full" to describe what viewers may encounter when they click to watch. For example, The Attorney Depot describes footage from the arrest of Freddie Gray Jr. as *Raw Video: Freddie Gray Arrested by Baltimore Police!* (See

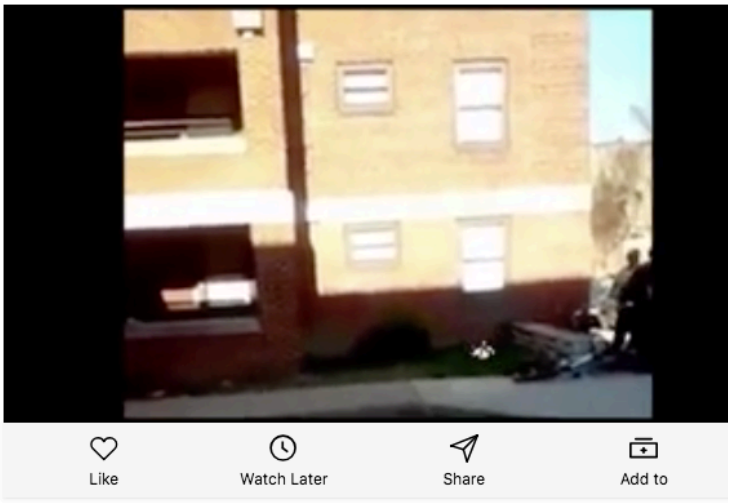

Figure 1

Figure 1). In advertising, while visual content is primary, language is used to direct emotional response. The emotional connection is what makes people remember the product.

The emotive power of "raw" makes the claim that viewers will see "objective" truth unfiltered by journalistic editing. Under this line of rationale, by viewing "raw", unedited footage, viewers will also feel the live-ness of the encounter. The visual will substitute for being on the scene. Olmstead et.al, found that news organizations were much more likely to include edited news stories than raw footage without narration, but the claim of pure footage was a part of the news stories' marketing (3). Just because the footage is full and uncut does not mean it is free from packaging. Additionally, the videos do not turn off the comments section, allowing viewers to speculate, commiserate and dismiss the content. This reflects the spectacle nature of viral videos where multiple voices contribute to the discourse, which then keeps the visual product relevant.

Over the course of a week, I conducted a thick reading of the source material by watching each video a total of twenty times. Notes on the videos were maintained in a spreadsheet with sections for each of the four embodied image schema categories. The spreadsheet also contained a space for my reflexive process as well as the descriptors of each of the videos, likes, shares and comments (See Appendix A).

Container Analysis

A common credo in filmmaking is that viewers are more forgiving of visual gaffs than they are of audio mistakes. A microphone pole in the shot will be forgiven

if there is significant space between the center periphery and the top of the frame but dialogue that is not synced with the character's lips will pull audiences out of the story, forcing them to acknowledge that what they are watching is not real. Container analysis of the viral videos reveal the diegetic or naturally occurring sound within the viral videos play a significant role in either 1) shaping the narrative of the event, 2) positioning these incidents as moments of spectacular violence or 3) amplifying the voices of the victims.

In the video of Eric Garner's death, Ramsey Orta's live commentary is heard throughout. As the video begins, it is simply cellular phone footage of Eric Garner and Police officers, as their argument gathers in intensity and it is easy to recognize the mounting anger, fear and frustration in Garner's and the officer's voices. At 2 minutes 23 seconds, Ramsey Orta begins providing his own voice over narration to the events. At times, the ongoing commentary from Orta and an un-identified witness begins to trump what is happening in the visual field as they tell the story of the altercation leading up to the events. At 5 minutes, officers descend upon Eric Garner, who immediately begins to declare, *"I can't breathe"*. Within 3 seconds an officer attempts to block Orta from filming by placing his body in the center frame. At that point, Orta begins proclaiming, *"All he was trying to do was break up a fight."* Officers continue pushing the crowd away and physically touching Orta to make him move away from the scene. At various points he and an unseen bystander repeatedly declare, *"They mad cause I got them on video."* At 8 minutes and 38 seconds, officers wave their hand across the frame of the camera. In response Orta states, *"They fucking up my video."* At 9 minutes and 43 seconds, Orta declares, *"We*

recording for safety purposes." A minute later Orta declares*, "He was sitting there, a fight broke out and he broke it up. Then they got out the car and started in on him."* 1 minute later he states*, "Cause he broke up a fight. Are you serious? Everybody was here to see the shit*." At ten minutes an officer declares*, "It had nothing to do with the fight."* Orta responds repeatedly*, "Don't lie now. Don't lie now. I was here watching the whole shit...They always fucking with niggers… I know everything. I got the whole thing on camera boy. It's a wrap."*

Ramsey Orta's audio records Garner's now iconic last words, "I can't breathe." Like the image of Trayvon Martin in his hoodie, Garner's last words captured the imagination of activists everywhere, spurring memes, online song challenges and protest chants. I noticed myself becoming tearful upon hearing the words from Garner's mouth but I did not feel my own mortality lurking over my shoulder. I continued breathing and watching and in noting the difference, realized my tears were not just for Garner but also for Black people in general. I realized I had been anticipating the moment those words would be heard and that I was empathizing more with what his death represented than what he was literally experiencing as his life was crushed out of him. I believe this difference has to do with iconic status associated with the phrase, "I can't breath". In her discussion of the iconography associated with Trayvon Martin and his hoodie, Nicole Fleetwood suggests that, "when we can isolate the image and hone in on a specific instantiation, then the emotional floodgates and the historical baggage pour out with all its weight onto that boy" (31). For me, Eric Garner's "I can't breath" operates much like Trayvon's hoodie. Because it has been taken up as a form of protest and as a link to

collective Black trauma, its very real connection to the husband and father who was Eric Garner was obscured.

Audio Shapes the Narrative

It is Orta's commentary that shaped the listening experience for me. Out of the eight videos analyzed, Ramsey Orta's footage is the only one that includes what can be considered a running voice-over narrative. Since I already knew the outcome of the video (Eric Garner's death), I found myself focused less on Garner and more on Orta's distress. I found myself responding to the emotions in his voice. As his agitation increased, I felt my own agitation increase. I noticed my leg shaking restlessly when Orta says, *"All he was trying to do was break up a fight"*. At times when Orta confronts the police officers, I too became incensed and found myself cursing the police aloud. His running voice-over guides me through the events and directs my focus and my agitation. His voice over is also filled with declarative statements that frame the encounter within a legacy of violent, racialized interactions between people of color and law enforcement. This furthers my feelings of kinship with both him and Eric Garner.

Ramsey Orta's narration illustrates knowledge of several factors that fit into a spectacle and surveillance culture. By capturing the events on his cellular phone, Orta shows an awareness of the power of visual media to put pressure on institutions as well as an understanding of the way media narratives sway public opinion. He is also aware of the need to describe repeatedly the facts of what he witnessed to lend context to the visual. This demonstrates some knowledge about the faultiness of visual testimony to garner justice for Black people in the U.S. His commentary also

demonstrates an understanding that people will and do comport themselves differently when under camera surveillance. By their efforts to obscure Orta's video, the officers involved seem to know this as well.

Audio Shapes the Spectacular

Other citizen witness responses can be considered merely reactions to what Robert Nixon calls spectacular violence, violence that is "immediate and explosive, as erupting into instant, concentrated visibility" (Nixon 2011). The shots heard in the videos of Alton Sterling and Walter Scott's deaths are startling in their speed and intensity. In the Walter Scott video, police officer Michael Slager fired eight gunshots in rapid succession at unarmed Scott. Officers Howie Lake III and Blane Salamoni shot Alton Sterling three times without pause while pinning him beneath the front end of a parked car. The rapid fire of the gunshots contributes to a sense that the officers viewed these unarmed citizens as immediate, extreme threats who required immediate, extremely violent responses. There are no pauses to consider alternatives. The citizen witness capturing Marlene Pinnock's assault by a highway patrolman on the side of the road simply repeats, *"Oh shit"* in surprise as he captures the incident. Similarly, the citizen witness capturing Walter Scott's murder repeats the same obscenity in surprise; adding *"Fucking abuse"* before his sounds of disbelief are overpowered by the sound of sirens approaching and, incongruously, a text message notification. Taken together, the sounds of everyday life and citizen reactions combine with sudden sound of gunshots and sirens create an audio landscape that is spectacular in its violence.

Audio as Amplification

Audio suggests many citizen witnesses are trying to augment the voices of the victims. While witnessing Freddie Gray Jr.'s arrest, Michelle Gross screams, *"Look at the boy leg! That boy leg look broke. His leg broke and ya'll dragging him like that!"* The declaration is made over the sounds of Freddie Gray's screams of pain as he is being placed in the police wagon. Similar attempts to amplify the victim's voice can be heard in the Facebook live stream of Philando Castile's murder by Officer Jeronimo Yanez. Audio is perhaps the most prominent aspect of this video. Throughout the video one can hear Castile groaning in pain. Diamond Reynolds remains calm and matter of fact as she addresses Yanez, telling him, "*He is licensed to carry. He was trying to get his wallet and ID out of his pocket and he wanted to let the officer know that he had a firearm and was reaching for his wallet."* Reynolds answers the officer with a measured voice and explains what is happening moment by moment, alternating between addressing her Facebook audience while answering the officer's questions. As Yanez becomes increasing agitated, screaming, *"Ma'am, keep your hands where they are!"* Reynolds remains composed, stating*, "I will sir, no worries"*. She then addresses the audience with, *"He just shot his (Castille's) arm off."* While she is talking, Officer Yanez begins screaming*, "I told him not to reach for it. I told him to get his hand open."* Reynolds responds*, "You told him to get his ID sir and his driver's license."* At 1 minute and 32 seconds, Diamond Reynolds realizes her boyfriend has been killed, stating, *"Oh my God, please don't tell me he's dead. Please don't tell me my boyfriend just went like that."* As a secondary witness to Philando Castile's murder myself, that sentiment rings true.

Complicating Liveness

Embodied image schema theory is about recognizing the way moving images imprint on the psyche. Using this approach to understand the audio landscape of viral videos revealed the realness of these encounters in a way that pushes against liveness as a marker of temporal and spatial authenticity. The cellular phone is an intimate device, much more physically attached to the body of the citizen witness than a traditional camera. The citizen witness holds it in their hands and as they are physically and mentally experiencing the encounter, their cellular phone image shifts in response. As a secondary witness, I felt intimately connected to the citizen witness. In each video I was acutely aware of the breathing of the witness, the moments where his or her breath hitched and reacted. This intimate twining made the sound of the gunshots distinct from my understanding of a gun's report, which I know primarily through my work as a video maker and consumer of dark media imagery. Even when mediated by news organizations, these citizen witness videos seem more real. The tragically surprised sounds of the victims, as well as their assailants, combined with the immediate and rapid distribution across media platforms supports Nixon's definition of spectacular violence, an immediate and explosive visibility. This begins to shed light on why these videos become viral. Their intimacy, even in just the auditory landscape, contributes to the feeling of connection central to a society of spectacle and surveillance.

Source-Path-Goal Analysis

While container analysis focuses primarily on what lies within and outside the borders of the frame, source-path-goal viewing calls attention to camera movement along the x and y axis (See Figure 2). In traditional film, we ascribe specific meaning to the axis of the frame (Roberts-Breslin 2018). The x-axis describes the horizontal portions of the frame. When cameras move from left to right across the screen, audiences psychologically feel as if the characters are moving in a positive direction. When a character or action comes into view from the right side of the frame, audiences associate that character or thing as villainous. The same filmic logic is applied to the Y-axis, i.e., the vertical portion of the frame. When objects move up the Y-axis, viewers associate it with progress, while movement down the Y-axis connotes danger or actions spiraling out of control. The z portion of the frame refers to the foreground, mid-ground and background of the frame. Analysis of camera movement in these viral videos reveals 1) there is a conflict between citizen witnesses' perceptions of their proximity to danger and their desire to capture clear and complete footage; 2) citizen witnesses are often active participants in the encounters, influencing the actions of other participants and 3) camera movement works in concert with audio to complicate the liveness of the footage.

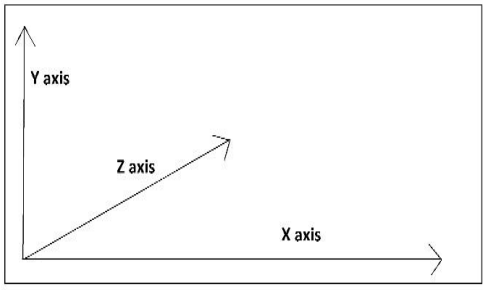

Figure 2

Camera Movement and Danger

While there is sense that the sounds in the videos are just a natural extension of the witnesses' viewing experience, what lies within and on the borders of the frame differs depending on citizen witnesses' approaches to video capture. Citizen witnesses must navigate being in close proximity to the incident while obeying police authority. The cellular phone footage of Corporal Eric Casebolt's interference in the pool party in McKinney, Texas, was captured by a white, 15-year old boy named, Brandon Brooks. In an interview on *Fox 4 News*, Brooks described Casebolt's aggression towards the Black teenagers and detailed how he was not treated aggressively, although he too was a partygoer. He states, "I was one of the few Caucasians at the party which makes me think it [Casebolt's aggression] was racial" (Fox 4News). Brooks is able to maintain a fairly steady, roaming eye on activities. He quietly follows other students as they leave the premises, panning left to right. He remains several feet away from Casebolt as he talks to a group of young women until Casebolt runs after Dajerria Becton and drags her to the ground. At that moment, still surrounded by officers and spectators, Brooks walks very close to the altercation and steadily films. Within the frame and on the borders, people walk by his lens, giving the sense that he is not being seen as a participant in the party or as a threat. His relative invisibility as a videographer seems to support his assertion that he was spared from racialized violence due to his whiteness.

Many citizen witnesses choose to stay a distance away from their subject matter. Kevin Moore, a Black male resident of the Gilmore Homes where Freddie

Gray lived, captured Gray's arrest from the middle of the street. Though he follows the police van from one block to the next, he still remains a distance away, suggesting a desire to remain unnoticed by the police. This desire makes for shaky, grainy frames, some of the angles of capture are canted, and witnesses walk into the border of the video until they realize Moore is taping the incident. Because of the distance between the camera and Gray, it is hard to understand the details of the arrest. I recognized while watching that I was imposing professional standards on the video footage. During analyzes of this footage, I found myself frustrated that the quality of the video was not clearer. When I thought about my desire to see more, I realized that seeing more would necessitate Moore placing himself in closer proximity to danger.

This conflict between proximity to danger and desire to capture overlays the citizen witness footage of Sandra Bland's arrest. The citizen witness stays unmoving, a safe distance from the scene. The video begins with a wide shot with trees aligning the right of the frame and cars (Bland's and the Texas Trooper Brian Encinia) bordering the left. The citizen witness zooms in on Bland as she lies on the ground and the two police officers as they attempt to subdue her. At 0.09 seconds the citizen witness zooms to a medium wide shot to capture a better view. At 0.29 minutes, Officer Encinia walks towards the witness and says, *"You need to leave"*. Within seconds of being noticed by Officer Encinia, the citizen witness lowers the camera to the ground and a swath of the witnesses' clothing fills the frame. During this motion, the witness responds, *"I can't hear you"*. Officer Encinia does not respond, instead he walks to his police car. As this happens, the witness then brings the camera back

up to capture Officer Encinia with a medium wide shot at the car. The witness then says, *"I am on private property."* With that confrontational statement, the witness does a 360 degree shot movement, landing on a white, wooden church behind him. He asks, *"I'm trespassing?"* When it is clear that Officer Encinia will no longer engage him, he returns to the medium wide shot of Bland protesting as she is being dragged towards the police car. As the cops and Bland come closer to the witness, the camera lowers, capturing participants from the waist down. This camera movement suggests the videographer is attempting to shrink from the Officers' gaze. Bland interrupts this attempt by addressing the citizen witness directly. She says, *"Thank you for recording. Thank you. For a traffic signal. Slammed my head into a ground and everything."* At being addressed directly, the camera is then lowered, capturing only the sidewalk. Like Diamond Reynolds' encounter with Officer Yanez, and Ramsey Orta's conversations with various police at the scene of Eric Garner's death, the anonymous citizen witness for Sandra Bland becomes a part of the confrontation. His actions shape and influence aspects of the encounter he is recording. Camera movement, combined with the citizen witnesses' commentary suggests the fine line witnesses walk when attempting to capture the truth.

Camera Movement and Emotion

Citizen witnesses' surprise, anger and frustration can all be gleamed by analyzing camera movement. When shots are fired into Alton Sterling, Abdullah Maflahi jerks the camera up the y-axis in surprise. Viewing Maflahi's reaction, I feel that same sense of dread and surprise because of Maflahai's bodily movement skews the frame physically and psychologically. Additionally, when the police officer tells

Ramsey Orta to move out of the way, the camera pans from the left to the right as he attempts to secure footage around the cops who are obstructing his visual field. The jerkiness of the camera motion tells his frustration at the obstruction. Camera movement during Walter Scott's murder pans and tilts as the citizen witness tries to secure the best shot. He captures trees, sidewalks and different horizontal/vertical motions. The movements are fast and stilted, suggesting his frustration at having to be so far away from the action. Diamond Reynolds pans from her self to the driver's seat where Philando Castille is dying in a continuous back and forth motion, suggesting she is in a panic. These physical motions contradict the measured and calm way she continues to address Yanez as the officer barks orders at her while pointing a gun in her face.

C*enter-Periphery Analysis*

Center-periphery analysis suggests that a "perceived object gains intensity as it approaches the center"(Coegnarts, Kravanja 2012). When objects of interest are in the center of the frame, the audience not only sees the object as significant to the narrative, it also feels a more intimate and interactive relationship with the object. My analysis of the center periphery of viral videos supports the assertion that center framing elicits a feeling of intimacy between the viewer and what is on the screen. It also revealed that the distance between the camera's lens and the event changes the nature of that intimacy.

Intimacy and Immersion

In cinema studies, spatial immersion "occurs in response to a setting or space, in which a user becomes absorbed" (McRoberts 2018). Although the videos engaged

in this dissertation are not cinematic, the film language of spatial immersion helps describe the experience of focusing on the center framing. The enclosed nature of the frame as well as the center positioning creates a feeling of intimacy. For example, Diamond Reynolds holds the center periphery throughout the Facebook live stream of Philando Castile's murder. At various points, Philando Castile and Officer Yanez take the center but for the majority of the video, Diamond Reynolds' body is positioned in the foreground of frame, while Castile fills the middle ground and Yanez remains tightly framed in the background. They are in half shadow, enclosed in the car, creating a frame within a frame effect. The compressed foreground, middle ground and background creates a claustrophobic and dangerous viewing experience for me as a viewer, especially with Yanez's gun pointing directly at Reynolds as Castille slowly bleeds to death beside her. When Reynolds chooses to focus on Yanez, the gun and the obscured bottom half of the officer's face fill the center periphery. This makes it feel as if the gun is pointed not only at Reynolds, the citizen witness, but also at me, the video viewer. It is an unsettling and intimate experience to have a gun pointed directly at my face.

Intimate Surveillance

Center periphery analysis also reveals that spatial distance between the camera's lens and the event transforms ones' feeling of intimacy. In the McKinney pool party footage, though Eric Casebolt and Dajerria Becton fill the center of the frame, the camera is so distant from the interaction that the video feels more like an intimate surveillance. In public health fields, intimate surveillance refers to private surveillance of interpersonal connections such as dating, mating and parental

monitoring through apps and technology, like "nanny cams". However, I believe intimate surveillance can also be ascribed to the surveillance associated with pain, wounding and death videos, which are public. The citizen witness and ultimately the video viewer who are intimately engaged in watching a trauma unfold are not invited to interrupt it. The same effect of intimate surveillance is felt in the footage of Marlene Pinnock's assault on the side of the highway. As the citizen witness attempts to drive and hold the cellular phone steady, the car effectively distances the camera from the interaction. The officer and Pinnock are centered but the immersive effect is diluted. This in no way detracts from the violence of the encounter, however it does contribute to a feeling of intimate surveillance rather than an immersive engagement with the visual text.

Balance Analysis

Balance analysis posits that visual symmetry creates a pleasant aesthetic. My analysis found this assertion to be accurate despite the jarring content. Out of the eight videos under investigation, the footage of Sandra Bland's arrest offers the best example of this concept. As mentioned in the source-path-goal analysis, the video begins with a wide shot with trees aligning with the right of the frame and cars (Bland's and Encina's) bordering the left. This simple composition creates a balanced rectangular frame that is made all the more pleasant by the wide, green tree canopy under which Bland is being restrained. The clean and quiet residential neighborhood contributes to the aesthetically pleasing quality of the image. If not for the arrest, this sunny summer day would be considered picturesque. By maintaining a safe distance from the action, the citizen witness is forced to frame the encounter

symmetrically, placing the bodily altercation in the lower third of the frame, a composition referred to as the "rule of thirds" (Roberts-Breslin 2018). The rule of thirds states than an image is most pleasing when its subjects or regions are composed along imaginary lines, which divide the image into thirds — both vertically and horizontally. This framing creates a sense of balance without making the image appear static (See Figure 3). It also creates a sense of complexity without appearing too hectic. The combination of a balanced frame, warm sunlight and vibrant tree canopy creates a pleasant canvas with dire unpleasantness at its center. This balanced composition renders the actual assault and arrest that much more jarring. Compounded with my knowledge of the end result of Bland's arrest, this framing places a fine point on the spectacular violence being visited upon Black Americans at the hands of the state in this contemporary moment.

Figure 3

Conclusion

I chose to use embodied image schema as a method to determine what citizen witnesses are attempting to make viewers feel when watching their footage and to understand their aesthetic approach to witnessing. The cellular phone camera does not work like a camera wielded by a cinematographer. Viral video footage is not designed

be seen in a darkened theatre in front of a mass audience. Viral videos are watched on large and small screens. They are viewed while in transit and while watching the news on television or on a computer, Kindle, or I-pad. Unlike a film camera or even a CCTV camera, the cellular phone is intimately attached to the body of the citizen witness. Through embodied image schema viewing, the citizen witness' powerlessness, apprehension, shock and fear are transferred to the viral video viewer. This dissertation project cannot gauge whether or not this is the direct intention of the citizen witness, however, what can be garnered from this process of viewing is the significance of interruption.

Citizen witnesses are attempting to interrupt what they see as an inevitable conclusion. Ramsey Orta's running commentary is an attempt to interrupt the narrative he believes is about to be spun regarding Eric Garner's culpability in his own murder. Brandon Brooks' video of Eric Casebolt's actions is an attempt to interrupt a potential cycle of racialized violence against his peers. Citizen witnesses commit interruption by their very presence at the scene of these encounters. The fact that they are interruptions is obvious by the reaction of law enforcement officials who work hard to control the citizen witnesses. This is evidenced in the interaction between Diamond Reynolds and Officer Yanez as he attempts to explain why he shot Philando Castile. Reynolds counters his attempt to spin the narrative, alternating between the officer and her Facebook live audience. As she continues to interrupt the narrative spin, Yanez becomes increasingly agitated, his voice becomes more strident, and his demands more aggressive. Reynolds' Facebook live stream interrupts Yanez' domination of her actions and the narrative.

This embodied image schema analysis suggests that citizen witnessing is more than witnessing, it is a politic of interruption. The term interruption is used in the sense of any event, whether external or internal to the individual, prevents completion of some action, thought sequences, or plan (Mandler 1982). This leads me to wonder if the practice of embodied image schema could be used to interrupt media desensitization (Khrae, Moller, Huesmann, et.al 2011). Desensitization to media violence occurs regularly in a society of spectacle and surveillance. The pained Black body is often on the receiving of this treatment. The rampant sharing of narratives and images of Black pain is normalized in a cycle of spectacularized surveillance. Despite watching each of the viral videos twenty times, never once did I feel a sense of detachment or distance from what was happening on the screen. Embodied image schema forced me to see, not as an attempt to determine forensic truth, but as an approach to properly bear witness to the tragedies unfolding on my screen. Bearing witness is a term that, when used in psychology, refers to sharing our experiences with others, most notably in the communication of traumatic experiences (Spielberger 2004). In the Black church, to "be" witnessing means to be in a constant state of truth telling, "to give one's testimony, to attest to having seen or having been in the presence of something" (Fletcher-Baker 2009). Those who listen to trauma narratives share the witness' burden and are considered proxy trauma survivors (Caruth 2014). Embodied image schema analysis reveals citizen witnesses are not survivors by proxy but survivors themselves. They are physically and emotionally engaged in the events they are capturing. If we position the citizen witnesses as trauma survivors, embodied image schema then turns viral video watchers into the proxy survivors,

collapsing the distance so easily created through mediated representations. We, the viral video watchers, are the ones that "be" witnessing.

"It's a wrap" is a term used in filmmaking to indicate the end of the production day. Ramsey Orta's use of filmmaking terminology highlights the intimate connection between viral video creation and our society of spectacle. This realization has many implications. First, the fact that these citizen witnesses immediately turned to their camera phones supports the assertion that in a society of spectacle and surveillance, many citizens are media makers. Secondly, embodied image schema analysis suggests citizen witnesses consider aesthetics despite the tragedies they are capturing, and the potential threats to their safety. For example, during Alton Sterling's murder, Abdullah Maflahi's attempts to move his camera closer to the site and breathes heavily in frustration when he is unable to secure a clear view. Additionally, the citizen witness to Walter Scott's murder turns the camera vertically and then horizontally in an attempt to secure an aesthetically balanced shot. He does this while remaining safely behind a fence so as not to call attention to himself. Footage being captured by citizens is aesthetically suitable enough that news outlets use them, ensuring that regardless of the outcome of the tragedy, as long as citizens have a phone, Black pain, wounding and death imagery will circulate.

Chapter 3: Group Pain is Not Group Think

Introduction

In 1958 in North Carolina, two Black children, James Hanover Thompson and his friend David Simpson —were accused of kissing a young White girl. James, age 9 and David, age 7, were charged with molestation. They were arrested, and sentenced to reform school until they were 21. In an interview on NPR's Storycorps, James Thompson describes how the two young boys were taken into the basement of the police station and severely beaten. The police made sure to avoid hitting them on the face so the abuse would go unnoticed. This arrests and subsequent trauma of this incident, known as "The Kissing Case", has followed their families for over sixty years.

Sitting across from me, on a quiet mid-day afternoon in Baltimore, the niece of James Hanover Thompson, a 35 year old, Black lesbian singer/songwriter casually mentioned that she grew up hearing stories about "Uncle Hanover". This story came out in the conversation when I asked her if she believed Black people have a collective identity and if so, does the notion of identity activation fit her understanding of her Black identity. Identity activations are continuous external stimuli that make members of a collective see themselves as a group. They are a key component in collective identity formation, i.e., a perception of a shared status or relation. Social psychologists Timothy Owens writes, "collective identity is not only derived from the process of interaction, but from the repeated identity activations a group undergoes as it negotiates its self-identification" (Owens 2003). In wrestling

with this definition of collective identity, James Hanover's niece immediately harkens back to "The Kissing Case." The singer revealed that her mother suffers from bi-polar disorder and was six when James Hanover was arrested. The musician says, "the Klan rolled up on my grandmother's house, held a gun to my grandma's head and asked, 'Where's the boy?'" She continued, "there is a reason Black people have mental health issues. Coming home everyday seeing people that look like you being shot has an impact on us, as a people."

The next two chapters of *Living With Death: Black American Trauma in the Age of the Spectacular* interview Black Cultural Workers (BCW) using frameworks developed in social psychology to 1) understand collective Black identity, and 2) frame viral videos of black pain, wounding and death as evidence of an evolving cultural trauma. Understanding the impact of viral pain imagery in forging self-identity, collective identity and feelings of in-group/out-group status is a key component in the examination of the interior process of the Black Cultural Workers who create art in response to Black cultural trauma. Using the words and experiences of Black Cultural Workers, this chapter aims to illustrate the operational links between collective identity, cultural trauma, consumption, and cultural production in our contemporary time.

Discussion group questions were influenced by theories of the self and identity found in social psychology as well as cultural studies frameworks that investigate cultural expression, Black performance, interiority, witnessing practices, and cultural trauma. Questions were separated into three categories: identity (demographics, centrality of race, collective identity) witnessing (cultural trauma,

consumption, watching and sharing) and, art-making (artist identity, uses, practice, motivation).

The only identity criteria for participation in Kitchen Table Talks were that participants had to identify as Black American, consider themselves artists and live in Baltimore. Knowing identities are fluid and complex, I fashioned my questions to be as open to interpretation as possible and avoided assumptions about aspects of the participant's identities. Identity questions included: how important is your racial identity to how you see yourself and do you believe there is a collective Black American identity? If so, what makes it collective? To discuss their witnessing practices, I shared one of my underlying research assumptions, which is: watching and sharing is not the same as seeing and witnessing. I asked them how they felt about that concept, what does it mean to witness and to see, as well as why do you watch and who do you share viral videos with? To understand more about their artist identities, I asked them to explain why they are artists, do they see themselves as Black artists and, do they feel like your artistic practices changes how they witness Black pain, wounding and death images? The full set of discussion questions can be found in Appendix B.

Kitchen Table Talks

"In the spaces we designate and create, the self is made visible in the spaces we occupy, literal 'black interiors', the inside of homes where Black people live." – Elizabeth Alexander, The Black Interior, 2004

I chose Black artists because this project emphasizes the links between trauma and cultural production. Additionally, since afro-futurism is much more of an aesthetic movement, Black artists seemed like a logical avenue with which to explore trauma, identity and production. As a former Program Coordinator at the Maryland Institute College of Art and a videographer, I have access to a fairly extensive network of Black Cultural Workers actively creating art in Baltimore City. Utilizing this network, I invited 30 BCW to participate in what I referred to as a series of "Kitchen Table Talks" at my home where they would have the opportunity to sit with six to seven other cultural workers to discuss their viral video witness, sharing and consumption practices. To minimize potential trauma and shift the focus from visceral reactions to interior process, including memory, I did not show BCW the viral videos engaged in this dissertation. I reached out to these artists via group messages on Facebook and followed up with individual emails. In the end, I held four talks from March 2017 through April 2017 and spoke with 17 artists, ages 18-44. Nine identified female, seven identified as male and one identified as gender-queer (See Figure 4).

Gender	Artistic Medium	Age Range
Male	Writer	35-44
Male	Writer	35-44
Female	Poet	35-44
Male	Spoken Word Artist	25-34
Female	Spoken Word Artist	18-24
Male	Visual Artist	35-44
Male	Visual Artist	35-44
Male	Visual Artist	35-44
Female	Visual Artist	25-34
Female	Musician	25-34
Gender Queer	Musician	25-34
Female	Musician	35-44
Female	Actor	18-24
Female	Actor	45-54
Female	Fashion Designer	35-44
Female	Performance Artist	25-34

Figure 4

Each conversation lasted for two and a half hours and was held on a Sunday. Following the Kitchen Table Talks, I completed three one-on-one conversations with BCW whose additions to the group conversation provided interesting avenues for further discussion in the next chapter.

I chose to call these Kitchen Table Talks because of the intimate nature of the engagement. As Alexander notes in the above quote, the place where Black people express themselves freely is the home. It was my desire to set the stage for truthful conversation where these artists and makers could feel vulnerable sharing their interior thoughts about Black trauma and their various identities. I wanted to facilitate the feeling of kinship that comes from having Sunday dinner with friends. Casual dinner party options were made available for the group. Items included salads, casseroles, cheese and fruit platters, sparkling wines, and sweet tea. Many of the artists knew of one another but only two were creative partners. Two male visual artists were partnered with one another but participated on separate dates. The multi-disciplinary nature of the artists, as well as the tangential nature of their relationships, helped create a fruitful dynamic for self-reflectivity. People opened up about their feelings, desires and conflicts. It wasn't always pretty but it was fruitful. This dissertation received a Human Subjects waiver by the IRB (See Appendix C). Kitchen Table Talks were recorded using the voice recording application on my android phone and the voice recording technology on my computer. The interviews were later transcribed and uploaded to Nvivo for qualitative analysis.

Upon arrival, BCW were once again introduced to the project and my intentions for the engagement. After each BCW provided a verbal agreement to participate, I read the names of the Black viral video victims and lit a white candle as a representation of their presence in the discussion. I also invited BCW to search their own memories and reflect upon the lives of other Black victims of state violence. I then gave them the opportunity to speak those names. We then held a

thirty second moment of silence. After this process was completed, I began to ask the questions that are central to this chapter. Upon synthesizing the transcripts for Kitchen Table Talks, I identified and have grouped this chapter into four themes to explore 1) the role of interiority in forming a self and collective identity; 2) the function of viral videos in perpetuating Black cultural trauma; 3) the specific meaning of cultural trauma in Baltimore; and 4) Black Cultural Worker's viral video witnessing and sharing practices.

Identity and the Interior

The creation of the self is a negotiation between the interior imaginary and understandings of the self as reflected by outside stimuli. Owens suggests, "the central quality that distinguishes self from identity is that the self is a process and organization born of self-reflection whereas identity is a tool…by which individuals or groups categorize themselves and present themselves to the world" (206). In order to establish the self, one must have thoughts, feelings, motivations and desires (interiority) as well as a level of reflexivity that comprehends the fact that one is "seen" by others. The person being observed is also able to recognize the way they are seen by others is incongruent with the way they see themselves. This sentiment is best reflected in the following quote.

> I'm Black before I am anything else. I'm seen as Black before anything else, which is why it becomes my go-to word. Black is such a seen part of my identity. My Blackness is just there. It's the #1 thing and the most conscious way I present in the world; I am just really aware when I walk into a room of Black folks. I'm not as consciousness of my maleness as I am in a room of women but I'm always aware of my Blackness – it determines if I look like I belong or not (Spoken Word Artist, Male, 20s).

This statement calls attention to the fact that Black Americans constantly navigate the line between inner understanding of the self and the external understanding of Blackness as a whole. This is partially due to the fact that race is socially constructed: races are "real" but they are artifacts of social classification. Historically, the Black race is constructed as the abject – the standard by which non-Black races in the Western world normalize themselves. The desire to make the White race the default by which all other races define themselves makes Blackness into the "other". This is supported by history, policies and language that reflect and perpetuate anti-blackness (Fields, Fields 2012). The histories, policies and politics of anti-blackness fuel the creation of a Black collective identity. Collective identity can also be understood as "an individual's cognitive, moral, and emotional connection with a broader community, category, practice, or institution" (Polletta, Jasper 2001). The black interior is the place where Black people dream themselves into this collective. This is best reflected in the following statement,

> I think we have a collective experience – but it's…your location that determines if you really have a Black identity (Visual Artist, Female, 30s).

This painter's nuanced understanding of racial identity describes what social scientists have coined: the centrality of race. The four dimensions of racial identity include: salience of identity; the centrality of identity; the ideology associated with identity and the regard with which the person holds the group associated with the identity (Sellars et.al 1997). For this BCW, a collective experience relates more to collective memory than a clear, affective relationship to Blackness as an identity. For her, one can have a connection to Black cultural memory but the choices one is

afforded determines if Blackness becomes central to one's identity. These choices are determined by the amount of anti-blackness to which one is exposed and the impact of anti-blackness on their ability to thrive. As one BCW put it,

> I'm learning that – my racial identity is one of THE most important things because if I'm not clear on that, I could die (Performance Artist, Female, 30s)

The black interior is the place where centrality of race is negotiated and where identity activations are processed. When asked if viral videos of Black pain, wounding and death act as identity activations, one artist responded:

> I cannot watch intentionally. Once you see it, you can't un-see it. You cannot even use detailed language (Spoken Word Artist, Male, 20s).

The other artists nodded in agreement. This Kitchen Table Talk included two spoken word artists, two female musicians and one male writer. That fact that an award winning spoken word artist is rendered speechless by viral videos of Black deaths illustrates the complex layers which undergird the watching, sharing and processing of Black pain, wounding and death imagery. The Black Cultural Workers in the Kitchen Table Talks feel multiple ways about the videos engaged in this project, from shocked and horrified, to inspired. What combination of content, medium and memory makes these viral videos powerful enough to stymie a cultural worker's primary method of communicating the interior?

The black interior refers to the chaotic interaction of thoughts and emotions that occur as one encounters the stimuli of the outer world. The interior is the source of human action that is shaped by inner life. In *The Sovereignty of Quiet*, Kevin Quashie describes the interior as the "reservoir of thoughts, feelings, desires, fears, ambitions that shape the human self" (2). The concept of interiority supports

representations of blackness that are complicated and contradictory, combating a monolithic understanding of blackness. A self-contained negotiation, the interior is often shown through external means such as language, behavior, performance, aesthetic in the home and other forms of cultural expression. Black cultural expression is always in conversation with itself, the lives of Black people and the world around it (Defranz, Gonzales 2014), but black interiority is private and individual. When asked about the connection between interiority and art production, two of the artists responded candidly, not just about interiority, but also about the way their art is used to manage thoughts, feelings, desires and fears.

> Art is directly tied to me trying to be functionally sane again. The interior is the part of me that feels most powerful, most alive, most human. That is the part of me that's made me brilliant. It helps me maintain my sanity (Visual Artist, Male, 30s).

> I make art to be sane. I feel like I communicate better artistically than verbally. It helps me to process and digest the ills of humanity and the process of humanity. Inside, I can understand the why and how without going completely insane (Visual Artist, Male, 40s).

Both of these artists speak of their art as a means to maintain their sanity in a world forged in anti-blackness. It certainly supports research that links art practice to healing the self physically and mentally (Stuckey, Nobel 2010; Petrie et. al 2004). Elizabeth Alexander suggests the black interior is, "the inner space in which black artists have found selves that go far… beyond the limited expectations and definitions of what black is, isn't or should be"(5). Black people have complex imaginations, understandings and reactions, and express these in wildly divergent ways. Their art is the way that they take these wildly divergent and painful traumas and turn them into

treasures. The black interior is directly tied to the creation of the self and identity, both individual and collective. Black cultural expression is the place where that dual process is communicated.

Collective identities lend themselves to the creation of in-group and out-group social identity. This sentiment is illustrated below,

> Through my art there is collective identification and White folks will not get the little jokes and nuances (Visual Artist, Female, 30s).

The BCW followed this reflection with a conspiratorial wink and everyone around the table laughed. Her statement is an act of resistance against the ongoing effort of white America to make those in the out-group (Black people) pariahs. Social psychologists posit the group to which one belongs is an important source of pride and self-esteem and gives one a sense of belonging in the social world (Tajfel 1981). A part of increasing one's self-image is elevating the group to which they belong. A part of that process is creating an in-group and an out-group. White Americans have historically situated Black Americans in the out-group status via anti-blackness. Mediated images of Black Americans experiencing trauma has helped maintained this firm boundary between of "us" and "them". For example, lynching took the lives of over 4,800 Black people between 1882 and 1981 (Jackson 77). Lynching acted as social events, which brought communities together, while the circulation of lynching postcards, were used to reinforce bonds between Whites while creating racial terror for Blacks.

The spreading of images and narratives of Black pain has been an essential component in situating Black Americans in the out-group of American identity.

Literary scholar Debra Walker King suggests the Black body in pain functions as a rhetorical device and as a political strategy. She posits, "disfigured black bodies function within a negative symbolic index of social worth defining what an American is not. Meaning…[it] is not derived from injury but is built on the injury's direct association with something larger than itself" (King 2008). In the United States, the Black body in pain becomes a stand-in for social, ethical, and economic politics that inform the stories we tell ourselves as a nation. Images of Black bodies in pain or in death during Hurricane Katrina support this understanding. As political scientist, Melissa Harris Perry suggests, "television news and popular magazines used images of desperate, frightened African American women to dramatize the tragedy facing residents as they battled the aftermath of the hurricane with little official assistance. Their suffering became the conduit through which new conversations on race, class and vulnerability began" (319). These images certainly did spark new conversations on race and vulnerability but as does happen with many images of disasters in America, they also contributed to a sense of empty empathy. This Newsweek cover (See Figure 5) suggests the relief effort in New Orleans is a "horror" and a "fiasco" in which all people outside of New Orleans can do is "pray" for a solution. The quote also assumes prayer is all the residents expects as aid. As researchers have pointed out, the tragic response to Hurricane Katrina was the result of racialized systemic issues (Pew 2015). The image of this desperate mother with her two small children

Figure 5

hanging off of her arm is described as "A Katrina refugee with her two children". The language of "refugee" displaces this U.S. citizen and obscures the governments' obligation to protect its citizenry before and after destructive events. It also suggests to those reading that there is nothing one can do but "pray" for change. The use of pained Black bodies for nation and race building discussion becomes even more pronounced when those images are moving pictures.

> I am witnessing by watching [viral videos] but I do have to cut them off after a while. If I watch it for too long, I'm going to be human and I know I am going to feel it (Fashion Designer, Female, 40s).

This statement is a reminder that images and narratives of Black pain are not just symbolic political devices. The existence of mirror neurons indicates moving images stimulate empathetic responses in Black people. This artist *feels* what is occurring on screen. This suggests the feeling of belonging to a collective identity is not just a political positioning; it is an actual, psychological and physiological process of empathetic identification with other Black people.

Viral Videos as Black Cultural Trauma

> Our performance of identity is based on our experiences of our trauma (Visual Artist, Male, 40s).

According to the Center for Advanced Studies in Behavioral Sciences (CASBS), "cultural trauma occurs when members of a collective feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways" (Alexander 2004). Trauma is not solely about the

group members experiencing each other's pain; it is about the group viewing the traumatic event as fundamental to their collective identity. Collectives decide to "represent social pain as a fundamental threat to their sense of who they are, where they came from and where they want to go" (4). In this model, it is both the collective's recognition of the trauma as detrimental to their wellbeing and the subsequent narrative created around the traumatic occurrences that define the cultural trauma. Cultural trauma evolves and changes meaning as it impacts the lives of those who see it as a key component to their collective identity. For many Black Americans, the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade is considered a cultural trauma and is the primary factor in the formation of a black identity. In the U.S., even if one's origin story cannot be traced to American slavery, this cultural trauma influences how Blacks in America live, work, form their families, and make culture. As Ron Eyerman suggests,

> the collective past is usable in at least two senses: it is central to the maintenance of group identity, part of a collective memory, and it is the source material, a cultural resource for a distinct aesthetic, explored and exploited not only by members of the group itself but by others as well (Eyerman 90).

From costumed interpreters at Colonial Williamsburg who reenact colonial slave auctions to the lower level of the National Museum of African American History where visitors are deposited into the bowels of a slave ship, exhibitions of this history have been known to cause distress and trauma for the Black people who encounter it. Our narratives of social pain shape our collective memory and help to solidify

cultural trauma. Kitchen Table Talks revealed that viral videos of black pain, wounding and death are narrative vehicles that affirm cultural trauma. Cultural sociologists suggest that a cultural trauma has a distinct precipitating event (war, social collapse) that shocks groups out of their routines or disrupts ways of being that were previously taken for granted (Sztompka 2000). For Blacks in America, cultural trauma also occurs when continuous racial hurt (King 2004) is maintained and reaffirmed. Sociologist, Angela Onwauchi-Willing suggests a Black cultural trauma process develops when there is: "(1) an established history or accumulation of the routine harm, which is usually a public or official affirmation of the subordinated group's marginal status; (2) widespread media attention, usually based on preceding events, that brings regional, national, or international attention to the occurrence of the routine harm; and (3) public discourse about the meaning of the routine harm (2016). Redress activities via the #BlackLivesMatter campaign, calls for online activism such as the #ICan'tBreathe challenge and the African American Policy Forum's #SayHerName campaign all illustrate the current environment as one in the midst of cultural trauma. Viral videos of Black pain, wounding and death exist within the legacy of lynching photography, footage of stranded Hurricane Katrina victims and iconic imagery of attacks on Civil Rights protestors in the 1960s.

Cultural Trauma and Baltimore Identity

Kitchen Table Talks illustrated the link between cultural trauma and the formation of Baltimore identity.

> Being optimistic is not being real. The only real Blackness is trauma and it's inevitable (Spoken Word Artist, Female, 20s).

Her quote silenced the room though all of us nodded at what felt like truth. Sitting across the table from me were two spoken word artists in their late 20s and a popular female musician, age 43. We were discussing the concept of cultural trauma and what it means in the context of Baltimore and Freddie Gray Jr. Many of the artists who participated in Kitchen Table Talks used similar language to describe their feelings about Freddy Gray's arrest and subsequent death. Their feelings were tied to their understanding of Baltimore as a place where trauma is inevitable and affirmed as positive in some circles. The male spoken word artist added,

> In Baltimore, you get points – you're more respected the harder you act. The closer your proximity to trauma, the more valid you are. Your relevancy is contingent on your proximity to trauma.

Having a trauma story is such a part of a Baltimore artists' identity that, "people actually manufacture their experience of trauma" (Spoken Word Artist, Female, 20s) meaning, artist often make up stories about traumatic experiences to affirm their credibility as an "authentic" Baltimore artist. "In Baltimore, we don't have the luxury to write poems about bouquets and tulips" (Musician, Female, 40s). Many BCW lamented this push/pull between framing Baltimore as a place steeped in trauma and defying this interpretation of the city.

During another talk, one artist suggested that in Baltimore, "there's no shame about violence. There is no shame about how you talk. No shame about coming from nothing. A Baltimore identity is collective identity that has no shame about violence. I think it's a defensive mechanism, 'I don't give a fuck' means I don't know what to do." Following this thread about shame, BCW recognized that there is a difference between "masking of shame vs. shamelessness". Teasing out this statement, words

like “bravado, swag, youthfulness, foolishness,” were used to describe masking of shame. These descriptors suggests masking of shame is a component of cool pose, a “ritualized form of masculinity that entails behaviors, scripts, physical posturing, impression management, and carefully crafted performances that deliver a single, critical message: pride, strength, and control” (Majors, Billson 1992). Cool pose is coping strategy (for Black males) to counter the dangers and instability associated with racialized oppression. BCW’ comments imply a Baltimore identity, regardless of gender, is synonymous with cool pose. Shamelessness referred more to the ability to recognize Baltimore as an epicenter for cultural trauma that is not wholly defined by that trauma. This sentiment is best summarized in the following reflection, “as Baltimore based artists, we have to break the stigma of trauma and describe the stigma in detail. We have to try to steer away from making our city seem really dark. For real, if you call this Bodymore Murderland you don’t love this city” (Spoken Word Artist, Male, 40s). This statement illustrates that there are multiple Baltimore identities but the thread connecting them all is trauma from violence.

In each of the Kitchen Table Talks, when conversation turned to the death of Freddie Gray Jr., BCW expressed no surprise by his death at the hands of the police. BCW were much more surprised about the viral nature of the Freddie Gray Jr. arrest video and the subsequent Uprising, than the fact that a Black man in Baltimore would die in police custody. Freddie Gray Jr.’s viral arrest was seen as an affirmation of cultural trauma. It was an accumulation of routine harm that was to be expected. BCW’s feelings about the mediated narrative around Gray’s death and the Uprising

resulted in a surprising number of insights that link media spectacle to cultural trauma as well as collective identity.

If Black cultural trauma is contingent upon widespread attention to the routine harms (over-policing, state sanctioned violence) and public debate about the meaning of these harms, then the Baltimore Uprising fits the model of a Black cultural trauma whole-heartedly. Black Cultural Workers provided insights into the nature of media spectacle associated with the Uprising.

> I didn't really think of distrusting the media until Freddie Gray and the Uprising. They [the media] were straight up lying. Like Baltimore was on fire. In Europe, on tour, I was watching people's reaction to it. They believed we were animals burning the city down. They kept [showing] the same clips over and over again. Numbing people out. Growing up in Baltimore, I never trusted the police because I saw the police being corrupt. I lived in Freddie's neighborhood so I knew it was fake. In Europe – all they knew about was The Wire so they didn't question the footage. That is the power of media (Musician, Gender Queer, 20s).

This BCW's understanding of media spectacle has multiple layers. First, he was able to see the humanity of those who were protesting while also being able to interpret the media footage of the protestors as dehumanizing. His Baltimore identity enabled him to read between the lines. This particular way of seeing supports what Courtney Baker refers to as humane insight, a kind of looking that, "describes a decision to identify the body being looked at as a human body" (5). Humane insight is an ability to see the human dignity of those who are in pain and to wish protection for them. This artist's humane insight is borne out of 1) his racial identification with those on camera; 2) familiarity with the geographic neighborhood in question and, 3) his awareness of the routine Black cultural trauma that occurs in Baltimore. He uses the term "we" though he was thousands of miles away from the activities in Baltimore.

His is the "we" of collective identity. He was able to see more of the Penn-North neighborhood because he had a mental picture of the geography of that space that expanded his gaze outside of the media's visual framing. There was more to that neighborhood than that which was on fire. Additionally, his awareness of the routine harm inflicted upon Black Baltimoreans at the hands of the state informed his discourse about the Uprising abroad. Another interesting insight of this quotation relates directly to this artist's understanding of spectacle and dehumanization. "They kept showing the same clips over and over. Numbing people out" – with this statement he shows awareness of the power of media to influence the discourse around Black cultural traumas as well as the power of spectacle to deaden others' willingness to take action. This is compounded by his final observation, "all they knew was The Wire" which acknowledges the way others are more willing to believe mediated narratives about Black people because of their lack of proximity to Black people.

Other BCW spoke about the power of the Uprising to reify their Black collective identity. Social psychologists cite three components to collective identity, including: (1) the collectivity has continuity over time and tries to adapt to its social and political environment; (2) the collectivity is differentiated and distinguished with respect to other collectivities; and (3) the collectivity is able to recognize itself and be recognized by others (Melucci 1996). One 34 year-old visual artist stated, "there was not a day that I did not feel blacker than the day after the Unrest. This skin is a target. My $200,000 MICA [Maryland Institute College of Art] education doesn't make a difference; I knew I needed my walking papers because my other identities do not

matter." His proximity to potential racial harm was a catalyst for collective racial identification. He "felt" his Blackness, meaning his sense of Blackness is couched in vulnerability to surveillance and targeted racial hurt. Another visual artist discussed her experience participating in the Uprising.

> After watching the news that first night I had an obligation to go there and prove them wrong. [I was] going there to bear witness and took people to the spot. I took [White] people to that spot but do not share viral videos. I wanted them to see the real stuff. The whole time we were there, I had just saw a documentary about the Philly people who got blown up[2]. I kept thinking, they could blow us up right there so I just gotta be prepared to die. I thought about the moments before they got blown up. I knew the news was lying to people. I felt safe. I wasn't worried about me getting hurt by my people. I was worried about the other entities [National Guard, Police] treating me badly. A couple different kinds of people on were on deck; media, the Hoteps, the people trying to be seen on the news looking cute. I saw the ill intention and that made me giggle (Visual Artist, Female, 30s).

In this reflection, the artist is pulled by a desire to prove "them" wrong. When I asked her to elaborate on "them", she said, "White folks, the media, the government". This is a clear recognition of differentiation in respect to other collectives, which is customary in collective identity formation. By setting up a "them", she is very firmly placing herself in the "us" category. Affirming her status as a member of the "us", she took a group of White allies - "them"- to Pennsylvania and North Avenue to impress upon them the incongruence between the media narrative of the Uprising and the actual experiences on the ground. Pennsylvania and North Avenue is a major transit hub in Baltimore and houses the Pennsylvania Branch of the Enoch Pratt Library, the Arch Social Club, which is the oldest known, continuously operating

[2] On May 13, 1985, the Philadelphia Police Department at the behest of Police Commissioner Gregor Sambor gave the order to bomb the headquarters of MOVE, a radical Black liberation group. The bombing resulted in 11 deaths including MOVE founder John Africa, five adults and five children between the ages of seven and 13.

African men's social club. On the second day of the Uprising and for several days thereafter, there was music, celebratory dancing, community organizing and inspiring speech making. It was a striking anti-thesis of violence discussed in the media. She was trying to impress upon *them* the feeling of pride and high regard that *she* herself feels about her Black collective identity. Her decision to take Whites to see Pennsylvania and North Avenue is also an act of impression management – not just for her as an individual but also for the collective Black community in Baltimore. Another statement of note is the way she links the Baltimore Uprising to the 1985 bombing of the MOVE compound in West Philadelphia by the Philadelphia Police. This historical reference establishes Black collectivity across time and social conditions, highlighting the role of shared cultural trauma history in stabilizing a collective Black identity. What underlie these social conditions are fear of state violence in reaction to Black protest, and the culpability of the media in this process. Finally, by mentioning the "different kinds of people on deck", she reveals how the Baltimore Uprising bolstered her feeling of collective Black identity while also affirming non-monolithic Blackness.

I Be/Stay Witnessing

Though we discussed the viral videos engaged in this dissertation, Black Cultural Workers were not required to watch these videos during Kitchen Table Talks. Additionally, BCW were not excluded from participating in Kitchen Table Talks if they confessed to having never watched any of the videos. My decision to exclude a viewing component from this discussion was based on my desire to lessen the potential for harm and keep the discussion focused on interior process, not

visceral reactions to troubling stimuli. It also allowed them space to examine what personal traumas contribute to their witnessing and sharing practices. Kitchen Table Talks were about understanding what it means to witness and consume viral Black pain, wounding and death. This meant going deeply into the interior landscape of memory, emotions, desires and fears.

> Something in the videos has a limbic effect that you feel. That is the danger of seeing it. You know that is a person, that is not role, nobody said cut. There is finality to it. A living trauma that people will continue to have. You see it if you're sensitive (Musician, Female, 42).

The limbic system is the portion of the brain that deals with memories, emotions and stimulation. This vocalist illuminates key questions threading through this dissertation: What collective memories are stirred up? What emotions guide witnessing practices? What do these videos live after we watch?

To understand how Black Cultural Workers witness and consume viral videos, it is necessary to first understand what it means for Black people to witness. In legal terms, a witness can be defined as one who has knowledge of something by recollection and experience and who can accurately give evidence in the court of law. *Bearing* witness is a term that refers to sharing our experiences with others (Spielberger 26). Cathy Caruth suggests those who bear witness become survivors of the trauma by proxy. Bearing witness can be thought of as a performative act that affirms the reality of the event that was witnessed. But the reality of the event differs from the "truth" of the event. The medium in which the event was captured, the schema of the person telling and taking in the story and the traumatic elements of the event all influence witnessing practices.

Studies of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) find that when Black Americans choose to speak AAVE, they often utilize what is called the 'habitual be'. Linguists find "when speakers of standard American English hear the statement 'He be reading' they generally take it to mean, 'He is reading'. In AAVE, 'He be reading' refers to what he does *habitually*, whether or not he's doing it right now" (Collins 2006). To 'be' witnessing means to be in a constant state of truth telling. In the Black church, witnessing is "to give one's testimony, to attest to having seen or having been in the presence of something" (Fletcher-Baker 67). It becomes possible to understand the assertion that "something in the videos has a limbic effect" if we understand Black consumers as those who "be" bearing witness. This habitual witnessing has a limbic effect that illustrates how cultural trauma is felt in the bones and in the psyche.

> Those videos act as activation points for me; even if it creates trauma; it's the reason I cannot watch them; it does heighten my Blackness. My Black rage is spiked. When I hear about hate crimes it reminds me of all of the violence I've encountered. I'm reminded of all the times my Blackness is perceived as a threat and has been threatened; I can't watch without thinking about my own Blackness (Visual Artist, Male, 40s).

This BCW statement shows Black witnessing as a process of living and reliving in a continual state of trauma. Recent science has shown that cultural trauma not only lives in a group's collective memory, it also alters a group's genetic structure, therefore, people carry the effects of intergenerational trauma in their genes (Hurley 2013). The effect of trauma on the DNA has come to be known as epigenetic trauma. Though a new field of study, scientists are finding epigenetic trauma may be responsible for heightened risks of depression, heart disease and infertility. This

theory is contested in some scientific circles because the initial findings were based on a small sample size of participants and a small amount of DNA. Still, is a fruitful concept when one considers the language BCW used when describing their process of witnessing.

Out of the 17 artists who participated in Kitchen Table Talks, only six of them admitted to watching all of the viral videos engaged in this project. The others have watched some videos but have foregone viewing others. Regardless of whether they force themselves to watch or refuse to watch, their language suggests the decision is both physical and psychological in nature. Some artists described their desire to forego watching as purely emotional: "I don't watch as much and I don't share because it makes me sad" (Writer, Male 40s). While other artists discussed the toll of the constant visual spectacle on their psyche.

> I watch them but I don't share them. The 24-hour news cycle is like torturing myself, especially since 9/11, but I don't want to sleep on what is happening. Beholding the image takes a little piece of me every time I watch. I avoid re-traumatizing people by not reposting. It's important that people who don't understand it – need to be reminded...but is sharing viral videos the right way to do that? (Visual Artist, Male 30s)

For this artist, media spectacle is likened to torture. But it is a torture he feels obligated to participate in though it takes "pieces" from him to do so. He is willing to bear witness but refrains from forcing others to be survivors by proxy. As a part of an in-group, he also anticipates the feelings of other members of the group and desires to protect them. This BCW "torture" and the vocalists' discussion of the limbic effect of viewing, brings to mind the fields of psychology and public health that investigate "allostatic load", the notion that, "the same systems that help the body adapt to stress

and serve a protective function in the short term also may promote pathophysiological processes when overused or managed ineffectively" (Cicchetti, 2011). Public health officials are finding that allostatic[3] load can lead to disease over a long period of time (McEwen 2006). In 2017, public health officials called for a full investigation of the "links between police brutality and poor health outcomes among Blacks" (Alang, McAlpine, et.al 2017) with an emphasis on measuring the allostatic loads of those impacted by state surveillance. Something psychic and physiological happens when these artists experience long-term exposure to viral videos of Black pain. As the performing artist shared, "it is re-traumatizing my DNA but the powers that be must be held accountable." Throughout Kitchen Table Talks, BCW recognized the moment of viral police brutality as a part of a longer cycle of Black cultural trauma in America regardless of whether it is passed down epigenetically. As one visual artist put it, "we may not have any understanding of the effects until 50 years from now."

BCW showed conflicted feelings about sharing viral videos of Black pain. One spoken word artist stated, "I do not watch or share the videos because it feels like the first images of Black people I was exposed to was those videos in Selma and stuff where the government was beating up Black people. I can't share that shit. Black bodies are mediated monsters." This artist is originally from Nigeria by the way of London, England. He moved to West Baltimore at the age of 13. When sharing his origin story, he made it very clear that his father did not want him to fraternize with Black Americans. In his words, "I have a West African father and he said you cannot

[3] Allostatic load is considered the "price the body pays when confronted with major stressors and sustained stress responses that must be maintained over extended periods of time" (Ganzel et.al., 2010; McEwen & Stellar, 1993).

have any Black friends. African Americans are not like us. They are violent, not like us. If you hang out with them you gonna end up a drug dealer, user or gay." Though living in a majority Black neighborhood in a majority Black city, this artist's father chooses to self-segregate. Segregation ensures that the majority of experiences people have with Black Americans are mediated. This artist's first encounter with mediated images of Black Americans was footage that illustrated the government violently opposing Black civil rights. That, compounded with a father who maintained a very rigid boundary between a Black American identity and a West African presence impacts his desire to share. As an adult who very much identifies as a Black American now, he "can't share that shit" because he understands how media shapes black people as "mediated monsters".

When discussing his decision to share viral videos, the gender-queer musician says he has become a "pessimist". When asked to unpack that statement he continued, "I'm a pessimist. The world is more bleak than ever. These tools [cameras, phones] make us now. Diamond Reynolds thought she was sharing truth but these images are used to exploit us." This is a telling statement in the context of a society of spectacle. Media consumption, media convergence and the primacy of visual communication contribute to a society of spectacle where we 1) make what we see, 2) we believe what we see and 3) we believe what we document with our cellular phones undeniable supports our understanding of injustice. With both the spoken word artist and the hip-hop artist, there seems to be a shared understanding of media as a tool that makes Blackness, exploits Blackness and fixes Blackness, often in a state of trauma. For many, viral videos of Black pain are being forced on them

because of media convergence. One BCW shared,

> I saw Philando, Walter, Freddie Gray, McKinney Pool Party. To be honest, I went to the video [Philando Castile] before I knew the story. I clicked on the hash tag—it was really problematic to me. In some instances it was shared with me and shared to my page. So people are forcing you into the video. Some I sought out because I didn't understand; how did it make sense? I can't keep watching for my heart and my sanity, as terrible as it sounds. If I've seen one, I've seen all of them. I don't want to assume its not taking a weight on my spirit (Spoken Word Artist, Female, 20s).

For the artist quoted above, the hash tags associated with viral black deaths *forced* her to witness trauma before she was able to gauge the full context. Scholars of social media activism claim it provides "strategic outlets for contesting and reimagining the materiality of racialized bodies" (Bonilla, Rosa 2015). For this artist, the hash tag is a signifier of cultural trauma. While hash tags are used to mark the temporality of an event, they also provide a framework to situate the event within a larger string of occurrences. In this framework, the hash tags are a red flag – alerting her to potential danger but never providing the full context of that danger. Bonilla and Rosa posit that hash tags, "allow users to not simply file their comments but to performatively frame what these comments are really about" (5) but #philandocastile is just a name. The twitter hash tag for his death was not as clear as: #philandocastilemurderedbypoliceonfacebooklive – a fictive marker that would have prepared the artist for what she was about to witness. The spoken word artist is not the only one who was unprepared to witness the trauma associated with viral Black deaths.

> I saw them but I didn't realize what I was viewing. I had a belief something else was going to occur… I didn't see it coming; I found myself sliding into a space and I was carried along on the wave of other people's sentiments… I still see it. You can't unsee it (Musician, Female, 40s).

Not only was the she surprised about the tragic outcome, she also felt pulled into a cultural trauma process that she now "can't unsee". Another artists added, "I don't want to watch it; I'm not blind to it; I don't need to watch a video about a Black person being treated like an animal; I don't want to worry about dying while sitting in my car" (Performing artist, female, 20s). These artist's statements suggests the inadequacy of hash tag to prepare them for witnessing trauma. The hash tag may place the event within the context of ongoing cultural trauma but it does not provide context for the actual event unfolding on the screen. Empty empathy occurs when we are invited to empathize with individuals who experience trauma without being provided the larger context for the existence of their trauma (Kaplan 2005). We get empathy -that is empty. The hash-tags associated with viral videos of Black deaths combat empty empathy by placing the events in socio-historical context and urging viewers to share the video but the effectiveness of sharing video as a social justice strategy is still up for debate. The one sure thing Kitchen Table Talks reveals about these viral videos is that they provoke collective Black identity and amplifies Black cultural trauma.

Five of the artists admitted that they refuse to viral videos of Black deaths. One visual artist explained she has no need to watch because she has, "always been able to visualize. I have a specific artist brain and I fill in the gaps" (Visual Artist, Female, 30s). Similarly to the Hip-Hop artist who was able to see the whole of West

Baltimore outside of the media's framing of the Uprising, this artist uses her "artist brain" to see more of the story, suggesting that she has a reservoir of trauma imagery to pull from already. Another artist explained, "I witness by watching the responses" (Fashion designer, Female, 40s). In this explanation, she is bearing witness to other people's outrage by becoming a secondary survivor by proxy. The graphic designer said he does not watch because, "it never stops. You can't turn it off." His response implicates social media and collective cultural trauma prevents him from staying detached from the pain. Finally, when asked what they believe was the motivation of citizen witnesses to record Black pain, one visual artist suggested it stems from, "media that shows good always prevails. It makes us feel hopeful" (Visual Artist, Male 30s). Despite the continuing indication that these videos do not garner justice for those being murdered or wounded, the power of media narratives allows citizen witnesses to trust the camera to tell the truth. One performing artist explained, "[Citizen witnesses know] that the system is flawed and hope that something is going to change" (Performance Artist, Female, 30s). In response to this statement, one of the BCW shrugged and said,

> It makes me think a lot about rape culture; no one believes you – you can have the videos and the pictures; the bruises show up on her face; it doesn't matter what proof we have; its all about the White gaze and our system is made for *their* future (Poet, Female, 30s).

Other artists expressed suspicion of those who regularly share these videos. One of the female performing artists explained,

> When Freddy was dragged to the van, I saw it once; when Oscar was shot, I couldn't watch that – I've been at that station; I couldn't watch Sandra; I'm very wary of people (like Shaun King), everyday it's like a new video, it's his business; if you are that outraged – at what point do you reach your threshold? If you reach that point where you can watch it everyday, you are desensitized or making money; it's not mutually exclusive, I don't want to reach that space.

This Black Cultural Worker called society of spectacle into question with her statement. The complicated relationship between Black pain and consumerism even filters into the work of those who frame themselves as Black activists. It also alludes to a specific threshold, suggesting that there has to be an over-saturation point in this moment of cultural trauma where, presumably, one stops watching and sharing.

Busing The Table

At the end of each Kitchen Table Talk session, I invited Black Cultural Workers to once again state the names of those whose videos are being engaged in this dissertation. I followed this process by extinguishing the white candle and inviting BCW to participate in the burning of sage to clear the air. These practices are inspired by my own ancestor worship, which is derived from a combination of West African Yoruba ritual and Goddess worship. Many of the BCW who participated in Kitchen Table Talks have similar spiritual and community practices or are at least familiar and respectful of these practices. For many participants, this was the first time they had participated in a guided discussion about viral Black deaths and people lingered in fellowship, having side conversations and finishing their meals. As the host and facilitator, I provided a thirty-minute cool down period because I

knew I had just asked for a lot and they had provided in-depth and heartfelt responses in return.

Kitchen Table Talks helped illuminate the ways Black Americans are agents who are capable of navigating their own pain. These talks also illustrated how Black Americans grapple with a society of spectacle that often makes the pained Black body symbolic and detached from lived, embodied experiences. Black Cultural Workers are very well aware of the way viral Black deaths influence their feelings of collective identity and use that identity activation to watch these videos with a level of care. Some artists watch for what is missing in the narrative. Others add context from their lived experiences to see more than what is being presented in the videos. This level of witnessing with care liberates Black pain from abstraction. This is no small feat in light of the endless circulation of these images that can numb consumers to the reality that of what they are seeing.

Black Cultural Workers also navigate the environment of cultural trauma in varied ways, interrupting any understanding of Black response as monolithic. Some artists refuse to watch the news and admit, "at times I feel really ignorant but I just… I can't" (Fashion designer, Female, 40s), while others want to know. The poet explained,

> I will read the articles that people share and I'm educated for the day. It's made me be more intentional to think about how I'm practicing joy, sweetness and kindness in my life. To counter it I sometimes watch white people killing other white people over a crumpet and that helps. Seeing these videos [viral Black deaths] help me figure out how to write about Black pain in a way that is joyful.

In this statement, the poet uses the pain of viral Black deaths to create new work that restores joy to the lives of those who have passed. This decision is just as much a politic of interruption as the artist who refuses to watch. Black Cultural Worker's decision to forego sharing or to share and make art in response to the videos stem from the desire to interrupt that narrative of mediated trauma cycling in a society of spectacle. Black Cultural Workers illuminate a broad and complex understanding of the society of spectacle. When I suggested that watching and sharing is not the same as seeing and witnessing, one artist observed,

> In this culture, we are consumers, watching and sharing is a process of consumption. Consuming something is not the same as taking it in. Going to McDonald's is not the same as cooking. Watching and sharing is consumptive; seeing and witnessing is experiential; and again, the process of participating in consumption is something that really deracinates you from your culture and your life (Writer, Male, 40s).

"Consuming something is not the same as taking it in" provides a helpful addition to my assertion that watching and sharing is not the same as seeing and witnessing. By bringing in the image of McDonalds' and its contested nutritional value, this writer equates consuming viral videos as a process of filling oneself up with something that is not nourishing. "Taking it in" compliments the notion of seeing (reading with context) and witnessing (empathetic viewing). Consumption of viral videos uproots and disconnects while seeing and witnessing viral videos affirms and bridges Black cultural identity. As a microcosm of a larger Black American community, talks with Black Cultural Workers provided a constructive and complex example of the interior processes of Black Americans living in this moment of cultural trauma. The question

now becomes, how do Black Cultural Workers take this complexity of lived experience into their cultural production?

Chapter 4: Survivors By Proxy

"Family [is] a living mystery, constantly changing, constantly providing us clues about who we are, and demanding that we recognize the new and challenging shapes it often takes" -Mary Helen Washington, Memories of Kin: Stories about Family by Black Writers, 1991

Introduction

The Kitchen Table Talks described in chapter three were crafted around the idea of family dinner where the interior space of the home allows Black people to connect with one another without monolithic expectations of their Blackness. Creating these spaces for discussion allowed the Black Cultural Workers in this project to talk intimately. Kitchen Table Talks were designed to provide an overview of the connections between identity, trauma, consumption and production. As Mary Helen Washington illustrates in her above quote, family changes shape. Each family member responds to trauma in his or her own unique way. The following chapter consists of three in-depth interviews and analysis of two pieces of art by the participants to theorize what it means for Black Cultural Workers to be survivors by proxy.

The Black Cultural Workers interviewed in this chapter have all attained levels of success in Baltimore's art community and all have agreed to be named in this research. Mixed-Media Artist Stephen Towns hails from Lincolnville, South Carolina. He works in oil, acrylic and fiber and his work explores African American culture from slavery to colorism. As an artist he, "wants to create beauty from the hardships in life" (Towns, website). His work has recently been added to the permanent collection at the Baltimore Museum of Art. Saida Agostini is a self-

described queer, Guyanese poet, advocate and movement builder. Her poetry explores Black queer identity, sexuality and legacies of gender-based trauma. A recent recipient of Maryland's Ruby Artists Award, her work is featured in *Not Without Our Laughter*, an anthology from the Black Ladies Brunch Collective. Ama Chandra hails from Tampa, Florida and is a musical artist whose work is influenced by world rhythms and jazz. Her song writing explores love as radical resistance. She practices community healing through her She Be Warrior projects in Baltimore City. All three artists deliberately create art that is about trauma or healing. Chosen from the 17 Black Cultural Workers who participated in Kitchen Table Talks, these three artists represent the complexities and contradictions inherent in Black cultural expression as well as the unique insider/outsider status common of artists who *choose* to work in small, urban cities such as Baltimore.

To conduct these interviews I turned to the life history and self ethnography methods of John Caughey proposed in *Negotiating Cultures and Identities: Life History Issues, Methods, and Readings* and the reflexive and affective approaches described by Fonow and Cook in the primer, *Feminist Research Practice.* Using Caughey's approach to ethnography, each of the BCW chosen for this chapter share a "common cultural ground" with me but also contain "many cultural contrasts" (Caughey, ch.2). Some of our common cultural markers include: our racial identity and self-proclaimed labels as artists/Black Cultural Workers. These common launching points were helpful for establishing a rapport with each participant. The cultural contrasts were varied – all three are Baltimore transplants, unlike me, a Baltimore native. Additionally, each of the artists works within a different medium,

which makes their approaches to cultural production uniquely varied. Though visual art, poetry and performing art all seek to express emotion, feeling, and cultural messages, each artist must tap into his/her own unique training to convey these messages. This means, stories about stories about the same traumatic experience may have a different emphasis from one medium to the next. I also used Caughey's exercise for determining research participants, paying particular attention to what is was that interested me in these artists specifically. Though I had an established relationship with Stephen Towns and Saida Agostini prior to this research, convenience did not play a part in the choice. What appealed to me was the ability of all three artists to talk about trauma from a micro and a micro level, which was revealed during Kitchen Table Talks.

Taking Caughey's suggestion that researchers should ask themselves the research questions, and combining it with feminist research practices that are committed to reflexivity and self-ethnography, I also kept a separate journal noting how the research was impacting my own understanding of trauma. I identify as a media maker who creates work that grapples with violence, psychic, physical and sexual. I am just as impacted by viral videos of Black pain, wounding and death as any other Black person in America. I created this dissertation project because of my interest in cultural trauma, identity formation and the ways Black people express these ideas through their art. My job is not to distance myself to describe a culture that is "other" but to describe Black connection around these issues. These considerations resulted in me continually asking myself the questions I am posing,

gauging when I am impacted by the participant's answers, and paying particular attention to affect as the interviews progressed.

Finally, this chapter involves analysis of a poem submitted by Saida Agostini and an oil painting by Stephen Towns. Poetry and visual arts are complimentary but vastly different mediums in Black life. Joanne V. Gabbin describes African American poetry as, "the aesthetic chronicle of race" (1). Black poetry has a long tradition of chronicling the struggles and the dreams of Black liberation, from Lucy Terry's 1746 poem, "Bars Flight" to the visual poetics of modern hip-hop – poetry's blend of oral and literary portraiture has been a stable in Black American cultural production. Black poetry has also had adequate space economically and aesthetically to present experimental and contradictory understandings of Black interiority. Visual art has just as a long a storied history, with similar works reflecting complex Black life, but unlike poetry, Black visual art has had viewer avenues for exhibition and economic growth (Bernier 2008).

My analysis of Saida and Stephen's art acknowledges Pierre Bourdieu's claim that to understand a work of art, we must look not only at the piece of art itself, but rather at the conditions of its production and reception, the specific logic characterizing the field of cultural production, and the way in which that field relates to the wider fields of power and class relations (Schwartz 1997). It then takes up the charge of Tricia Rose, who cautions against seeing Black cultural production as either a reflection of purely socio-historical and economic circumstances, or as an expression of a monolithic people. As Davarian Baldwin says, "in a sense Rose warns against situating Black cultural production (or Black people) as the terrain on which

to work through seemingly larger ideals, without recognizing and engaging the existence of dynamic and hybrid experiences that can still be called 'Black' (Baldwin 2014). To ensure that my analysis pivots away from considering only socio-historical/economic context or only essentialists Black aesthetics, I turn to the work of Abduri-Rahmann's *Against the Closet*, Deborah Walker King's *African Americans and the Culture of Pain* and Christina Sharpe's *Monstrous Intimacies*, Cassandra Jackson's *Violence, Visual Culture and the Black Male Body*, Elizabeth Alexander's *The Black Interior* and Harvey Young's *Embodying Black Experience: Stillness, Critical Memory, and the Black Body*. These scholars query Black cultural productions by acknowledging the way the interiority of Black artists – their desires, emotions, fears and arousals shapes the art they produce just as much as collective Black identity, socio-historical contexts, and economic circumstances. By filtering my analysis of Saida and Stephen's work through these three contexts, I am able to identify the conceptualizations of Black identity, understandings of collective trauma and contradictory approaches to ontological and literal death reflected in their work.

Elizabeth Alexander posits that, "in absence of first person witnessing, stories are passed along so that everyone knows the parameters in which their bodies move" (Alexander, 186). This prompted me to ask BCW to provide me a piece of art that answers: *Do you have a particular piece of art that you have created that you feel reflects your understanding of the impact of trauma on Blackness?* My analysis of the poem and painting looks specifically at the ways these works are cautionary tales. My analysis of BCW art also examines Debra Walker King's assertion that, "Black cultural productions, whether presented by men or women, offer more than an

expression of "Ouch!" of black pain. They offer an examination of (gender and racial) hurt, its social functions, and how to survive it safely" (158). By placing BCW art in direct conversation with their one on one interviews, I am able illustrate the way their art supports and challenges survivor by proxy.

To develop my interview questions, I re-read the transcripts from the Kitchen Table Talks and identified specific statements about identity, witnessing, and trauma that I felt would be useful for understanding BCW interiority as well as to better theorize what it means for BCW to be survivors by proxy. Saida identifies as a lesbian and Stephen identifies as gay. As members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer (LGBTQ) community, I developed specific questions about LGBTQ identity to garner a fuller understanding of their social identity and their work. I first asked them to state their identities in order of their salience. Options included: race, ethnicity, gender, socio-economic status, sexual orientation, sex, artistic medium, national origin and geographic origin. I posed a series of questions about self-labeling as queer, gay or lesbian, educational and socio-economic background, the process of coming out, influence of spiritual background on sexuality, social and activist-oriented gay- related activities and self-disclosure of sexual orientation (see Figure 6). These questions were intended to determine how LGBTQ BCW define their Black LGBTQ identity and how that is connected to their collective identity as a whole. According to Rosario et.al (2003), empirical research on LGB identity suggests that racism from the larger white LGB community may lead many ethnic/racial minority individuals to avoid participating in predominantly white gay social activities. These sexual identity questions were designed to

determine if addressing Black cultural trauma contributes to a Black social identity that is strong enough to block the negative aspects of exclusion from mainstream gay life.

Identity Category	**Description**	**Importance (salient –least salient) 1-12**
Race		
Ethnicity		
Sexual Orientation		
Gender		
Country of Origin		
Socio-economic Status		
Education		
Marital/Relationship Status		
Education		
Other		
Career		
Artistic Medium		

Figure 6

Over the course of one month I conducted three one-on-one interviews. Each interview lasted for 2 hours. I took notes with my laptop computer and also recorded their responses with my cellular phone. These interviews were later transcribed and analyzed using Nvivo software. The conversations with the poet and the musical performer took place at local, independent cafes, while the meeting with the mixed-media artist occurred in his studio, surrounded by his finished works and works in progress. I would like to note that this chapter makes several tonal shifts due to the complexity of the subject matter and my commitment to reflexivity. Some sections read as participant observation, while others are highly theoretical engagements with the insights and text that were presented to me.

Theorizing Survivor by Proxy

Dovecote café is located in West Baltimore near Druid Hill Park. Similar to the environment I created for the Kitchen Table Talks, this black and queer owned space describes itself as a place for "communal nesting" where community is invited to sit, gather and stay. On the day that I sat down to chat with Ama Chandra, it was living up to that description. As I waited, I ran into several people I know throughout the Black, artists and non-profit community. Several other patrons seemed to be having the same experience. When Ama arrived, she flowed through a gauntlet of friends and acquaintances before settling at my table. During Kitchen Table Talks, I asked BCW what it means to witness Black trauma as an artist. In response, she'd stated that, "as an artist, we bring every part of ourselves. There is sociology of the group mind, and a group consciousness" (KKT #2). Now, following up on this statement, she added:

> As an artist you can't help but show up. We take it all – good, bad, and ugly. Whatever medium you use, you are engaging the experience with that tool. Our environment is influencing us constantly… Everything and everyone leaves something with us and those interactions flow into what influences us. We bring the consciousness of the community to bear in our stories.

During Kitchen Table Talks, I'd assumed she was referring to being a survivor by proxy and her statement now confirmed it. In her understanding, as an artist, being a survivor by proxy is a process. It starts with first witnessing the trauma (showing up as an artist). Next the BCW processes the trauma through their artistic medium (engaging the experience with that tool). Finally, the artist outputs the story (representing the conscious of the community). Each of these steps has a set of

considerations and each of the BCW interviewed in this chapter articulated some aspect of them.

Showing Up As An Artist (Ama)

Identity is how we perceive and express ourselves. The factors and conditions that an individual is born with (race, sex, geographic locale) play a role in defining them. As we journey through life, these identities shift, change and grow (Howard 2000). Many artists use their work to express, explore, and question ideas about identity. The sentiment, "we bring every part of ourselves" suggests that when witnessing viral trauma, BCW cannot separate their artist identity from their various other identities. Witnessing cannot be parsed out through identity filters. For some BCW, to "show up" is a whole body, active process. She continues:

> [BCW] are being influenced by our environment constantly, even if its just someone standing behind [us]. Everyone deposits something in us whether its love or venom.

As an artist, showing up (witnessing) is a deliberate absorption of multiple influences- some large, some small, some good, some bad. Paraphrasing DuBois (*Dusk of Dawn,* 67), Debra Walker King states that, "one cannot be a calm, cool and detached observer" of racial wounding. No one escapes blackpain's victimizing hand" (King, 21). King's assertion supports Ama's observation. Black Cultural Workers cannot detachedly observe or compartmentalize their witnessing. Whole body witnessing is a schematization practice that artists are uniquely trained to do. My former job at the Maryland Institute College of Art forced me to develop a rationale for deliberately bringing artists into social justice movements. One of the arguments I would frequently make was that artists are trained to see around corners.

Artists are trained to observe the entire scene. Visual artists look at framing, proportion, balance, symmetry, and rhythm (among other things) when examining the world around them. They are trained in composition as it relates to where the eye will go first, and where it will travel by using color, value, and form to create movement (Benshoff 2016). Similar to visual artists, through intense repetitious learning, performing artists are trained to focus on what is in front of them while navigating stimuli from multiple directions (Hays 2017) and writers use language to make readers see more than what lies on the surface of everyday life experiences (Clark 2013). These schematization skills translate into BCW witnessing practices.

Showing up as an artist also means acknowledging and accepting that watching the traumatic will change the artist in some way. Ama explains that, "who we are is transformed by our trauma. Trauma stimulates and adds emotion to the body. Being present means being ready to deal with that change." For Black Cultural Workers such as Ama, being a survivor by proxy means not only witnessing with her whole self, it also means being emotionally intelligent enough to know that she will be changed in some way after the experience. She adds that, "the art tells you where an artist is and if they've processed it or not. [When you are] making it, you recognize that there will be other people that feel this way as well." From this statement, one can assume that Black Cultural Workers who are survivors by proxy create work that reflects where they are in that present moment and for some audiences, it resonates as familiar. She concludes that:

> We [BCW] are the walking testimony of the collective trauma we have experienced. When we read each other's Facebook status, you hear you're your own voice and energy. It's just a Black experience. We are a collective. Folks are starting to understand that [collective] trauma is real.

Ama switches between the I/we as it relates to her Black identity and artist identity. This statement is reminiscent of Elizabeth Alexander's definition of a Black collective memory that "has been constructed as much by storytelling in multiple media as by personal, actual experience" (176). Being a survivor by proxy is influenced by the event, the feedback loops created on social media and the artist's schematization training.

Several years prior, Ama experienced a violent attack that became public knowledge. Many people rallied around her recovery fiscally and emotionally. In our conversation at Dovecote, we switched gears to talk about *personal* trauma experience and art that is made in response.

> With trauma, it's been my desire to create the best stories – the best opportunities for these outcomes to occur. Sometimes it is as simple as "I am enough, I do enough, let go". To deal with my trauma is to stay committed to my healing to keep going. My music is the answer to: "how do we heal this? and, how do we create the understanding to allow the healing to occur?"

Like many artists who participated in Kitchen Table Talks, Ama sees her arts practice as a healing practice, both on a personal and on a community level. A large part of that is the storytelling, which is essential to cultural production. Cultural production is the art of sharing stories, no matter the artistic medium. The role of storytelling in processing trauma has long been investigated in fields such as cultural studies, psychology and trauma studies. According to trauma theory, to "witness" means working through trauma by telling one's story of suffering (Herman 1992, 1997).

This process helps to restore social order and kick-start the healing process for victims (Herman, 1992,1997). Ama witnesses her trauma through her song making in an effort to "get back to love".

Loving and Witnessing

> The experiences I was having - no one could give me any guidance on those experiences. So my process of finding what I needed was finding my super power – the ability to get back to love. All of us can find love. I've had all of these broken points and on the other side of the pain point is the love. On this side are all the things that are keeping us from it – we push through to communicate our stories. Often times you take in the pain point and you have the experience. Getting back to love is taking it in to find the love.

In this observation, witnessing is not only an act of love; it is also a process of finding love in the trauma story. Finding love is having compassion for oneself, the person(s) being harmed, and, the person(s) doing harm. Compassion is a combination of empathy (the ability to feel the emotions of another) and a willingness to be of service to those being harmed. This entails pushing past the "pain point". Pushing connotes an active use of force to move something. In this statement, it is not an act of pushing it away or ridding oneself of the trauma, but is an act of moving through it. Applying this to Black Cultural Workers as survivors by proxy, three observations become clear: 1) the act of witnessing with the artists' eye can be an act of love; 2) the act of communicating the story can be an act of love and 3) this act combats desensitization because BCW must bring all of themselves to the process. She concludes, "people think witnessing is about justice but it's about love." If that is case, how do Black Cultural Workers communicate that love? Conversations with Saida Agostini and Stephen Towns provide some insight.

A Poet's Testimony

Engaging the Experience (Saida)

Engaging the experience means Black Cultural Workers must bring both their feelings of collective identity and their personal experiences to bear on the trauma. As was discovered in the previous chapter, collective identity is stimulated by repeated identity activations - moments where one's Black racial identity is a key component to how others see one in the world. To be a Black Cultural Worker and a survivor by proxy is often to testify, meaning to give evidence as a witness. This evidence manifests as storytelling, which is filtered through the artists' mediums. Writers have provided years of testimony to the Black experience. Some claim Black literature is always in response to "racial oppression and a socio-political impulse to showcase the achievements of the race" (King, Moody-Turner, 2013). Others push back against that notion, suggesting that the post Civil Rights era has allowed for more Disaporic perspectives and a diversity of approaches, with Black writers, "hiking en mass to the artistic mountains once only viewed from the top of the racial one" (Johnson, 2013). Within the canon of Black literature, poetry has played a vital role as a signifier of Black humanism, allowing for the exploration of Black interior life.

Surrounded by the bustling, diverse energy of Red Emma's, a radical bookstore and restaurant/café in the Station North District, Saida Agostini sat down to talk to me about identity, poetry, and trauma. To start, I asked her to identify her most salient identities.

> I am Black queer, Afro-Guyanese, cis[gender], woman, upper middle class, first-gen[eration]. Blackness centers my perspective. When I think about whom I am writing my art for, I'm writing for Afro-Guyanese girls. The other identities…I can be challenged on them.
>
> My Blackness and my queerness are so fixed. My politics are rooted in the intersection of both. When I rate my identities, I ask, "who do I love?" [The answer] is: black and brown queer people. Those are the people who have lifted me up and who hold me. There is so much history--- all of the people that I honor as a part of my history make up who I am today.

"Blackness centers my perspective" very firmly reveals race is the most salient of her identities. This supports social psychologists' assertion that "role identities are organized hierarchically, on the basis of their salience to the self and the degree to which we are committed to them, which in turn depends on the extent to which these identities are premised on our ties to particular other people" (Stryker 1980). There is a long history or research suggesting that racial identity often trumps other identities that Black people hold. For example, studying middle-class Black people raising families in predominately white suburban spaces, sociologist Karyn R. Lacy found that when, "black parents say that they want their children to have a black racial identity, they mean they want their children to understand the norms and values of the black world, they want their children to feel comfortable in this world, and they want them to develop an affinity for other blacks" (2007, 157). In her study, having positive regard for Black racial identity trumps a middle-class or wealthy identity. Saida's statement points out the connection between love, high regard and history that help create the conditions for collective identity development. Her statement illuminates this self-love even as it acknowledges the ways her other social identities are challenged. By mentioning this struggle, she alludes to interplay between regard

of self and exterior perceptions by others, which is a fundamental aspect of social identity development.

Blackness and queerness are fundamental to her interior life. For Saida, exterior stimuli filters first through her Blackness and queerness, then her other salient social identities come to bear on the situation. Elizabeth Alexander's work on interiority is helpful in clarifying this process. Writing about her experience developing dream poems, Alexander muses, "I learned that race, gender, class, sexuality – our social identities- exist and have been 'always already' constructed in the dream space, even when they are constructed outside of a racist impetus" (2004). Alexander suggests the primary way the marginalized encounter their identities is through oppression. But once the marginalized realize their identities are not oppressive, it frees them to understand those identities have always been a part of them – existing in the dreamscape, creating the Black interior. The interior space where Black artists imagine them selves into being is the primary site where Black Cultural production occurs.

Though Blackness and queerness situates her practice as a poet, the audience for Saida's writing is, "Afro-Guyanese girls". This suggests that though the foundations of her interior life are her racial and sexual identities, her expression of that interior life (her writing) is much more targeted. The stories she tells -her testimony- is for Afro-Guyanese girls. Queer literary theory is dedicated to troubling binary identities and the essentialist baggage that accompanies them. In writing for a specific subsection of an already marginalized identity, Saida queers her poetry. I asked her to reveal what poetry does as testimony.

> Poetry forces you to write about the things that are harmful. In poetry, we are taught automatically that pain is where you go. We ask Black artists to excavate their pain. But we can break.

When artists push through the pain point to get to love, as Ama Chandra suggests, they are actively working within the break that Saida describes. Black cultural production of racial hurt is supposed to help audiences understand pain's function in society and provide tips for navigating it safely (King 127). Saida's observation highlights the impact of pain excavation on the artist's wellbeing. This is the double-edged sword of Black Cultural Workers taking on the role of survivor by proxy. Black cultural production provides a service to the community by creating a story of trauma that reflects group consciousness but it also exacts a cost to the artist.

> There is a difference between catharsis and healing. You [BCW] are in a space where you have some distance from the trauma but that part of you is still really tender. We tend to mistake that experience for an act of healing but sometimes we are reliving that trauma in that fucking moment.

Although there is no biological evidence to support it, catharsis (emotional discharge) is commonly understood as the release of emotions necessary for recovery from trauma (Briere 1989). Catharsis is one step in the process towards recovery from trauma (Herman 1997). On the other hand, healing is generally framed as the process of making something or someone healthy or whole. It is easy to mistake one for the other because, for many, the process of release feels freeing and wholeness is often equated with being unburdened. Theorists investigating the link between healing and art propose that, cathartic trauma stories should have "open narratives that never end, rather than closed narratives that presume to wish away wounds rather than working

through scars" (Bandy Lee et.al, Peter Lang, 2015). In excavating the pain, Black Cultural Workers are often led to believe that by testifying they are healing; but sometimes it is simply a momentary release of collective pain. Trauma is a fractured, stealthy phenomenon. Cultural trauma, such as the one Black Americans are experiencing now, will leave resonances that will haunt the next generation.

> When we [BCW] are putting it out there on the page or stage– there is this rush to publish and to see it. We are urged to rip out that painful shit and then we get lost in the admiration.

This quote implies that the admiration, combined with the catharsis, helps to create the illusion of healing. An important part of identity formation is high regard for one's group. When other Black people affirm and admire a BCW' catharsis about Black pain, it may contribute to that feeling of high regard, racial pride, and collectivity. Additionally, the rush to "publish and to see it" works on two levels. One, there is the need for cathartic release of pain. This occurs when survivors of trauma have the opportunity to express the full ranges of emotions (Briere 1989). Secondly, the act of having others "see it" reflects the desire to have one's perception, reality, or experience validated by the audience. On the other, there is the real economic consideration Black Cultural Workers must take into account. Black artists are workers just like teachers, day laborers and academics - and have to make some choices about whether they mine their own pain for profit. Following up on this thread, I asked her to clarify the link between her poetry and her own healing.

> When I think about healing for myself I think about a poem I've been trying to writes since I was 18 called, *What I'm Afraid Of Poem.* What feels different about it now is that it feels necessary in my journey. I'm putting it out there now because it's my story and I need to tell it. Knowing you control the story, you own the story and know why you are or are not putting it out there is key. Healing poetry means having agency over how you wrote it, what you do with it, who sees it. It means trusting that the power of your work comes from your craft and not just the power of the story.

Control of the narrative and its production is the key to creating Black pain testimony that is healing, not just cathartic. An important distinction to note is the difference between knowing it is the "craft" i.e., the art that contributes to the power of the story, not just the story itself. Black pain narratives are part and parcel of the American artistic landscape. This acknowledgment interrupts the potential for Black cultural testimony to be dismissed as sentimental storytelling, "texts that represent history, events, people and/or conflicts in simplistic emotional binaries" (Wanzo 2006). Sentimental stories ignore the complexity of emotional response and the systemic factors that undergird traumatic stories, while relying on excess emotionality and audience mimicry to elicit a response. This is especially common in stories about Black women's suffering, which are often only legible in narratives of Black female resiliency. Stories that illustrate black women's nimbleness as they constantly navigate their gender, race and caste (Parks 2013) are most powerful when Black Cultural Workers are able to maintain control over the story they create. Black Cultural Workers are then able to leave the work and the *audience* whole.

Out of Mind, Into Sight

Representing Group Consciousness (Stephen)

In Black American culture, to "represent" generally means to acknowledge one's home, background or social group. Sometimes "represent" is closer in meaning to "shout out", which refers to signifying. Both terms are used as markers of legitimacy and to note one's social location. For Black Cultural Workers who act as survivors by proxy, to represent Black cultural trauma is to speak for and to the experiences of Black people collectively. It is a process of distilling trauma down to its essential meaning. Examining the aesthetic of Black visual artists over time, Celeste-Marie Bernier identifies history, memory, improvisation, narrative, and resistance as consistent themes in their work, from slavery to the present (Bernier 2008). At their best, Black Cultural Workers create complex, multi-layered, and compassionate stories that help Black people navigate cultural trauma. To do that, Black Cultural Workers must engage their interiority to speak to the collective. For this to occur, Black Cultural Workers must 1) be willing to be vulnerable, 2) be able to articulate a multi-layered understanding of the self and, 3) foster knowledge of Black history and legacies to support an empathetic understanding of Black trauma.

Engaging Vulnerability

In *The Sovereignty of Quiet*, Kevin Quashie identifies vulnerability as the state in which Black collectivity and interiority intersect. He calls attention to images of lunch counter protests during the civil rights era, which show Black students reading or being meditative even as they are vulnerable to pending violence (Quashie 2012). Formally trained in non-violent strategies, their work for the collective forces them to

turn inward (Ackerman, Duvall 2000). Confusion, loss, fear, insecurity, dreams, whimsy and potential victimization are all reflective of an intimate inner life. Sometimes artists use that vulnerability to speak to and for, the collective.

Stephen Towns and I worked together at the Maryland Institute College of Art. When I started there in 2011, he was not making much art. Over the four years of our working relationship, I watched him slowly and deliberately reclaim his spark. Now his work is featured at the Baltimore Museum of Art and he garners artist talks with the likes of Amy Sherald and Mark Bradford. When I sat down to meet with him in his studio, works I'd seen previously, sketches, photographs from his recent trip to Ghana and material for a new show created a fitting background to discuss representation and collectivity. As does happen when we chat, the deep dive began immediately. I asked him to clarify what he meant during Kitchen Table Talks when he said that, *"Baltimore has shown me what poverty can do to people and awakened me to how people live" (KTT 3).* I found this statement puzzling because he, just like I, grew up impoverished. I had assumed we shared a similar understanding of what it meant to be poor as a child but his comments reminded me that Southern poverty differs from urban poverty. His further clarification provides helpful insight into the links between interiority and vulnerability.

> It [living in Baltimore] has helped me develop numbness because I am seeing very painful things regularly. My old self would take on the pain but now I'm better able to control the amount of physical pain that I take. It's like taking medicine. It takes mental numbness to survive this. The gift of empathy is dangerous in our world.

Becoming numb is an interior process. Some research suggests that emotional numbness may develop as a sort of coping mechanism, acting to desensitize

individuals exposed to extreme or continual stress (Kennedy, Cebello 2016). There is no question that Baltimore is a town that can expose one to continual stress. Driven by its poverty, Baltimore City's mortality rate is 30% higher than the rest of the state (BCHD 2018). Additionally, a May 2018 report by the FBI ranked Baltimore City in the top 5 of the most violent cities in America, with 98.6 violent crimes per 10,000 residents (CBS News May 2018). It is important to note that numbness is not always an indication of a negative emotional state. Some psychologists identify numbness (emotional desensitization) as an adaptive strategy (Swisher, Latzman 2008), which is influenced by a number of factors across one's life course. For a Black Cultural Worker who considers their self to be empathetic, the process of numbing out reads like a survival strategy. Stephen's revelation illuminates his vulnerability and his process for mitigating it. Referring to numbing as medicine highlights that its balm is short-lived and must be reapplied often. His reference to empathy as "dangerous" also shows an inner life that recognizes the toll empathy can have on artist's feelings of safety in the world.

To represent the consciousness of the community, Black Cultural Workers like Stephen have to be comfortable with their vulnerability. Vulnerability is generally seen as the anti-thesis of strength. It is often paired with victimization – the exact state that Black people are supposed to actively work against to make progress collectively (Quashie, 2012). However, Audre Lorde posited that, "the visibility which makes us most vulnerable is that which also is the source of our greatest strength" (Lorde 1984). My discussions with BCW suggest that vulnerability lies at the center of Black cultural production and just like the non-violent strategies that

helped bolster the Civil Rights Movement, being vulnerable is a sign of strength, not a weakness.

A Multi-layered Self

Being vulnerable means bravely living with uncertainty, subconscious doubt and complexity. It also means trying hard to understand why you do, what you do. Talking about the reason he makes art, Stephen shares:

> I feel like I communicate better artistically than verbally. It helps me to process and digest the ills of humanity and the process of humanity. Through my art, I understand the why and how without going completely insane.

This statement shows an extreme vulnerability and a clear awareness of the role art plays in his life. It also calls attention to the second component for engaging the interiority to speak for the collective – a multi-layered understanding of the self and of the way one's Blackness works in space. I asked Stephen to list his identities in order of salience to flesh out this line of inquiry.

> I identify as Black, Black American, Artist, Thinker, Male, and Gay. None of it is in opposition. I know how my gayness can make me comfortable in a room full of Whiteness: a positive. A negative would be in a barbershop where I'd have to reserve my gayness. I am aware that I am with another Black male and our gayness helps us and hinders us – when two black men go into a space, we are a threat. If our gayness comes out in a white space it makes us safer. If I'm in the hotel that gayness has to be taken out. I am constantly figuring out of how am I fitting in. I get to be an artist when I'm in my studio or when I'm doing an art a show. When I am putting art out there, it gives the viewer a lens they can use to see themselves.

Stephen identifies as Black then Black American, which is an interesting perspective that I suspect was amplified by his recent trip to Ghana. There he'd really tapped into the reality of Diaspora. He revealed that, "in Ghana, I just felt like a human being. Not black. Everyone around me was dark skinned. I didn't feel racially profiled. It

was me being an outsider because I was American, not because of my race." Prior to his trip, I'd introduced him to Saidya Hartman's *Lose Your Mother* and he thanked me because he felt the text "grounded him so he wouldn't expect much". It is a sentiment reminiscent of Dionne Brand's *Door of No Return* where she muses, "one does not return to the Diaspora with good news from the door except the news that it exists and its existence is the truth" (Brand 26). Black people often return from visiting the door of no return with the knowledge that they are indeed connected to a collective…and that is all. Stephen came back from Ghana with a feeling of connection to the Diaspora because he was treated as a dark-skinned man amongst dark-skinned people. He "didn't feel profiled" around race. He felt profiled due to his American identity.

The identity salience questions also helped articulate the reality of navigating multiple social identities. Harvey Young states, "the black body exists as a theoretical construct that both represents and creates the experiences of multiple, individuated bodies within certain contexts" (Young 2010). As a gay Black man, Stephen is constantly aware of the effect he has on the spaces he occupies. He knows as a Black male a myriad of desires, fears, and fantasies are projected onto him. He makes White people comfortable by amplifying his gay identity. He manages to remain safe in Black male, heterosexual spaces by curtailing all markers that may target him as an outsider in those spaces. Due to a lifetime of these experiences, both positive and negative, he knows which social identities to amplify and the possible outcomes from making the right/wrong choice at any given time. It is this kind of multi-layered

understanding of the self and Blackness that creates the condition for Black Cultural Workers to be survivors by proxy.

Acknowledging Legacies

Black cultural production provides a reflection of Black experiences while also providing a road map for safely navigating Blackness in a hostile world. In an interview on the blog, *Black Perspectives*, Black artist and scholar Elizabeth Burden identifies four aesthetics of Black cultural production. An aesthetic of identity: are artworks that enact, reflect, represent, and transmit heritage. An aesthetic of social justice is politically engaged, producing art and artifacts that evoke conflicts about power and its uses/abuses that is an aesthetic of social justice. An aesthetic of subjectivity embraces the unique position of Blackness, negate it, or confront it, reflecting an aesthetic of subjectivity and an aesthetic of ontology, explores the meaning of Blackness, whiteness, or other-nesses (Burden, 2018). Regardless of whether the Black Cultural Worker has an aesthetic of identity, social justice, subjectivity, or ontology, Black arts do work. A part of that work is being able to place collective memory and trauma in context. To speak for the collective through the interior, a survivor by proxy must have an understanding of the histories and legacies that impact the collective.

> For me, everybody is not good. There are parts of humanity that are horrible. We are crabs in a barrel – we have a President that is an example of that. People never have the conversation about the working class that is not attached to Whiteness. They totally ignore Black disenfranchisement. Knowing those conversations are not going to happen – make my work a meditation. I listen to books about slavery and oppression and it helps me process these things. Humanity is not always a pretty word- it's very ugly. My meditation helps me answer questions like: How do I exist within it? How do I recognize the bad parts of myself in humanity? How am I doing harm? How do I do better?

When he is preparing for a show, he researches the topic –seeking out books, photographs, first-person accounts, and scholarly articles. He spends hours absorbing information and following threads that often lead to dynamic configurations as mixed

media pieces. It is an immersive process that allows him to sit and ruminate on the nature of Black trauma. This rumination is part academic exercise to determine why humanity is the way it is. It is also part self-reflexive, allowing him to situate himself within the trauma. Stephen refers to his process as a meditation. Meditation involves cultivating a level of empathy with oneself and the world around them. Empathy allows us to identify with another's experience without erasing the person 's experiences. Nursing scholar Theresa Wiseman identified four attributes of empathy: to be able to see the world as others see it, to be non-judgmental, to understand another person's feelings and, to communicate the understanding of that person's feelings (Wiseman 1996). By situating himself within the trauma, with a fuller understanding of the causes, and an eye to empathy, Stephen is able to develop cultural responsive art. His meditation becomes the audience's roadmap to navigating Black cultural trauma. There is power in the "ah ha!" moment that occurs when one has their feelings and perceptions reflected back at them. It is also powerful to be provided context for perceptions/feelings one experiences in the wake of cultural trauma, especially because of the way Black cultural trauma is often dismissed and disavowed.

Testimony

Just being Black, having the temerity to proclaim oneself a working artist challenges the structures of domination. At the same time it also capitulates to those structures. – Elizabeth Burden, (aaihs.org) 2015

I conclude this chapter with an analysis of work from Saida Agostini and Stephen Towns to provide examples of what it means for Black Cultural Workers to be survivors by proxy. I asked each to share a piece of their art that reflects their

understanding of the impact of trauma on Blackness. This analysis is designed to examine how these Black Cultural Workers engage performance of identity, collective memory and historical blackness in order to speak to the lived experiences of black people.

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when it is 2 pm in your office and you have a flashback to that moment you were raped
Baltimore, November 2017

go into the bathroom, make an animal of your lips.
snarl, push your back against the wall, be grateful for everything your body forgot, make your story the anchor: *i was only six* see her on the floor: that big moon faced semi colon of boy trying to stuff all his human into her. imagine all the questions you could ask if he showed up today all lost and foolish in those dirty white sneakers he dragged every day in the new jersey dirt searching for mica, like was it true that his daddy would make the brothers strip before he beat them - the skin peeling like bark, how you marveled the way black could go from walnut to white, the blush of red inside -saida, would you kill him? for these thirty years of loss copulating - all this time you been here so black and woman waiting to be believed? or would you know that this lesson would've come some other way, as sure as the moon. you are weeping for the days you would gladly bury every knife in his chest, let agony's children sing an anthem to his bones. imagine the feast you would have before his body
your hands now grown closed round his throat once again, his eyes a forest primeval
could you love him then? that 14 year old bruised boy in a torn hoodie immolating whole cities - would you love the american in him?

This poem begins with the flashback – a sudden reexperiencing of the trauma (Briere, 1989) that transforms her lips into an animal. By the end of the poem, she has subjectivity again, she is able to name herself. That process of transformation from human to animal and back to human is wholly individual and is a peek into her interior. We are plunged into her story – first physically through descriptions of her body (lips, back), then psychically as she "anchors" her story in the past. Once there,

she sketches out the vulnerabilities – hers, a six year old girl; his, a 14 year old "semi-colon of a boy" - both are half-persons– not quite formed. For both of them, this experience is a stop along the way. She brings in the possibility that she would have learned the lesson of rape at some point in her life- suggesting it is a rite of passage for women. She also grounds his violence in the continuing cycle of domestic abuse. Sketching out the small details, wounded Black skin turning "walnut to white"; "dirty white sneakers" dragging in dirt filled with mineral- this poem mimics the rhythm of traumatic memory in which the victim witness recalls only snippets and are often are unable to provide a clear linear narrative (Herman 1992). The staccato rhythm is also impacted by 30 years of life in between the incident and its retelling. As she comes back to the present, the poem moves from visceral experience to inquisitiveness - she questions herself, understanding that this traumatic event has metatistzed within her Black female identity. She grieves for her childhood and her inability to hurt him back at the time – she can now, but would she want to?

In a discussion about choosing poetry as her medium, Saida mused that, "when I'm thinking about poetry – it's a way of processing shit. That's part of the work. My job as a poet is to be in witness of my own journey and the journey of others. Circling and circling my wound and exploring how it has replicated across generations." This poem certainly does that. Flashbacks "represent the mind's attempt to heal itself" (Briere 1989). As dramatic, jarring and nightmarish as they are, flashbacks allow the survivors to slowly accept bits of memory and begin to process and eventually integrate the experience – lessening the overall pain of the trauma over time. According to Black Women's Blueprint, 60% of Black girls have

experienced sexual abuse at the hands of Black men before the age of 18 (BWB 2011). Her poem highlights the link between rape and race, where the traumatized Black boy traumatizes a Black girl as punishment (hooks 2004). In the title she calls the experience what it is –rape. She wasn't "touched"; she did not call it "unwanted" or "inappropriate". She called it rape, which from the beginning of the poem, combats the casual depictions of the way people think about, minimize and normalize sexual violence in everyday life (Young, 2016). In the end, this poem does the work associated with Black cultural production. She provides a roadmap for Black women to contextualize their own trauma by: naming rape, showing the process and potential healing effects of a flashback, highlighting cycles of trauma for Black men and women and providing some thoughtful considerations about empathy. By being in witness of her own journey, Saida becomes a survivor by proxy for other Black women who have experienced sexual abuse.

Stephen Towns, Shall It Declare Thy Truth_2016_Acrylic Oil Metal Leaf Bristol Board Canvas and Paper on Panel_24x18.jpg

In an artist talk, Stephen discussed his love of trash television as a child. He was an avid consumer of Jerry Springer and stayed up late to watch it. About this, he says, "it wasn't until I became an adult that I started reading historical narratives, and then when I started reading about slavery, taking a deep dive, then everything made sense. What I saw on Jerry Springer made sense…I saw how people got to a place and how we are still in that place" (artBMA). In his consumption, Stephen sees what Christina Sharpe defines as post-slavery subjects -those who continue to be shaped by the sexual and racialized subjugation of slavery (Sharpe, 2010). Post-slavery subjects dominate his art as well. His work holds multiple stories, both intimate and collective.

Shall It Declare Thy Truth is a part of Stephen's series on the Southampton Insurrection, also known as Nate Turner's Rebellion. The rebellion of the enslaved in Southampton County Virginia occurred in 1831 in which the enslaved killed over 50 white men, women and children. Nat Turner's rebellion was inspired by stories in the Bible and he was called to action supposedly by the word of God itself. In retaliation, the state killed 120 enslaved Black people, several of whom were not involved in the rebellion at all. In this portrait, Stephen has painted himself into the rebellion. He holds a noose around his neck and stares somewhat defiantly at the world. The starry night provides a darkened backdrop; the moon provides him a halo and two butterflies circle the canvas. Butterflies and halos are motifs that appear frequently in Stephen's work. I will begin at this site in the canvas.

For Stephen, butterflies represent the spirit. The butterfly on the left side of the canvas appears close to his cheek, ready to grace it with a kiss. The second butterfly makes a wedding band on the fingers of the hand holding the noose. These fluttering spirits are ready to usher him to other side of the trauma, while the moon provides a halo. When discussing the use of halos in his portraits, Stephen asks often asks, "how can you call somebody ugly if they have a halo behind them?" (artBMA). In this painting, the butterflies and the halos are attempts at showing the divine righteousness of Black people. They are already magic – alive or dead. The dark blue background places the portrait in a time before electricity, where the enslaved plotted in the dead of night, using the moon, the stars, and their wits to navigate the hostile world. Other features in the background suggests there is some subtlety in environment– the stars are feathered sketches that look like wings, the moon, the portraits' only illumination, is red rimmed, adding portent to the frame. The noose suggests the agency of the enslaved people who participated in the rebellion. They were aware that they might not live through the rebellion or succeed. They knew the penalty would be death but they decided to try anyway, they took their lives into their own hands, much like those who chose death over bondage during the Middle Passage journey. Finally, his gaze, which aside from the noose, is the most arresting element of the frame. He is gaze looks as if he taking a self-portrait with his camera or is testing out the composition while looking in the mirror. His right eye is slightly shut, suggesting he is trying to get the proper angle, while the left stares almost ahead. He is not smiling, nor does he appear afraid. He just is.

Shall It Declare Thy Truth is a passage in the King James Bible. Psalm 30 is a dedication of the house of David, and suggests one's mourning can be turned into dancing, however, there is no telling of the costs. This portrait was included in *A Migration*, an installation that was mounted in the Rosenberg Gallery at Goucher College. The image is one of five portraits of Black people from the Nat Turner Rebellion. The portraits from this series are on his website where visitors can experience them as well. When a Black staff member at Goucher saw the row of portraits with various Black people holding nooses around their necks, she complained. Out of respect for this woman's trauma, Stephen had the images taken down but left the taped framing where the portraits where mounted. He included a statement that described his rationale for removing the paintings. As I discussed earlier, this is the portrait he provided to me when I requested a piece of art that reflects his understanding of Blackness and trauma. Someone was traumatized by his art on Blackness and trauma. Just like the portrait's gaze seems to be looking at a mirror or phone, the trauma of this portrait and its exhibition continues a cycle. The portrait and the exhibition experience illustrate the plight of those who are post-slavery subjects.

First, this portrait reflects frustration with the way slavery is rarely seen as a Holocaust. Unpacking cultural trauma, sociologist Ron Eyerman, posits that after the Civil War, "a distinct gap emerged between the collective memory of a re-constructed minority group and the equally reconstructed dominant group in post-reconstruction America: the one which controlled the resources had the power to shape public memory" (Eyerman, 2001). In creating an exhibit about the Nat Turner Rebellion,

Stephen re-introduces this moment in American history to many who never heard of it or do not want to believe that something as long ago as slavery in the U.S. still resonates in the lives of Blacks in the present. Historian, Edward Baptist makes a compelling argument when he suggests that America tries to place American slavery outside of U.S. history so that it is not implicated in US prosperity. He states that, "if the worst thing about slavery was that it denied African Americans the liberal rights of the citizen, one must merely offer them the title of citizen- even elect one of them president – to make amends. Then the issue will be put to rest forever" (Baptist 2014). The Nat Turner Rebellion resulted in the death of 50 White men, women and children and the deaths of 120 enslaved Black people in retaliation. It is a story that is not often told in schools. It is what Edward Linenthall calls a "fishbone" or "indigestible" story that the United States has yet to reckon with (2006). By placing himself in the work, Stephen makes the connection across generations to those who were enslaved and those who chose to rebel. On his website, Stephen explains that this series of works, "pay homage to enslaved blacks who led rebellions and lost their lives as a result of their actions" (stephentowns.com). A BCW becomes a survivor by proxy by witnessing trauma with an artist's eye, communicating the trauma story for the Black community, and bringing their full self to bear in the process of art making. By placing himself in the painting, Stephen is embodying survivor by proxy. His work is not inviting detachment but engagement and immersion. Audiences of his work are invited to become survivors by proxy as well. But despite being provided full context for the work, the staff member at Goucher rejected his invitation to

become immersed in the work and possibly gain a richer, more empathetic relationship with a shared cultural trauma.

In Lose Your Mother, after talking with her great-grandfather about his recollection of slavery, Saidya Hartman realized that, "I had been looking for relatives whose only proof of existence was fragments of stories and names that repeated themselves across generations" (Hartman 2007). There are no pictures of the enslaved people who rebelled that weekend in Southampton. Only one monument to the Nat Turner Rebellion remains – it is the church where Nat Turner did his ministry. By placing himself and other contemporary Black people in portraits related to this incident, Stephen attempts to add a face to all those who remain unnamed and unclaimed in American history. Another way this portrait speaks for Black Americans is its recognition of the fears, desires, fantasies that live on in the bodies of Black people. Black cultural production is haunted by the image of wounded Black people. This "dialectic of fear and fantasy" (Jackson 2011) is one of the many markers of a post-slavery subject. In the portrait, Stephen's noose is both jarring and expected because of the legacy of lynching and lynching photography that inspires its composition. On one hand, the viewer is invited to speculate about the horror that will befall him. On the other, he is doing it to himself, engaging in a sure to be fatal expression of bodily autonomy and agency. He owns his potential wounding and by doing so, owns his vulnerability. This is very common in the Black community on different ways. Young Black men who participate in informal economies must own their risk of wounding and death. Black men who are simply driving at night must own their risk of wounding and death. This common positioning of Black men as

vulnerable to violence – either by the state or their own actions, is deeply familiar in the Black psyche. But just because Black men are vulnerable to violence does not afford them victim-hood status by the dominant culture. Nor does it elicit automatic empathy. People who are framed as already deviant cannot assume they'll be afforded the perception of innocence. "The imaginary of black male woundedness is a representation of a representation, an idea refracting in so many lenses that a specific genealogy of the image is impossible" (Jackson 61). It may be impossible to trace its specific genealogy but it is certainly *felt* when examining this portrait. *Shall It Declare Thy Truth* interrogates Black agency amidst a web of half understood collective traumas. It teases at memory long forgotten and attempts to bridge the gap between the past and present. It is ultimately a portrait that questions where Black Americans belong. This is best summarized in Stephen's own words.

> Black Americans – people hate us but want to be us. Even in Ghana that sentiment exists. I feel like Black Americans are a breed of people that have no place in the world. I don't even know if I would use the word hate. I would use hate and envy. What is Black? What is your performance of Black American? I think we are hated by lots of people. They are always asking, 'Why can't you all disappear? ' 'Why can't this history disappear?' 'I don't want to think about it all the time, why don't you get over it?' But I can't get over it. I won't.

Conclusion

As survivors by proxy, these Black Cultural Workers witness by showing the fullness of Black humanity in their work. At moments, you can see past the collective and personal traumas and catch a glimmer into that liminal space Ama Chandra calls love. As survivors by proxy, Black Cultural Workers witness by affirming the knowledge that humans do terrible things but humans are not evil. In

their work and the approach to their work, you see the frustration that comes with having an empathetic gaze into humanity.

Chapter 5: A Periscopic Gaze

"When we open ourselves to the bonds of loss and pain, we lessen what debilitates us; we assert life and its beauty. We open ourselves to the bonds of love, expansively understood." - Cindy Milstein, *Rebellious Mourning*, 2017

This dissertation continues with a brief auto-ethnography, which examines my own understanding of trauma as it relates to my viewing practices. Taking a cue from Christina Sharpe's most recent work, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, and Sadiya Hartman's *Lose Your Mother*, this auto-ethnography uses personal life events to further theorize the connections between trauma, identity, and witnessing. As Sharpe so eloquently puts it, "I include the personal here to connect the social forces on a specific, particular family's being in the wake to those of all Black people in the wake; to mourn and to illustrate the ways our individual lives are always swept up in the wake produced and determined, though not absolutely, by the after-lives of slavery" (Sharpe, ch.1). This brief turn to auto-ethnography not only personalizes this dissertation, it also provides the groundwork for the final meditation in chapter six, which summarizes the work of this project and theorizes ways to view trauma from an afro-futurist perspective.

If someone were to ask me how trauma informs my viewing practices, my immediate response would be, "Which kind? Personal? Cultural? Historical?" If someone were to ask me how trauma informs my social identity, I would respond similarly. Broadly defined, psychological trauma results from "an event or series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically or

emotionally harmful or life threatening and that has lasting adverse effects on the individual's functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being" (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA], 2012, p. 7). Scholars of Indigenous Studies have documented the phenomenon of historical trauma as "the cumulative emotional and psychological wounding, as a result of group traumatic experiences, which is transmitted across generations within a community" (SAMHSA, 2015). As described in previous chapters of this dissertation, cultural trauma and collective trauma are phenomena associated with group experiences of wounding, which permanently impact entire collectives. Both my ways of seeing trauma imagery and my self-identity are intertwined with what I have come to understand as a spectrum of traumatic experiences, both small and large. These experiences are all related to the poverty I experienced in childhood.

The fields of public health, psychology and sociology have studied the links between poverty and trauma from social and economic perspectives. Childhood poverty is a multifaceted phenomenon that affects multiple aspects of a child's life (Pitillas 2013). Children in poor households are four times more likely to suffer physical abuse, are twice as likely to be abandoned, and are more likely to adopt self-harming behaviors (Ayton, Rasool, and Cottrell 2003). Childhood poverty has been identified as an Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE), which links poverty to risky health behaviors, chronic health conditions, low-life expectancy, and early death (Ratnani et al. 2015, S90). In light of these factors, poverty puts a child at risk for experiencing traumatic incidents throughout their lives. Poverty is both a social class determined by income level and a social identity, meaning it is formed through ones'

interactions with others (Sen 2008). A life of scarcity has a psychological impact on one's social identities, impacting one's educational choices, romantic partners and career aspirations (Hudson 2014).

Formation of identity occurs through the acknowledgement that other people are like you. Oppression and exclusion may occur when people identify you as different in one way or another. Being perceived as poor is often framed as being "the other". This framing can lead to social exclusion from the majority group (Sen 2000). My introduction to my status as impoverished developed through a framing of "otherness". In a neighborhood where the line between middle class and working poor was very tenuous (SEIU 2003), seeing myself framed as "the other" led to traumatic experiences. However, it also facilitated some generative ways of witnessing trauma.

Periscopic Gaze

A periscope is the eye of the submarine. It provides a means to view what is above without fear of detection by crafts on the surface of the water (Maritime Park Association 2013). When I think about my childhood, I see myself operating like a human periscope. Poverty and the subsequent insecurities that come with it fostered in me a tendency to gauge my own safety by discreetly observing and reading the currents around me. This way of seeing is a "periscopic gaze". The periscopic gaze is a strategic mode of observation developed for self-protection. Growing up poor in West Baltimore, I struggled to make sense of what motivated people's actions and emotions so I could determine my next move. This constant way of seeing taught me how to read power dynamics from a very early age. In *Black Feminist Thought,*

Patricia Hill Collins describes power as both a force that some groups use to oppress others and "an intangible entity that operates throughout a society and is organized in particular domains" (2005). She goes on to identify these interrelated domains as structural (involving institutional entities); disciplinary (modes that sustain bureaucratic hierarchies); hegemonic (images, symbols and ideologies that foster oppression); and interpersonal (patterns of behavior between individuals and groups), (Dill, Zambrana 2009). Though the work of academic Black intersectional feminists was unknown to me as a child, when I reflect upon my periscopic gaze, I realize many of my observations about inequality and gender reflect those four domains. The periscopic gaze is a situated knowledge (Haraway 1998), a strategy for seeing developed through my lived experience. The periscopic gaze fostered my ability to 1) recognize how inequality manifests in a given situation; and 2) identify the stakes in volatile situations. These mechanisms directly contribute to the way I witness images of Black pain, wounding and death as an adult.

Seeing Domains of Power

My mother often joked that I came out of her womb with my fist raised in protest. I have always chuckled at the notion because of how intuitively truthful it feels, particularly as it relates to recognizing gender inequality. The mustard yellow, three-story duplex apartment I lived in from elementary through middle school was filled with single mothers. Most of them worked, formally and informally. Our small apartment was located on the second floor and housed me, my older sister, my brother and, my mother. As the youngest, I was always underfoot. I worshiped my mother. She was a stay at home mother on public assistance but she would occasionally work

with my aunt as a domestic worker. In the third grade, my Social Studies teacher asked who my best friend was and I said, "my mom". My mother put up with my endless litany of questions about the world. Most of them were related to my curiosity, but many of them were just an excuse to engage her in conversation. To any questions she could not or was not in the mood to answer, she would instruct me to, "look it up." And I could because we had three separate sets of encyclopedias. My father was an encyclopedia salesman and my mother had taken them when she divorced him and moved us from Connecticut to Baltimore. She was an avid reader; had a progressive politic, a sense of humor and a deep sadness. Informally, my mother was the building supervisor/matriarch and our apartment was home base for many of the women and their children when they were seeking respite or advice. Over the years, the families on the first and third floors changed, but from my earliest memories to the age of twelve, my family remained on the second floor. And my mother held court.

I have painted this portrait of the yellow house because it is there that my awareness of gender and inequality was forged. Poor Black people are subject to endless levels of surveillance (Brown 2014, Harris 1999, Lee, Sewall, Jefferson 2015) as a means of asserting disciplinary power. In my experience, this surveillance manifested as the intrusion of the social workers and case managers that many of the women in our building were forced to engage with in order to receive public assistance. I accompanied my mother to appointments at the Department of Social Services where I witnessed her indignation at the intrusion of these same entities. Surveillance was reflected in my constant awareness of police officers and detectives

on our block. Their presence made me feel as if our lives were always on display and that we were always vulnerable to violence. Underfoot, I listened to the stories the women told my mother about the bureaucracy they navigated just to visit their boyfriends' who were incarcerated. Or to apply for social security when their husbands had passed. The disciplinary power of surveillance often intersected with hegemonic and interpersonal domains in the privacy of the yellow house.

Disciplinary and Hegemonic Power Plays

The yellow house was one of many West Baltimore homes owned by Tony Tripp, a figure in Baltimore who owned several popular nightclubs. Some would call him an absentee landlord because of the way he neglected his properties and disregarded the livelihood of his tenants. A man named Darnell was the property manager. He had access to each of the apartments in our duplex and was called when repairs were needed. As the matriarch of the building, my mother was the one who called Darnell for other tenants. This is where I witnessed the intersection of disciplinary and hegemonic power manifest. I was always uncomfortable with his presence. Not just because there were very few adult men in our house, but also because he stared at, and commented on the bodies of the women in our building. He was critical of the women. Darnell's frequent critiques were never lobbed at my brother, who flowed in and out of the house with his group of friends. Nor was it directed towards the other young men in the building. Neither mothers, nor their daughters were spared Darnell's critique and assessment. One such incident occurred in the summer when I was ten years old.

Darnell was called to the yellow house to fix a leaking sink on the third floor, which was creating problems for our apartment below. As he and my mother chatted about the problem, I noticed his attention was split between my mother and my older sister, who was prepping the table for dinner. My sister is four years older than me and never seemed to like his presence either. I recall Darnell commenting to my mother, "She sure is getting old. You need to watch out for that." My mother responded, "Don't worry about my children." As opposed to this stopping his comments, Darnell became more emboldened. He looked at me and said, "And that one right there, she seems hard-headed." I do not recall my mother's retort; all I could recall was my feeling of embarrassment and shame. How was I hard headed? I was extremely amenable to my mother's wishes. I was a serious child. Was it because I asked questions of adults? Was it because I did not put on a fake smile to make myself seem approachable? Was it because I refused to be submissive?

A part of utilizing a periscopic gaze is paying attention to body language. Upon hearing his critique, my sister bowed her head and focused on the dishes she was washing. I noticed the subtle way my mother moved to block Darnell's gaze from staying on my sister. Her usually relaxed posture was stiff, not combative but protective. The move seemed instinctive, not deliberate. My mother's immediate response, "Don't worry about my children" came so suddenly, it is easy to imagine this was a refrain she used previously or at least thought about in the past. Her mixture of indignation and wariness has stayed with me over the years. I have heard her voice in my own when I encounter gendered and racial slights. I could tell by her tone how much she desired to respond more aggressively but could not. This was

because of the power dynamics involved. From a hegemonic perspective, Darnell felt he had the right to act as a patriarch – paternalistic and judging of a poor Black woman's parenting style. His concern stemmed from the standpoint that Black women's children are unruly, and potentially degenerate because of their ability to replicate undesirable social patterns (Collins 2000). From a structural standpoint, he had direct power over our quality of life in this scenario. Not only could he have refused to fix the leak which was impacting our home, as the building manager, he also had the direct ear of our landlord. My mother, on the other hand, had a vested interest in protecting her daughters while maintaining some level of status as the matriarch of the building. The landlord, and Darnell by extension, responded to my mother's calls. In an impoverished community, having somewhat direct access to those who have power over one's quality of life (landlord, probation officer, social worker) is necessary for survival. As children, my sister and I had very little power in the situation. Neither of us spoke up to defend ourselves, though it was obvious by her body language that the words impacted my sister.

Three years later, this "power" my mother had as building matriarch was not sufficient enough to protect our family and the other families in the building from eviction. The eviction was brought on by the mothers' refusal to pay rent until the landlord fixed the electricity and gas in the building. The electricity for the entire building was illegally wired through our second floor apartment. This resulted in my mother receiving astronomical bills from Baltimore Gas and Electric and the other mother's experiencing frequent power outages. The mothers banded together to withhold rent until the situation was resolved. They lost their fight in rent court and

we were all forced to move within thirty days. This practice is extremely common in impoverished communities in Baltimore. Though rent court was designed to be "a tribunal that would hold landlords accountable for violating newly enacted safety codes" it often works in the favor of the landlords over the tenants (Donovan, Marbella 2017). Neither my mother's status as a long-term tenant, nor as the matriarch of the building was enough to save our family from an extremely abrupt shift. As Angela Davis makes clear, "working class women, and women of color in particular, confront sexist oppression in a way that reflects the real and complex objective interconnections between economic, racial and sexual oppression" (78). In light of this convergence, how does a group of poor mothers fight a corrupt landlord and a corrupt housing authority?

School was another site where the trauma of childhood poverty helped me learn how to read power. My mother encouraged us to work hard in school, and to me, striving to do well was a no-brainer. She never said it but underlying every admonishment to "finish your homework", "look it up", was the adage – "do not embarrass me". In elementary school, I was particularly interested in theater and the humanities so I signed up to participate in every school assembly when able. As a veracious reader, I also liked to participate in Dramatic Reading Contests. These competitions pitted students of the same grade and gender against one another. Students were able to choose from a work of age appropriate poetry, select a piece of writing, a story, or an excerpt from a play to read dramatically or select a famous persuasive speech. Students were graded on their presentation, originality, creativity, length, and content. In the fourth grade, I decided to select a passage from an Alfred

Hitchcock horror anthology and perform it. I signed up to the competition on my own and chose the passage on my own. At home, I practiced my dramatic reading of this grim werewolf story for weeks in front of everyone who would sit for four minutes. On the day of the event, I came to school prepared (I believed) to perform. The competition was eleven o'clock before lunch. As I walked down the hallway, I caught the attention of Ms. Randall, the fourth grade English teacher. Her first words were, "I thought you were competing today." I did not understand the irritation in her tone. I replied, "I am. I've been practicing." She looked me up and down with her nostrils flared and preceded to stick her finger in the hole in my polo shirt. It was my favorite shirt – I'd picked it out myself at the beginning of the school year. With her finger still in my shirt she said, "You can't participate looking like that. What's wrong with you?" In her words, I heard disdain, not just for me but judgment about my mother's parenting. I tried hard not to cry. I scrambled to explain that no one had told me I had to dress up for the competition. I also explained that I did not have any dress clothes of my own. She said I could not participate without being dressed appropriately so I went home, came back in an outdated skirt and shirt from my older sisters' wardrobe and arrived just in time to perform. I was so embarrassed that it was hard for me to do my best. I stood there in hand-me downs feeling like an alien and I lost the competition. I realized in retrospect, no one had informed me of the general rules of the competition other than the basics – choose a passage and read it. I also realized each of the other students had a teacher as a mentor who had coached them, helped them determine the best passage to read and set them up for the

performance. I had entered the contest on my own and no one had bothered to provide this guidance.

This painful incident sticks with me for a variety of reasons. As an educator, it forces me to pay closer attention to the lives of my student's outside of the classroom. It is actually one of the primary pedagogical reasons I begin each of my classes with a general check-in where I devote five minutes for students to share highlights of their lives. This not only builds camaraderie amongst my students, it also alerts me to potential issues my students' may be experiencing. As a poor child in a school with a widely mixed income of students, it was easy for my needs to become lost in the shuffle. My mother was not active in the Parent Teacher Association. For a host of reasons I can never truly understand, she did not operate as some of the other mothers who came to school to advocate for their children over the slightest infraction. My mother seemed to believe her children could handle themselves, perhaps she feared she could not. She relied on the school to communicate with her about any grievances or mistakes, which they did on the rare occasion I, or my siblings, came to the attention of the administrators.

The public education system is a disciplinary site where "ideas and practices characterize and sustain bureaucratic hierarchies" (Dill, Zambara 20). One way that it does this is by rendering poor students simultaneously hypervisible and invisible. This was especially true for poorer female students, especially as puberty began to impact our lives and bodies . From late elementary school through high school, Black female students were subject to heavy policing about our bodies and our "potential" for promiscuity (Akoumany 2018). In middle school, one of the disciplinary

measures was enforcement of a dress code. While male students were disciplined for having the tails of their shirts out of their pants or wearing their pants low, female students were scrutinized for the length of our skirts, not wearing leggings or adorning our uniforms with patches and buttons. Female students were also given detention or suspended for acts deemed unfitting for a "young lady". These punishable acts were expressions of power. They included: competing against boys in sports, rough housing, participating in rap battles in the cafeteria, being opinionated, and being strong-willed. It is no coincidence that many of these behaviors are seen as non-gender conforming. Faculty gossip about poor female students accompanied these disciplinary measures, and at times was just as damaging as being sent home for looking like "a hoe" or "acting like a boy". But in another way, poor Black girls were entirely invisible: the causes for our behavior often went unexplored and unconsidered. Few faculty and staff actually took time to get to know a female student and understand our lives outside of the classroom. As a young woman in public schools in Baltimore, I was an outsider amongst the potentially promiscuous, and the B-girls who were deemed too "mannish". As a comic book reading, heavy-metal listening "nerd", my periscopic gaze helped me analyze and navigate this disciplinary power. It fostered an analytical approach undergirded by empathy for my peers. I was not absolved from discipline and punishment, but I also could not take it personally because I saw the fears prompting the actions of the faculty and my fellow students.

Viral Videos and the Periscopic Gaze

The periscopic gaze assisted in my ability to frame the trauma in my life caused by childhood poverty. Humans *frame* (locate, perceive, identify and label) in order to organize their understanding of the world and to guide future action (Goffman 1974). In essence, framing theory suggests that how something is presented to the audience ("the frame") influences the choices people make about how to process that information. My "frame" is the periscope, which allows me to make intersectional assessments of the traumatic information that is presented to me. I use the same framing device as a filmmaker and a writer. Stories, written and cinematic, are the primary ways in which I communicate my worldview. In my storytelling and story viewing, I tap into my periscopic gaze to identify the domains of power at play and to anticipate what may or may not happen next. My periscopic gaze interrogates what is presented on screen but differs from the interrogation described by bell hooks as the oppositional gaze. The oppositional gaze is the ability of Black female spectators to gain pleasure, not from identifying with the white female heroine on screen, but by interrogating the text to illustrate how incongruent it is to Black female life (hooks 1992). Though both the periscopic and the oppositional describe a type of interrogation, the periscopic does not emphasize Black female spectatorship solely, nor concern itself with authentic representations of life. Instead, the periscopic gaze is deployed to illuminate the gendered and racialized domains of power at play when witnessing traumatic encounters in person or on screen. It is a "seeing" tool of emotional survival.

My experience watching the traumatic confluence of gender, poverty and race weave its way through my childhood directly impacts the way that I see the atrocities that are visited upon Black bodies in viral videos of pain, wounding and death. As Philando Castile died in the car beside Diamond Reynolds, I felt the periscopic gaze come to bear in my witnessing of Reynolds' encounter with Officer Yanez'. In her voice, I heard my mother's response to Darnell – a feigned calm and underneath, the wariness and indignity. As viewers, we did not get to see what Diamond Reynolds said prior to the camera footage. We did not have a chance to read her body language or hear the possible pep talk she may have told herself and young daughter before she began to film. But in my viewing, I could superimpose my own mother in that kitchen, years ago in our yellow house. I also watched this video for the four domains of power bearing down upon her. There is no question disciplinary power frames the entire encounter – a police officer is the enforcement arm of the legal system, which is a structural domain. Further oppression occurs due to hegemonic ideals about Black people as dangerous (Parks 2013). As Megan Sweeney points out, the "criminalized figure of the black woman haunts public debate about welfare reform, single parent families, and the war on drugs" (5). This criminalized understanding of the black woman also haunts all of the videos of Black women engaged in this dissertation. Finally, the dashboard camera video of Diamond Reynolds' arrest shows the heart-breaking interpersonal domain engaged. As Yanez continues to hold a gun on Reynolds, her four-year-old daughter pleads for her mother to remain calm. *"It's OK, I'm right here with you,"* Reynolds' daughter can be heard saying. Later, she adds, *"Mom, please stop cussing and screaming 'cause I*

don't want you to get shooted". Even as young as four, her daughter comforts her mother while being terrorized and traumatized herself. It is as if she already recognizes how Black female oppression works.

Cultural, historical, and collective trauma theories all acknowledge how trauma can and is transmitted across generations (Eyerman 2001). Memory is the result of experience. Our families provide the building materials to make us humans but *experience* creates who we are as a person. Specific memories of trauma may not be passed down, however, even the field of genetics has provided evidence that a major traumatic event has the ability to modify one's genetic structure therefore modifying the genetics of future generations (Sullivan 2013). As Sheri Parks suggests in *Fierce Angels*, "whether it was a gift of the goddess or forged in the suffering of their lives, black women have preserved and practiced a type of female strength that has been true to the lives of women as they lived them, a type of female strength that has kept them and their families alive when everything else was working against them" (206). When I circle back to the kitchen scene in the yellow house, the question I am left with is: what was my mother channeling to respond so immediately and quietly to de-escalate the situation? How did I develop the periscopic gaze so early in life? How do we account for the way even Diamond Reynolds' four-year old daughter knows how to respond to the constant threat of death? I believe it is reasonable to assume that if a collective can transmit trauma across generations it can also transmit its modes of living. If, as Kara Holloway posits, "the generational circumstances may change, but the violence done to black bodies has had a consistent history" (2002), so have Black people's modes of living with that violence. I

purposefully use the word living as opposed to survival or resilience. Survival comes with an assumption of existing in spite of difficult circumstances. Resilience refers to "the process of, capacity for, or outcome of successful adaptation despite challenging or threatening circumstances" (Masten, Best, Garmezy 1990). In the study of impoverished young people, resilience is often a term that suggests there is some inner driver that makes young people survive despite structural oppression. It allows structural oppression to be de-coupled from a young person's life within that structure. It lets those responsible for the livelihood of young people "off the hook". But, there is no real agreed upon definition of healing or success. To me, living connotes not just the state of physically being alive, but actively engaging outside stimuli and having an interior negotiation in response. Living incorporates survival and resilience without defining the whole person/collective as an aberration that somehow keeps going. I believe the periscopic gaze is a *living* mode that was passed down to me by my mother and the previous generations of women in our family. Thinking purely from an understanding of matriarchal lineage, if a Black woman is born with every egg she could possibly have already in her, not only does her mother carry her, so does her grandmother, and her grandmother's mother. Periscopic gaze is not just a survival strategy or evidence of resiliency. It is afro-futurist in that it is an act of living in the present and the past. If we insist on focusing on "healing" people from generational trauma, what then becomes of the modes of living that are passed down along with that trauma? What happens when a young Black girl living in an oppressive situation no longer has these tools readily available in her DNA?

Chapter 6: Towards an Afro-futurist Witnessing

Claudia Rankin quotes Fred Moten as saying, "I believe in the world and I want to be in it. I want to be in it all the way to the end of it because I believe in another world and I want to be in that" (Rankin 2017). Though Rankin uses Moten's words to explain the rationale of the Black Lives Matter movement, I can also hear the adage of afro-futurism. Afro-futurism acknowledges the ongoing impact of the traumatic experience of slavery/post-slavery while also illuminating the ways in which Black people use that trauma to create new avenues of creative expression. This move towards visioning a Black future holds space for the lessons of ancestors who passed down cultural norms, expressions, folklore, and various other living modes to ensure there was a future in the first place. This dissertation has explored modes of living in and through a world of anti-blackness. I use the preposition "through", meaning: "continuing in time toward completion of a process or period" (Oxford English Dictionary), to capture the Afro-futurist potentials inherent in this work. Afro-futurist theorizing accounts for the way Black people move forward and backwards simultaneously, always in a state of both/and. As an afro-futurist investigation, each chapter of this dissertation wrestles with the perpetual "both/and (ness)" of Black life.

In chapter one, "Can You Be Black And Look at This? Yes, You Do it All of the Time", I place this contemporary moment of viral Black deaths in conversation with the *Jet* magazine cover of Emmitt Till's body to illustrate the in time/out of time nature of Black pain and death in the American imagination. Black people "stay"

dying and images of our deaths circulate via whichever means of mass communication are prevalent at any given the time – from lynching photographs to print media to television news reports to the Internet. After setting the stage, chapter one continues with a more explicit description of the intentions of this project. I describe my use of afro-pessimism/afro-futurism as a theoretical framework that ensures I center *Black people's* understanding of the use of Black pain, wounding and death imagery. This move is not very common in investigations of Black pain, which often explores uses of Black pain as a device to reify Whiteness as the norm and Blackness as the "Other". Next, I explain how this dissertation contributes to the field of American Studies through its interdisciplinary marriages, as well as its attempt to provide the field of American Studies with an example of an afro-futurist method. Then, I describe my adherence to American Studies ethnographic modes and feminist research principles to situate myself in the work. I provide an overview of my methods, sources and evidence, which were inspired by my desire to tackle Black pain, wounding and death from multiple approaches informed by my background in film studies, work with artists at the Maryland Institute College of Art and my commitment to reflexivity. I move onto a complex literature review. In true American Studies form, the literature review for this dissertation used concepts from media studies, social psychology, cultural studies, trauma studies, and consumer culture theory to contextualize Black American witnessing, schematization, spectacle and surveillance, cultural trauma and Black subjectivity. This overview of the fields highlighted the complex engagements this dissertation attempted to meld, and called attention to the lack of research about the work of surveillance and viral video footage

as it relates to Black pain. Chapter one ended with an outline of the rest of the dissertation chapters.

As an attempt to illustrate the both/and (ness) of Black life, this project investigates what it means to the Black and to be the witness, subject and consumer of Black pain, wounding and death imagery. Chapter two, "The Suffering is Televised, Shared, Remixed and Auto-Tuned", answers this by illuminating the role of media convergence in framing/positioning Black people as subjects of an ongoing cycle of pain, wounding and death. I suggest embodied image schema viewing as a method of interrupting this process. I highlight the usefulness and limitations of Guy Debord's Society of Spectacle, a prescient essay written well before the Internet that still provides some insight into our current state of media saturation. I argue Debord's spectacle society is propelled by media convergence and the creation of everyday media makers/consumers who place primacy on the visual. This leads into a discussion about our society of surveillance where humans are conditioned to surveil themselves, and others, especially online. I then place both theories in conversation with histories of visual Black pain and Black surveillance to argue that a spectacle and surveillance society creates the conditions by which viral images of Black pain, wounding and death are consumed. After establishing this position, I introduce the concept of embodied image schema, a way of reading visual texts to make abstract concepts meaningful to the viewer. In film, embodied image schema helps to stimulate mirror neurons in the viewer that invoke empathy with the actors/situations on the screen. I attempt to determine if the same concept can be applied to cellular phone footage of Black people's violent encounters with law enforcement. This

experiment in viewing identified the work of citizen witnesses as a practice of interrupting spectacle and surveillance. It also revealed citizen witnesses as trauma survivors by proxy, and I suggest that if viral video watchers are trained in this particular method of viewing, they too will become proxy survivors, collapsing the distance and empty empathy so easily created through viral mediated representations.

Black artists are often cited as having the ability to hold and express afro-futurisms simultaneity (Womack 2013). Afro-futurists philosophy and aesthetics can be found in the work of artists who engage in speculative Blackness and Black futures such as singer/songwriter/scholar, Sun-Ra and science fiction writers like Octavia Butler, N.K. Jemison, and Sam Delany. These artists' works acknowledge ancestral trauma while creating new avenues of expression. With this in mind, chapter three, "Group Pain is Not Group Think" engages Black Cultural Workers (BCW) that hone their craft in Baltimore, a place with long history of racialized violence, as well as a vibrant cache of artists who choose to stake their claim in this city, and engage its trauma. Kitchen Table Talks confirmed one of the essential positions of this dissertation, which is, encounters with conflict can become productive spaces for the creation of new avenues for social justice and new modes of power (Tsing 2005). I begin the chapter by relaying a story of historical trauma provided by one of the musicians to illustrate the operational links between collective identity, cultural trauma, and cultural production many of the artists identified in their storytelling. I then explain how discussion group questions were separated by three themes (identity, witnessing, cultural production) and were influenced by theories of the self and identity found in social psychology, as well as cultural studies frameworks that

investigate cultural expression, Black performance, interiority, witnessing practices, and cultural trauma. I move on to describe my online recruitment process. Kitchen Table Talks articulated how Black artists are agents who are capable of navigating their own pain. These talks also illustrated how Black artists grapple with a society of spectacle that often makes the pained Black body symbolic and detached from lived, embodied experiences. Kitchen Table Talks revealed that Black Cultural Workers are very well aware of the way viral Black deaths influence their feelings of collective identity, and use that identity activation to watch these videos with a level of care. Some artists watch for what is missing in the narrative. Others add context from their lived experiences to see more than what is being presented in the videos. This level of empathetic witnessing liberates Black pain from abstraction, and for many, provides text with which to create new works of art.

Finally, an unanticipated insight gleamed from this process is the importance of communal mourning for cultural trauma. Chicago-based artist, Benji Hart suggests that, "when we talk of self-care, self-defense, and self-preservation, we need to talk not about overcoming our feelings of grief but allowing them, making room for them" (22). At the completion of each talk, artists continued to network and support one another for up to an hour. This year I made it a point to visit or reach out to many of the artist who participated in Kitchen Table Talks to express my sincere gratitude for their openness and insights. During these check-ins, it was made clear to me that many of the artists appreciated the intimate setting and communion fostered by the discussions. Several artists revealed that Kitchen Table talks were the first time they, as artists, were able to mourn cultural trauma with other artists in the Baltimore

community. These post-discussions make it apparent the need for Black artists to have spaces of mourning.

In-depth interviews with BCW in the fourth chapter, "Survivors By Proxy" positioned Black cultural production as a site where collective and personal trauma is experienced, empathetically witnessed and transformed. By interviewing three artists who choose to create work about trauma, I operationalize what it means for a Black artist to be a survivor by proxy. This term, originally coined in trauma studies, suggests that those who bear witness to trauma become survivors themselves (Caruth 2014). But to bear witness enough to become a survivor by proxy, one must engage a level of empathetic viewing. Through interviews and analysis, I define empathetic viewing for Black Cultural Workers as a three-step process. It starts with first witnessing the trauma (showing up as an artist). Next the BCW processes the trauma through their artistic medium (engaging the experience with that tool). Finally, the BCW outputs the story (representing the conscious of the community). Empathetic viewing is a whole body process, which uses identity activations, an artist's tools and an artist's vulnerability to properly represent the cultural trauma of the community. This act of representation not only validates Black reality in America; it also further supports the site of trauma and mourning as a productive place for the creation of collective identity and resistance to spectacle society.

Chapter five, "The Periscopic Gaze", uses an auto-ethnographic exploration of my childhood trauma to develop a new theory of viewing called the periscopic gaze. The periscopic gaze is a method of reading potentially traumatic experiences with a commitment to intersectionality. This approach to understanding the traumatic

extends the utility of intersectionality in the work of trauma studies, adding to the work of feminist therapists, researchers, scholars, and activists who are enriching the field by developing trauma theories that recognize the consequences of power [race, sex, class, ability] differentials in trauma experiences (Webster and Dunn, 2005). By exploring my personal story, I show how the periscopic gaze was not a learned witnessing practices but an instinctual one that occurred naturally as I grew up. I posit if cultural trauma is passed from generation to generation, so are living technologies such as the periscopic gaze. The periscopic gaze suggests afro-futurist simultaneity. It is a practice that has its roots in historical cultural trauma that has utility for present day and future life situations. The periscopic gaze articulates Black "living" – not survival. This dissertation articulates Blackness as both an ontological death/and a sustained process of living. Living incorporates survival and resilience without defining the whole person/collective as an aberration that somehow keeps going. Black Americans live fully and vibrantly – even while being the subject, witness and consumer of Black pain, wounding and death imagery.

Considerations

How does a dissertation effectively explore a trauma that is contemporary and ongoing? How does one project speak for the experiences of Black Americans as a collective? What is the most effective approach to using two theoretical frameworks, which have no methods as of yet? How far can one theorize about generational trauma without engaging historical texts? There is no doubt that the shape of Black cultural trauma changes from moment to moment and that there is no shortage of viral stories about Black people's encounters with anti-blackness. High profile stories of

violent Black deaths and the subsequent response of Black communities to these deaths set the stage for this dissertation. The deaths of Oscar Grant in 2009, Trayvon Martin in 2012, Renisha McBride in 2013, and Tamir Rice in 2014 all provided the impetus for the Black Lives Matter activism which blossomed after Mike Brown's murder by Darren Wilson in Ferguson Missouri in 2014 (Edwards, Harris 2016). Although these stories were high profile, it was the viral video of Eric Garner's death that prompted me to question why Black deaths becomes viral in the first place. I made the choice to focus on viral videos from 2014-2016, knowing there would be additional incidents after the death of Philando Castile in August 2016. An incident has to be considered damaging to the life course of a collective to be considered a cultural trauma. I choose to consider viral Black deaths evidence of cultural trauma, however, the field of trauma studies has not yet done the same. To make my case, I situate this moment in the legacy of ongoing Black cultural trauma narratives, I speak with a specific group of Black American artists to gauge the impact these incidents have on their feelings of collective identity, and I use the viral nature of the texts to suggest the incidents have an ongoing impact on Black life.

Afro-futurism is an aesthetic philosophical approach so I focused on Black artists as an avenue to explore trauma, identity and cultural production. The emphasis on BCW in Baltimore has made for a dissertation that is very site specific. However, Baltimore is often used as an example of the American post-industrial city as in the National Endowment for the Humanities funded *Baltimore Stories: Narrative and the Life of an American City* (Parks, Stern, Carruthers 2018). Additionally, the site-specific nature of this dissertation has allowed me to illustrate examples of Black

people's interiority that are not so readily gleaned in literature about Black pain, and historical documents that describe Black cultural trauma. In the future, I will broaden this project to bring in more Black artistic voices, especially for the in-depth interviews and artistic analysis components of the project. Finally, my decision to refrain from potentially traumatizing my discussants led to my decision to exclude viral video viewing from the Kitchen Table Talks. However, while analyzing the Kitchen Table Talks, I identified moments where I might have elicited more detailed responses to my social- psychological questions.

My attempt to show how one might approach a dissertation about trauma and cultural production from an afro-futurist framework has allowed me the freedom to gather data and conduct analysis in ways that are organic and intuitive. I gathered and analyzed my data in a way that honored Black life, and afro-futurism is reflected in the format for my discussion groups, my textual analysis of Black art, and my assertions about specific Black witnessing practices (embodied schema analysis, empathetic witnessing, and the periscopic gaze). Cultural trauma, collective identity, cultural production, and media studies are fields that inform one another but do not necessarily speak to one another in the same language. I make use of the different theories because they come together fluidly but I have not reconciled the assumptions, theories, and methods of each of these individual fields. My task has been to effectively place them in conversation in a way that describes something elusive to research– interiority. This exploration of interiority queries feelings about trauma and identity that inform ones' art making practices, feelings about ones' own cultural trauma and collective memory, feelings about ones' connection to

intergenerational trauma and living technologies. In the humanities, cultural trauma and collective memory are often explored through the use of historical documents, historical narratives (fiction/non-fiction), literature, and art. This project's focus on a contemporary and evolving cultural trauma moment precludes the use of these standard methods of investigation.

Living With Death: Black American Trauma in the Age of the Spectacular provides me with a number of additional avenues for exploration of the question, "What does it mean to be Black and to be the witness, subject and consumer of Black pain, wounding and death imagery?" There are several follow up threads I intend to explore. The first is a continuation of my investigation into embodied image schema theory. My analysis shows that by identifying with the citizen witnesses who are capturing events on their cellular phones, watchers of viral videos will have a more empathetic relationship with the text. In this analysis, I make suppositions about what the citizen witnesses are feeling as they film. I would like to follow up this query by contacting those citizen witnesses to see if my understanding of their experience is accurate. I believe this line of inquiry would greatly enrich a larger project about the use of embodied image schema viewing as a politics of interruption. Another avenue of interest is expanding the cache of Black artists who make work about cultural trauma to see if my stages of empathetic viewing apply across mediums. Although this dissertation is informed by a diverse group of artists, I would like to discuss these questions with artists who are older and have experienced the Black Arts Movement. The final thread of interest I would like to explore further is intergenerational trauma and its relationship to intergenerational living practices. In the future, I would like to

have more in-depth interviews with Black women to explore their experiences of the periscopic gaze and other intuitive lessons. I am interested in the living technologies Black women pass down to Black girls, and what this inquiry might say about visioning Black futures.

Appendix A

Embodied Image Schema Analysis Summary Table

Primary Source Name	Container Analysis	Audio Notes	Source Path Goal	Center Periphery	Balance
Eric Garner Video-Unedited	Cell phone footage - sides trimmed/blacked out. The desire to get additional angles of the action and. The forcible arrest begins at 1.23 sec. 1.52 sec in more testimony. Camera angle is still the same. Pedestrians and seven police officers against one frustrated and scared man.	Ramsey Orta's commentary is heard throughout. The videographer begins to provide his own testimony 2.23 seconds into filming. Argument between Garner and Police Officers. Steadily increased anger, fear and frustration. The ongoing commentary from Orta and unidentified witness-- the frustration of police at Orta's filming trumps what is happening in the visual field. Its the audio. Orta's statement: they fucking up my video. "Everybody was here to see the shit...I know everything. I got the whole thing on camera boy, its a wrap."	The camera only moves when Orta is told to get out of the way. Orta moves to steps and tries to do what he can to get footage around the cops who are obstructing the visual field. Transitions -- 8.40 sec Transition -- 9:45 (wipes); 10:25 -	The center periphery -- Garner, cops, store front, concrete. The reaction from the police officers when they realize they are being filmed is telling.	The basic shot composition was simple, straightforward, with little movement. Since Orta tried to stay as still as possible, the content, while not pleasant aesthetically, gets the job done. Surveillance video style

Raw Video: Freddie Gray Arrested by Baltimore Police	Kevin Moore stays across the street.	Witnesses try to instruct the police or amplify the voice of the victim while witnessing. "Look at the boy leg. That boy leg look broke. His leg broke and ya'll dragging him like that!". Freddie Gray's scream of pain as he is being placed in the police car. "Shorty that was after they tased him they got him like that." "I been recording it."	Second level of cell phone footage - find myself frustrated that the quality is not better…eek…	Projects in the background throughout	Unbalanced frame, disjointed image, blurry - irritating

Philando Castile Police Shooting Video Live Streamed on Facebook	Facebook live streaming adds another dimension. As opposed to feeling like there is pseudo documentary happening, this footage fills much more obscure; hidden camera oriented. It is in half shadow, enclosed in the car, when the cell phone is thrown, all we have is the videographer witnesses voice to guide us. There is a disembodied aspect to the container - everything is on the periphery. As this is a news report - the dialogue is in subtitled, lending the video a "foreign film" quality.	Audio is what this video is all about. You hear Castile groaning in pain. Reynolds remains calm and matter of fact. Pulling on all of her restraint to record, answer the officer with a measured voice and explain what is happening moment to moment. The officer is freaked out - she remains calm, "I will Officer." "He just shot his arm off." The realization of Castile's death..."Oh my God, please don't tell me he's dead. Please don't tell me my boyfriend just went like that." The commentary from the news reporters as they dramatically tell this story like it is...a story... The little girl comforting her mother— *Press conference explains her rationale: I did it so the world knows the police are not here to protect us.*	The camera moves according to Diamond Reynold's body, access and position. There are no transitions -- but this is a news report so…there are additional storytelling approaches.	Reynold's is the center of the frame…the police officer's body and the gun steadily pointed at her as she remains calm --its eerie and other worldly.	Trying to get the best angle without drawing attention to self;

New Video Released of Alton Sterling Shooting & Democracy Now footage	cellphone capture - one angle. In the frame is the encounter; on the border is the videographer witness; you have sense of an outside crowd but no real indication of them participating. The videographer witness does not move very much. It is a scene of intimacy.	The gunshots are loud and in rapid succession. Press conference spectacle of wife and crying older son. At press conference: "He is 15 years old. He had to watch this as it was put all over, the outlet." Her indignation that this is how her children witnessed their father's death. "As this video was shared across the world, you will see with your own eyes how he was handled unjustly and killed without regard of the lives that he helped raise."	camera jerks away in surprise once the shots are fired. Camera becomes skewed - mimics what we the viewers are feeling.	corner left side of frame; car, Alton, two officers.	No aesthetic considerations; simply trying to record. No efforts to focus or clean up the footage while shooting.
(Video) California Highway Patrol Officer Beating Woman in the Head on the Side of Road	Cellphone capture - shaky camera; moving car; half in focus; no way of knowing who else is watching it.	Expletives and amazement – not necessarily empathetic in tone	Shaky camera movement – remains safe distance from the action	Dashboard and half side mirror	Nothing aesthetically pleasing; feels voyeuristic because of lack of style

Walter Scott Death: Video Shows Fatal North Charleston Police Shooting | The New York Times	Initial dash cam footage -- panoptic gaze at interaction; cell phone footage - multiple angles as the videographer witness tries to capture footage; shaky- medium shots as videographer witness tries to be unobtrusive. The barrier of the fence makes for an interesting surface division. Kaleidoscopic angles that flip the world. Cleaned ABC footage provides title cards and subtitles so the incident is better narrated. Slow motion of object dropping; a narrative being built by the news. The curious lack of urgency as Walter Scott bleeds out - so different from the way it looks in cinema. The urgency, the music - not there. Almost casual and leisurely. Title card alerting that, "second video captured the next footage"; EMT officer finally shows some urgency.	Wind, what could be the breathing of the videographer witness; Sound of eight gun shots - interesting the videographer witness makes no sound of surprise. Then, sounds of surprise "Oh shit"; "shit", Sirens as more authorities begin to arrive; incongruous sound of incoming text message - Verizon carrier? "oh shit", "fucking abuse"; *strange that I tried to identify the mobile carrier*	Ongoing camera movement to try to get the best shot. Trees, sidewalks, fingers in front of the camera; different horizontal/vertical motion.	Long shot and medium long mainly. Attempts to get closer without drawing attention to oneself.	No aesthetic considerations—super long shot makes for distant surveillance

Dashcam Footage Shows Sandra Bland Arrest	Only dashcam footage; inside is the dashboard, the back of Bland's car and the highway to the left. Visually unchanged - Its all audio;	The majority of this video is inferred violence - the escalation, her resistance; her right to ask questions; the female police officer literally telling her that she "does" hear what the officer is saying;	Dash cam is static;	Focused squarely on what the cops are doing	Static, panoptic centering
Witness video shows another side of Sandra Bland Arrest	Safe distance away; trying to stay unobtrusive; only shows her from the waist up	Sandra thanks the citizen videographer for recording; the videographer witness: "I am on public property" repeatedly as a means to not have to move.	Videographer witness is long shot - minimal movement except when confronted – 360 degree turn	Focused on cops and Sandra	Balanced rule of thirds symmetry; beautiful clear day, quiet street – feels more jarring because of its balance
Extended video of cop in McKinney, Texas, Incident	Handheld footage - captures officer and the party attendees. Inside the field is simply students going to and from. Focus on Casebolt because of his actions and language compared to the other officers.	No commentary from the videographer; only Casebolt and the numerous young people involved. No running commentary or opinion - indicative of a level of invisibility.	Handheld camera - long shots a safe distance away. Brandon seems invisible	Only focus is medium shot of Casebolt and interactions No other periphery; no particular feelings of immersion.	No attempts at visual symmetry. Very steady observation - almost dash cam steady with minimal movement. *Because he is a young person?*

Appendix B

Kitchen Table Talks Questions and Guidance Document

Welcome

Thank you all for agreeing to participate in this small group discussion about Black pain, wounding and death imagery. My dissertation project, Living With Death: Black American Trauma in the Age of the Spectacular is working to determine how Black Americans deal with being the subject, witness and consumer of viral images of Black pain, wounding and death. I believe Black artists may read these images in ways that may run counter to how people think Black Americans should see them. I theorize that this may have to do with not only artists' sensibilities around the performance of identity, but their feelings of collective identity and memory.

Overview

These discussions are designed to tease out perspectives about this contemporary moment in Black America. I will first ask questions related to racial and collective identity. Then, we will discuss your viral and movie viewing and sharing practices, and finally, we will go into the art you make in the world.

Ground Rules

There are no wrong answers but rather differing points of view. Please feel free to share your point of view even if it differs from what others have said.

Please remember to respect each other's privacy after this conversation.

Please refrain from speaking over one another people.

Feel free to step out of the conversation at any time.

For data collection, I am videotaping and recording this session because I do not want to miss any comments. People often say very helpful things in these discussions and I can't write fast enough to get them all down. Do I have your consent use your name and likeness in the final dissertation project?

Well, let's begin. I've provided name- ages so that we all remember each other's names. Let's find out some more about each other by going around the table.

OPENING

Light white candle. Read the names of those we are discussing in round robin. Invite participants to say the name of any other person they'd like to pay your respects to.

Paying Respects:

Freddy Grey Jr.'s (April 2015)
Eric Garner (December 2014)
Walter Scott (April 2015)
Marlene Pinnock (Sept 2014)
Sandra Bland, (July 2015)
McKinney, Texas Pool Party (June 2015)
Alton Sterling (July 2016)
Philando Castile (July 2016)

Questions

Identity
Demographic Questions:

- What is your name, where do you live and what medium of art do you engage in the most?
- Do you consider yourself a Baltimore native? If so, what does that mean to you?
- If not from Baltimore geographically, where do you feel most connected to?
- What is your age?

Centrality of Race

- How important is your racial identity to how you see yourself?
- How central is your racial identity to how you present yourself to the world?
- How central is your racial identity to the art that you create?

Collective Identity

- Do you believe there is a collective Black American identity? If so, what makes it collective?
- What does it mean for you as an artist to identify with a collective Black experience?

Theorist say that a key component to collective identity is repeated identity activations - moments where your Black racial identity is a key component to how others see you in the world.

- To what level does witnessing images of Black pain, wounding and death impact your feelings of collective racial identity?

Other Identities:

- Do you have another identity that is central to how you see yourself in the world, how people see you in the world and one that influences your art?

- How is it connected to collective racial identity as a whole?

Witnessing

Now we will discuss what I call witnessing and viewing practices. First, I will read the names and describe each of the videos.

A key theme in my research is the notion that watching and sharing are not the same as seeing and witnessing.

- How do you feel about that concept?
- What does it mean to witness or see?
- Have you watched any of the viral videos I've described?
- Why do you watch?
- Do you share the videos with others?
- Why?
- Who do you share them with? Anonymous or specific groups? People?
- What kind of responses to the videos do you want from your online community?
- Have you watched either of the movies (Fruitvale and 12 Years)?
- Do you think you watched them differently than you watched viral videos?
- What does sharing and watching do for you?
- When you watch these videos/film, what do you find yourself focusing on?

Art Making

- Why are you an artist? What does art making do for you?
- Do you see yourself as a BLACK artist?
- As an artist, how do you work with these images of Black pain, wounding and death? Do you?
- Do you make art in response deliberately? Unintentionally?
- Do you feel like your artistic practices changes how you witness Black pain, wounding and death images?

Closing:

Thank you all for participating in this talk.

Appendix C
Human Subjects Waiver

1204 Marie Mount Hall
College Park, MD 20742-5125
TEL 301.405.4212
FAX 301.314.1475
irb@umd.edu
www.umresearch.umd.edu/IRB

DATE:	November 21, 2016
TO:	Kalima Young, PhD
FROM:	University of Maryland College Park (UMCP) IRB
PROJECT TITLE:	[990995-1] Living With Death: Black American Trauma in the Age of the Spectacular
SUBMISSION TYPE:	New Project
ACTION:	DETERMINATION OF NOT HUMAN SUBJECT RESEARCH
DECISION DATE:	November 21, 2016

Thank you for your submission of New Project materials for this project. The University of Maryland College Park (UMCP) IRB has determined this project does not meet the definition of human subject research under the purview of the IRB according to federal regulations.

We will retain a copy of this correspondence within our records.

If you have any questions, please contact the IRB Office at 301-405-4212 or irb@umd.edu. Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence with this committee.

This letter has been electronically signed in accordance with all applicable regulations, and a copy is retained within University of Maryland College Park (UMCP) IRB's records.

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