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Videos, Police Violence, and Scrutiny of the Black Body

The video of George Floyd's 2020 murder by police seemed to provide straightforward evidence of racial injustice. But other videos of police violence have met a more complex reception, and the role of videos in establishing misconduct remains contested. I argue that in line with a long history of racialized surveillance, official pedagogies train viewers to mine videos for evidence by scrutinizing the Black body as a site of pervasive threat. Use of videos to combat injustice requires incorporating them within humanizing narratives and cultivating resistant modes of looking.

VIDEOS AND FACTUAL CONSENSUS
It sometimes appears that videos serve as straightforward evidence, such that we can expect reasonable viewers to converge on an understanding of the events shown. Legal scholars refer to this view as "naïve realism" (Morrison 2017).[1] Because unedited documentary videos, such as those shot by surveillance cameras, cell phones, and police dash cams and body cams, directly present a view of events, it is easy to see why naïve realism is compelling. But two obstacles prevent videos from producing straightforward factual consensus.

First, because videos are excerpted from events unfolding in space and time, they present a limited view that can distort our understanding. We can't see what happened outside the frame or before the recording began, which may provide crucial context for understanding and attributing causation. Angle and proximity can profoundly shape our interpretation, sometimes without our awareness. As legal scholar Mary Fan notes, "A suspect may seem to be resisting if an altercation is recorded at a tight and low angle. A higher[,] wider perspective may reveal something altogether different—such as [an] officer stomping on a prone suspect" (2019, 15). Law professor and former police officer Seth Stoughton demonstrates how two videos of the same event can support vastly different interpretations: a police body camera video shot when an officer and another person are dancing in close proximity can appear to show that the other person's movements are erratic and threatening, when from a different vantage they can appear playful and harmless (Williams et al. 2016).

Of course, when we are physically present for an event, we observe it from only one perspective—but we also have a broader vantage, better perceptual acuity, the ability to turn our heads and perhaps reposition ourselves, and a clear understanding of how we are oriented relative to what we see. Because videos present a seemingly accurate and objective depiction while stripping away context, they can make us feel that we have a clear picture of events when in fact we don't (Fan 2019, 151–52).

Second, the claims that videos are interrogated to support are often normatively laden. Video can sometimes answer factual questions, but the crucial questions for which evidence is sought are questions about whether use of force was *excessive* or *unjustified*, and this requires the prior availability of a conceptual vocabulary and normative framework.

The US Supreme Court ventured into naïve realism in its 2007 *Scott v. Harris* decision, when it ruled that police were justified in using deadly force to conclude the chase of driver Victor Harris. The court publicly posted a police dash cam video alongside Justice Scalia's majority decision, which stated, "Respondent's version of events is so utterly discredited by the record that no reasonable jury could

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[1] Lee Ross and Andrew Ward (1996) originally used this term to describe the assumption that people will converge on interpretations of states of affairs, with no specific focus on video mediation.

have believed him…. We are happy to allow the videotape to speak for itself" (Kahan, Hoffman, and Braman 2009, 840–41). In the majority view, the video clearly showed that the driver had endangered others and was the primary culpable party. Ramming Harris's vehicle, a form of lethal force that left him quadriplegic, was thus deemed to be warranted.

But researchers found, on showing the same video to over 1,000 research participants, sharp differences in interpretation associated with race, class, US geographic region, and political orientation. Though the majority agreed with the court, participants belonging to groups "tend[ing]to share a cultural orientation that prizes egalitarianism and social solidarity," as opposed to "hierarchical and individualistic values … tended to perceive less danger in Harris's flight, to attribute more responsibility to the police for creating the risk … and to find less justification in the use of deadly force" (Kahan et al. 2009, 841). Questions of what constitutes significant as opposed to minor risk, who is to blame, and what circumstances justify lethal violence are all normatively laden and may be affected by factual and normative beliefs. When the majority of justices affirmed that only one interpretation was reasonable, they may have been swayed by their group-based identities and background beliefs without realizing it; lack of awareness of such factors, which characterizes much human cognition, helps to make naïve realism plausible in the first place.

Structural elements of video, too, may influence normative elements of interpretation. We tend to sympathize with the person from whose perspective a video is shot (Morrison 2017, 815–17). Adam Benforado (2010) argues that because the *Scott v. Harris* video came from a police dash cam, viewers are likely to identify with the officers. Lassiter et al. (2002) demonstrate that camera angle affects how much causal influence viewers attribute to a person shown on video. The fact that the video was shot from the officers' point of view may help to explain why Harris was seen by many as culpable, without viewers being aware of how these structural elements influenced their conclusions.

USE OF FORCE, EVIDENCE, AND SCRUTINY OF THE BODY
Videos are replete with detail. How we look at them and what we find depends on the task we are performing. Paul Ziff described the fact that different images call for different forms of engagement, which he called "acts of aspection":

> To contemplate a painting is to perform one act of aspection; to scan it is to perform another; to study, observe, survey, inspect, examine, scrutinize, etc., are still other acts of aspection…. I survey a Tintoretto, while I scan an H. Bosch. Thus I step back to look at the Tintoretto, up to look at the Bosch. Different actions are involved. (1966, 71)

An act of aspection involves a way of looking at an image: a particular manner of seeking out information or constructing an experience that leads to seeing certain levels and kinds of detail as highly relevant in some cases and less relevant in others. We engage in different acts of aspection in relation to artworks because we aim to access their distinct aesthetic affordances. Many of the affordances of a Tintoretto, even a finely detailed one such as the enormous *Paradise* (ca. 1588), are large-scale and formal. Thus we step back to appreciate the composition as a whole. The works of Hieronymus Bosch, on the other hand, offer much more at the level of local detail.

Sometimes we look for aesthetic affordances. Other times, we look for information, often using an act of aspection we have been trained to perform. A doctor viewing an X-ray will typically perform a targeted act of aspection, scanning it in search of precise information from a specific region.

What act of aspection is primary when it comes to moving images of police violence? Many viewers are aware of the central events before they start viewing a widely circulated video and may view it multiple times. The questions the video is interrogated to answer are causal and normative questions: What caused the use of force? Was it justified?

How are moving images used to answer these questions? In the video of the police killing of Eric Garner, there is a brief moment that is often described as showing Garner resisting arrest, justifying the initial application of a chokehold. New York Police Commissioner James P. O'Neill said, "Every time I watched the video, I say to myself, as probably all of you do, to Mr. Garner: 'Don't do it. Comply'" (Wilson 2019). The "resistance" or "noncompliance" is constituted by the fact that Garner, who had been gesticulating while speaking to the officers, moved his arm after one officer pulled it to his side, presumably to cuff him for the crime of selling individual cigarettes for 75 cents apiece. In the video, this arm movement can be seen to occur in a fraction of a second. Only one second later, Garner was in the chokehold that killed him (*Guardian* 2014, 1:20–1:21). As has been widely reported, he said "I can't breathe" 11 times before he died.

The way this video has been deployed as evidence demonstrates that the critical questions about what caused the use of force and whether it was justified are answered primarily through scrutiny of Garner's bodily movements. What caused the initial use of force? The purported answer is that Garner resisted arrest, where this resistance was constituted by a nonaggressive arm movement that took a fraction of a second.

Cleveland police released an annotated video of the 2014 police killing of 12-year-old Tamir Rice, who was playing with a pellet gun in a park. They added a red circle and caption to guide viewers toward a specific bodily movement that is difficult to discern in the grainy surveillance video: Tamir's hand moving downward or, as the caption puts it, "to waistband" (Anderson and Vadaj 2021). This information was deployed to explain why the officers felt so threatened that one of them fired fatal rounds within two seconds of arriving on the scene.

Justice Department analysis notes, "The positioning of the moving arms suggests that Tamir's hands were in the vicinity of his waist, but his hands are not visible in the video." It also notes that while the officers stated that Tamir had been repeatedly instructed to "show his hands," the time-lapse surveillance video has no accompanying audio (Department of Justice 2020). If the instruction Tamir received was different from what the officers reported, for example, "drop the weapon," his movement might have been an attempt to comply.

Officials train us in a principal act of aspection for these videos: scrutiny of the body to justify violence against it.

OFFICIAL PEDAGOGY AND PERVASIVE THREAT
The act of aspection and the conclusions drawn from it are shaped by the conceptual framework available for understanding, categorizing, and describing what is seen. This framework, in turn, is achieved through acts of naming: the development of a vocabulary and the training of perceivers on its application and use. As Susan Sontag argues, "There can be no evidence, photographic or otherwise, of an event until the event itself has been named and characterized" (1977, 19). We have seen two examples of such acts of naming: brief arm movements are designated as "resisting arrest" or "reaching to waistband." These acts of naming are often achieved through a detailed pedagogy.

Several years ago, the then police chief of Norman, Oklahoma, where I live, emailed a link to a group of people he knew to be concerned about the problem of racialized police violence. The link was to a news report including footage of a police stop of three Black teenage boys in response to a call that claimed one of them was carrying a gun (which turned out to be a BB gun) (FOX 4 Dallas-Fort Worth 2015). In the email, the police chief commented that the "children put themselves in a very dangerous position."[2]

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[2] Email message from Keith Humphrey, Jan. 8, 2015. The video shows a tense scene, but no physical violence.

In the news report, the dash cam video is narrated by Brian Heard, assistant chief of police in Duncanville, Texas. As the police car pulls up behind the children, they turn to look. Referring to one of the children, Heard says, "Looks back, sees the officer—what was that move at his waistband? That's what, in law enforcement, we call a 'furtive gesture,' and it's highly concerning." Note the mention of the ominous waistband, a region where many hand gestures occur given how the arms are attached to the human body. I invite you to view the relevant part of the video yourself (0:57–1:11). Does the boy's arm movement appear to be a "highly concerning furtive gesture," or does it simply appear to be the kind of normal gesture one might make on anxiously commenting that a police car is pulling up? The video is used—by Heard, by the news anchors, and by the then chief of police—in the service of training us to perceive the boy's subtle movement as a sign of threat.

Even bodily states that appear safe or innocent can be reframed as acutely threatening. At one point in the video, the boy in the hoodie has his hands empty and raised and the officer has his firearm pointed at him. In his pedagogical narrative, Assistant Chief Heard states the following: "Even though the officer has his gun drawn, he's on target, if this man [*sic*] chooses, from this position, to draw and fire, he can draw and fire before the officer can see that, perceive that, and stroke the trigger" (1:46–2:08). The claim, to be clear, is that even if the boy's hands are raised and the officer can clearly see that he is not holding a weapon, and even if the officer already has his firearm trained on the boy, a weapon that is concealed somewhere in the boy's garments can be extracted and used to fire at the officer before the officer can fire back.[3] The boy is thus framed as a lethal threat to the officer even when his body manifests compliance. The praise offered for the officer's restraint makes clear that had he shot the boy, the danger posed by the child's mere presence would have been proposed as exonerating.

This pedagogy reveals a conceptual logic. Concepts like "resisting arrest," "noncompliance," "furtive movement," and "threat" are given a broad characterization that encompasses slight bodily movements and is used to explain or justify actual or contemplated use of lethal force. This, in turn, supplies an implicit characterization of concepts like "excessive force" and "police brutality." This characterization is a negative one: "police brutality" is a concept such that no affirmative evidence of force is ever sufficient for its application; affirmative evidence must always be accompanied by an *absence* of justification for physical contact. A moving image can serve as evidence for police brutality, then, only insofar as it is clear of any evidence of "resisting arrest," "reaching for the waistband," or "failure to comply." Because these bodily states have been identified, through acts of naming, as signs of extreme threat and culpability, there is no question of proportion: any level of violence is automatically exempt from being named "police brutality." Viewing these images, then, becomes a sort of *Where's Waldo?* exercise in seeking out that minimal movement that nullifies a finding of police brutality.[4]

What if the minimal movement cannot be found? In his famous essay "Of the Standard of Taste," David Hume spoke of what it is to be a good judge of art. Good judges have delicacy of taste, and this means being able to detect the relevant qualities of an image even when they are present in very small quantities and mixed with other things, rather like being able to detect just a hint of cumin in a

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[3] Heard's claim is a distortion of reaction time findings. It is true that an officer, even with gun drawn and trained, is at significant risk of being shot in an encounter with a person *who is already holding a firearm*. If a person is holding a gun pointed toward the ground at their side or is aiming a gun at their own head, the time it takes them to aim their gun at an officer and fire is roughly simultaneous with the time it takes an officer whose firearm is already on target to return fire. A study showed that under these conditions, the officer will shoot the person about 90 percent of the time but will be shot about half the time (Blair et al. 2011). This is quite different from the scenario with the boy, whose hands are empty with no firearm in view.

[4] Readers outside North America may know Martin Handford's series, in which a character wearing a red and white striped shirt is concealed within a complex illustration, by its original name, *Where's Wally?*

dish. "Where the organs are so fine, as to allow nothing to escape them; and at the same time so exact, as to perceive every ingredient in the composition: This we call delicacy of taste…. [I]f the same qualities, in a continued composition, and in a smaller degree, affect not the organs … we exclude the person from all pretensions to this delicacy" (Hume [1757] 1907, 273).

Nonexperts, Hume implies, will often miss something in their encounters with images: they may detect and respond to an image's coarse-grained features, but fail to detect the fine-grained features that contribute crucially to its value. Something similar is at play in relation to the acts of aspection that we commit with these moving images. We may scrutinize them and fail to detect any modicum of threat; but then the response is that we, as lay members of the public, are not qualified lookers. Indeed, the very fact that we have not detected these qualities is evidence of our incompetence.

Authorities will sometimes assist us in detecting the information we have allegedly missed by, for instance, slowing down the video. The slow-motion presentation of the 1991 video of Rodney King being beaten by four LAPD officers transformed the events into a "slow dance of stylized movement" (Alexander 1994, 92) such that the baton blows appeared softer and King's movements could be reconceived as signs of aggression rather than attempts at self-protection (Morrison 2017, 823–24).

In our evaluation of videos showing police use of force, we are invited to scrutinize the body of the recipient of that force for movements or states that signify threat or resistance. Acts of naming and associated pedagogies encourage us to detect threat everywhere and to acknowledge that it triggers a need for controlling physical force that therefore cannot be described as excessive or unjustified.

A TRADITION OF RACIALIZED SURVEILLANCE

I have said nothing about how race figures in this act of aspection. The official narrative is that race plays no role: concepts like "resisting arrest," "furtive movement," and "reaching to the waistband" are allegedly race-neutral. This is belied by countless studies showing that perceptions, judgments, and evaluations are affected by race at every turn, with Black bodies more likely to be viewed as suspicious, dangerous, and aggressive, and Black people disproportionately punished due to these racialized perceptions (Baumgartner et al. 2016; Payne and Correll 2020; Trawalter et al. 2008).

As Saidiya Hartman argues, heightened scrutiny of the Black body has a long history. Control of the fine details of Black facial expressions and bodily movements dates back to slavery, and emancipation brought with it a comprehensive scheme of racialized surveillance designed to maintain Black subordination. Black people have been required to perform happiness in experiences of grave suffering such as permanent family separation, contentment in experiences of pain, and absolute subservience during mistreatment to avoid consequences such as "a severe and life-threatening beating" or, later, lynching (Hartman 1997, 63). George Yancy argues that "confiscation" of the Black body extends into contemporary forms of everyday surveillance. When Yancy enters an elevator, a White woman recoils, stiffens, clutches her purse more closely. "Independently of any threatening action on my part, my Black body, my existence in Black, poses a threat. It is not necessary that I first perform a threatening action. The question of deeds is irrelevant" (Yancy 2008, 4). The woman's evident somatic response then triggers in Yancy a form of bodily self-surveillance:

> My movements become and remain stilted. I dare not move suddenly…. I now begin to calculate, paying almost neurotic attention to my body movements, making sure that this "Black object," what now feels like an appendage, a weight, is not too close, not too tall, not too threatening. I genuflect, but only slightly, a movement that somewhat resembles an act of worship. I am reminded of how certain postures—"bowing and scraping"—were reenacted over generations, sometimes no doubt unconsciously. (14)

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Yancy's impulse to minimize the perception of him as a threat through genuflection is both historically embedded, as he observes, and eerily confirmed by a study showing that in White research participants, Black faces trigger increased scrutiny associated with threat detection *except* where their gaze is averted, a classic enactment of racial subordination (Trawalter et al. 2008).

Surveillance, in both individual everyday encounters and broader social contexts, is a longstanding mechanism of racial hierarchy. Simone Browne (2015) traces the lineage from early forms of bodily surveillance such as branding through to contemporary manifestations in biometrics. As John Fiske argues, surveillance functions as a geographical zoning regimen that produces tiers of racialized citizenship. Surveillance is often promoted as a technology to enhance safety, but its operation is essentially shaped by coding some people and behaviors as normal (and thus in no need of scrutiny) and others as abnormal. "Surveillance is a technology of whiteness that racially zones city space by drawing lines that Blacks cannot cross and whites cannot see." It produces "racially differentiated senses of 'the citizen'" while concealing its operations from Whites, who are coded as "normal" in most contexts and thus not subjected to scrutiny[5] (Fiske 1998, 69). Where Black presence is understood to be abnormal, heightened levels of scrutiny are triggered, as occurred when Ahmaud Arbery was pursued and murdered by a group of White men while jogging. A study by Maria Lowe, Angela Stroud, and Alice Nguyen (2017) confirms the use of informal surveillance networks to construct Black men as threatening within predominantly White neighborhoods.

The history of racialized surveillance, then, codes Black presence as abnormal in many contexts, requires bodily comportment designed to minimize the sense of the Black body as threatening, and demands the performance of attitudes that do not accurately represent Black subjectivity. An additional feature that must be mentioned is the coding of Black bodies as superhuman. Official narratives of police violence against Black people have often employed elements of a trope involving, in filmmaker Spike Lee's words, the "magical, mystical Negro" (Gonzalez 2001). This trope is realized in countless fictional and nonfictional narratives, and elements of it appear in everyday beliefs about Black imperviousness to pain and superhuman tendencies, as well as in the tendency of doctors to undertreat pain in Black patients and in police narratives about why they "had to" kill an unarmed Black person (Trawalter and Hoffman 2015; Waytz, Hoffman, and Trawalter 2014).

As Jamelle Bouie has argued, the magical Negro trope is present in former police officer Darren Wilson's narrative about why he killed Michael Brown, a Black teenager in Ferguson, Missouri: Wilson said that when holding Brown's arm, "I felt like a five-year-old holding onto Hulk Hogan … that's just how big he felt and how small I felt just from grasping his arm" (Bouie 2014). He described Brown as looking like a "demon" and said that he feared a punch from Brown might be fatal. Wilson was 28 years old, six foot four, and weighed 210 pounds. Brown was 18 years old, six foot five, and weighed 290 pounds. There was a size difference, yes, but hardly on the order of a five-year-old versus Hulk Hogan. Bouie notes that Wilson's description of Brown's behavior, including the details that he made "a grunting, like aggravated sound" and that "that face that he had was looking straight through me, like I wasn't even there, I wasn't even anything in his way," fits the White supremacist trope of the "black brute," "a menacing, powerful creature who could withstand the worst punishment." Rodney King, Bouie notes, was described in similar terms at the trial of the police officers who brutalized him.

A similar description was given of Natasha McKenna, who was approximately five foot three and 130 pounds when she died after force was used by deputies attempting to transport her from a jail cell. A report by the county prosecutor (Morrogh 2015) announcing that no criminal charges would be filed

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[5] As with many aspects of racism, the extent to which racialized zoning is "concealed" from or unable to be seen by Whites may reflect willful ignorance rather than a genuine lack of access to relevant information (Mills 2007). Whites may deny the operation of mechanisms of racial social control even when they know full well that people of color are coded as "not belonging" in various contexts.

in McKenna's death cited her "extraordinary strength and endurance" (15), twice used the expression "superhuman strength" (16, 46), and quoted officers as stating: "it's like she didn't feel pain" (16), it was "like a demonic possession because she was growling the whole time" (16), and "her strength was amazing … she never seemed to tire" (17). Though unarmed hospital staff had previously succeeded in restraining her, a team of six specially trained members of the Sheriff's Emergency Response Team used a taser on McKenna, who was unarmed and nude, four times "after she was handcuffed behind her back, shackled around the legs, a hobble strap connected to both restraints, and a spit mask placed over her face" (Jackman 2015). As Kimberlé Crenshaw notes, though racialized police violence against them receives little attention, Black women are targeted at far higher rates than White women and are the group most likely to be killed while unarmed. "Their being female does not inoculate them from the rapid escalation—often fueled by race-based fear—that often happens" (Crenshaw 2019). The prosecutor's report uses the attribution of "superhuman" and "demonic" qualities to McKenna to justify the finding that the force used was reasonable.

The video of the three teenagers, discussed earlier, also contains elements of the magical Negro trope: a Black boy whose hands are raised and empty is conceived as a deadly threat to an officer who is aiming a loaded handgun directly at the boy.[6] That does sound like magic, doesn't it?

The magical Negro trope is available to police because it is available to all of us; it is a thread that has been running through White supremacy for hundreds of years. The claim that Black people suffer less than Whites was one of the justifying tenets of slavery, and Friedrich Nietzsche stated it in a perniciously racist passage in *On the Genealogy of Morality* ([1887] 2006, 43–44).

The viewing of these images is not only informed by but may also deepen racialized tendencies of perception. The principal genre of image that has entered the public discourse in relation to police violence is the image of the Black body in confrontation with police. And thus the act of aspection prescribed for these images winds up being a racialized one: that of scrutinizing the Black body for "furtive movements," "noncompliance," and "signs of resisting." Viewing these videos thus becomes a form of visual stalking, inspecting the Black body for signs that it is dangerous and threatening.

This scrutiny of the Black body is a reiteration of the mode of looking that leads to racially disproportionate levels of police violence in the first place. If we accede to the official instruction to search these videos for signs that the Black body is threatening, we are training ourselves to become attuned to ever-more-subtle signs of threat. When this looking is conditioned by official acts of naming that train us to see threat everywhere, even in an empty-handed boy with his hands up, we may watch the videos again and again, eventually finding that yes, there is something to see here, and we are finally competent, sensitive enough, to see it.

VIDEOS AND SOCIAL CONTROL
The use of videos as evidence is shaped by official pedagogies, and the act of aspection we are trained to commit both emerges out of and contributes to schemes of "racializing surveillance" (Browne 2015, 16). And this is not the only mechanism by which the circulation of videos contributes to racialized social control. Hartman notes, pursuant to an observation by James Scott, that "a significant aspect of maintaining relations of domination 'consists of the symbolization of domination by demonstrations and enactments of power'" (Hartman 1997, 7, citing Scott 1991, 45). During slavery, "these demonstrations of power consisted of forcing the enslaved to witness the beating, torture, and execution of slaves" (Hartman 1997, 7–8). As a demonstration and enactment of racial power in our own era, what could be more compelling than the video of a White police officer coolly extinguishing the life of George Floyd over a period of eight minutes, in the presence of three supportive colleagues, with full awareness that his actions are being recorded? These events were allowed to unfold because, as we all know, a

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[6] I am grateful to British poet Rommi Smith for this observation.

bystander who attempted to intervene in the murder would have been met with swift and lethal force. Nothing less than total submission to police authority is permitted even in the face of egregious violence.

This form of demonstration is, of course, directly traumatizing to communities targeted by racialized violence. Elizabeth Alexander observes that for Black spectators "bodily experience, both individually experienced bodily trauma as well as collective cultural trauma, comes to reside in the flesh as forms of memory reactivated and articulated at moments of collective spectatorship" (1994, 80).

For White observers, on the other hand, a more detached mode of looking is available; and it may be facilitated by video mediation. Sontag argues that "images anesthetize. An event known through photographs certainly becomes more real than it would have been if one had never seen the photographs…. But after repeated exposure to images it also becomes less real" (1977, 20). The first time we see a type of atrocity represented, we may have a strong and even overwhelming affective response, but over time, it joins "the vast photographic catalogue of misery and injustice throughout the world [which] has given everyone a certain familiarity with atrocity, making the horrible seem more ordinary—making it appear familiar, remote … inevitable" (15). As a type of event transitions from shocking to ordinary and inevitable in the consciousness of observers, it becomes part of the status quo, and the status quo tends to acquire its own normativity, as a known quantity that structures a comprehensible world (Samuelson and Zeckhauser 1988).

The mining of videos for evidence through bodily scrutiny invites a cool and detached encounter, an analytical study of fine details in isolation from the personhood of the victim and the gravity of the event. We are invited to turn our attention away from the pain and terror that Natasha McKenna clearly felt, from the horror of young Tamir Rice being killed in a public park, and toward details of their bodily movements. The prescribed act of aspection leaves no room for affect or moral sensibility; we are to master a conceptual scheme and apply it to a visual array, no more and no less.

Because bodily movements, especially those of Black bodies, are defined as pervasively threatening, it is rare that a video is widely understood to provide evidence that use of force was unjustified. The video of George Floyd's murder included a unique confluence of factors: the totalizing force with which Floyd was held passive, his body making no movements that could be interpreted as resisting or posing a threat; the video up close and clear, with audio; the presence of multiple observers, including a White female off-duty firefighter, complicating any attempt to spin a narrative about the insufficiency of the video to show what really happened. This video meets the nearly impossible standard of manifesting an absence: the absence of any physical movement that is subject to naming or interpretation in a way that would justify the officer's ongoing application of deadly force.

This is an unacceptable standard for police accountability. A person should not have to be completely motionless to deactivate the presumption that extreme or lethal police force is justified. The very fact that such perfect victimhood was required for a multiracial reckoning demonstrates, paradoxically, a willingness—among Whites, at least—to tolerate use of force in situations that are less than perfect, as nearly all such situations are. While some people may have been jarred to learn that a restrained person could have his life slowly extinguished by police on a public street, most other videos are bound to fail the test that the George Floyd video passed: there is usually some movement, however subtle, that can be defined as threatening and thus exculpatory. As videos that fail the test accrue, unjustified police violence comes to appear as a rare exception rather than the outgrowth of a systematic targeting of communities of color.

A further effect of the focus on fine-grained scrutiny of videos is that it draws our attention away from broader context, from sociopolitical arrangements and patterns of police behavior that regularly set some people up for interactions with the potential to turn violent. The focus on specific movements and the notion that the video itself holds the key to understanding distract us from a host of relevant data. It is perhaps no accident that the police killing of Michael Brown, of which there was no

video, motivated some of the most compelling analysis of context: a mostly White force of officers from other communities policing a majority Black city, a pattern of disproportionate targeting of Black residents, and a municipality that was using fines and fees for low-level infractions as a primary funding source. In 2013 alone, the Ferguson municipal court issued more than one and a half arrest warrants *per member of its population* for minor offenses (McCoy 2015).

The laser focus on events shown within a frame, while distracting us from broader patterns and context, also opens up any details lacking video documentation to forms of outlandish storytelling. Believing that there was no video of the killing and its aftermath, the officer who killed Walter Scott claimed that Scott had stolen his taser, and officers claimed that they had administered first aid and CPR. But when a video shot by a member of the public emerged a few days later, it showed that the officer had shot the fleeing Scott in the back and then planted his taser next to Scott's body, and that "for several minutes after the shooting, Mr. Scott remained face down with his hands cuffed behind his back" (Schmidt and Apuzzo 2015). No one performed CPR.

One of the most powerful evidentiary functions of video, as we see in this case, is its ability to contradict false claims (Morrison 2017, 797). However, the ability of video to serve this function is limited by the fact that policing agencies may gather and study videos as they weave the official narrative of events, taking care to tell a story that cannot be contradicted by known sources. Fan (2019, 99–101) documents that policies in most jurisdictions allow officers to access videos as they write their reports, raising the specter of tailoring. In addition, officers may make utterances to influence viewer interpretation, such as telling a stationary person "to stop resisting, apparently in a display for the body cameras" (138). The fact that some parts of the official narrative appear to be confirmed by video evidence can produce a halo effect, giving the impression that even details of the narrative with no video support must be true.

LIBERATORY VIEWING
As Leigh Raiford notes, "photography as historical resource is at once neutral and partisan, transparent and elusive, ideological, authentic yet unreliable" (2011, 212). The same image can be used for wildly divergent projects. Photographs of lynchings were circulated as celebratory keepsakes by racist Whites, while Black activists deployed them to condemn injustice. A single community may incorporate images within distinct narratives meant for different audiences and purposes. Karlos Hill (2016) argues that victimization narratives designed to convince Whites to recognize and address severe injustice coexisted with consoling narratives, circulated within Black communities, whose purpose was to acknowledge the agency and heroic resistance of those who fought against lynching, even if they were ultimately overpowered.

Images, including moving images, do not speak for themselves. They are deployed within normatively laden projects designed for specific ends. Official discourse aims to conceal this fact: policing agencies and related authorities use pedagogy to present their interpretative project as an objective and value-neutral application of technical concepts. But the officially sanctioned ways of looking at videos, and the narratives that result, are entangled with racialized mechanisms of social control. If videos are to be used for liberatory ends, they must be intentionally redeployed within liberatory projects.

A video can rarely be the chief support of a liberatory narrative, since analysis of a video invites narrow focus and videos are subject to the same forms of racialized bodily scrutiny that are widely deployed in everyday life and that contribute to inequitable policing in the first place. A video might instead be used as an anchor—rather than as the primary focus—of a humanizing narrative that re-situates a narrow event of police use of force within a broader sociopolitical context, inviting empathy and identification rather than detachment.

University professor Ersula Ore was confronted by a campus police officer for jaywalking when she walked in the street to maneuver around construction. When the officer approached her and asked, condescendingly, "Are you aware that this is a street?" Ore did not assume a meek and compliant demeanor. Perhaps informed by her prior scholarship, which addressed "how official and unofficial campaigns of violence … continue to contribute to the formation of an American national community" while undermining "the civic status of African Americans" (Ore 2011, iii), she expressed disbelief. She told the officer, as recorded on the dash cam, "I never once saw a single solitary individual get pulled over by a cop for walking across a street … in a campus location." The video shows Ore questioning the officer's disrespectful manner and pointing out that others have been jaywalking in the same location without police confrontation. When she continues to speak rather than produce ID as the officer requests, he decides to handcuff her. When she fails to position her hands to the officer's satisfaction, he tells her, "I'm going to slam you on this car" and eventually throws her to the ground (FOX 10 Phoenix, 2014).

Viewer comments on the dash cam video focused on Ore's body and behavior, with the typical conclusion that she failed to comply and resisted arrest, justifying the officer's use of force. But we can choose to study different aspects of the video. We can attend to the officer's disrespectful demeanor, his choice to confront Ore for a minor infraction that is ubiquitous, and his choice to escalate rather than offer a mild caution. We can then turn to broader patterns. The university, after first claiming that the officer had behaved appropriately, engaged an outside firm, which identified numerous prior instances in which he had engaged in insubordination, policy violations, and excessive enforcement, and ultimately encouraged him to resign (Ryman 2015). The relationship of the policing agency to the university seems to have facilitated an inquiry less invested in a narrow narrative designed to defend the officer at all costs.

Expanding our inquiry to include a broader array of facts is one useful strategy. But direct engagement of affect and moral sensibility is also critical, especially for White viewers who may be prone to detachment from phenomena that do not target them. With the killing of Natasha McKenna, we can consider the terror McKenna must have felt as a large group of male officers entered her cell dressed in white Tyvek suits, purple gloves, and gas masks. Early in the encounter, McKenna, who had been diagnosed with schizophrenia, said, "You promised me you wouldn't kill me. I didn't do anything." While the county prosecutor's report includes extensive accounts of the officers' perceptions and a painstaking analysis of McKenna's movements, it offers little acknowledgment of her state of mind or the possibility that her physical resistance was prompted by fear that these strangely dressed men had come to kill her. As the *Washington Post* put it, the "51-page report is a sympathetic account of the incident, but nearly all the sympathy is reserved for the six male sheriff's deputies" (2015).

Sixteen-year-old Ma'Khia Bryant was involved in a fight with another teenager when police were called to the scene in Columbus, Ohio, in 2021. Bryant had a knife in her hand, and a White officer shot her four times, killing her. Even here, where the threat assigned to the girl's movements seems less like a fabrication produced by official pedagogies, incorporating the events in the video into a broader narrative designed to humanize Bryant and re-instill a sense of her life as valuable and worth preserving raises acute questions about the use of deadly force. A poem by philosopher V. D. James (2021) illuminates the ignorance of a simplistic narrative that construes Bryant as receiving comeuppance for her own bad choices.

They don't get it

Aint lived it or died it or thought they were dying while they lived it suspected they might already been dead from it had friends die of it have friends dying bout it

Ain't never woke up on the Honor Roll wondering if today was the day that you and Shay were finally going to throw hands because you refuse to let another person hit you hurt you push you without fighting for you

For yourself

and what are you even but somebody that some people love and love to forget and love to test

[…]

and some of us lived

and you didn't and you didn't and you didn't and you didn't and that shit ain't right

And dammit they got shit to say and shouldn't cause they don't know and ain't lived it or died it

they ain't never….and you did.

James's narrative, excerpted here, highlights the inadequacy of a narrow assessment of police use of force in the moment. The legal project of evaluating use of force in relation to the standards authorized by the Fourth Amendment, which focus on how a reasonable officer should act in the moment, should not be conflated with the ethicoepistemic project of valuing the lives of those subjected to differential risks of violence and working to alleviate the full range of conditions that create those risks.

George Yancy (2016) advocates, particularly for White viewers, a project of "un-suturing": deconstructing the self that can be detached from violence targeting communities of color, the self that regards Black bodies as superhuman and threatening, the self that prizes the achievement of being bulletproof not physically, but socially. White viewers must, Yancy suggests, un-suture themselves to recognize the humanity of people of color and participate in the forms of engagement and vulnerability that our mutual humanity requires. The aim is "an always already un-sutured corporeal interconnectedness" in which we are "ontologically compelled to respond in a mode of care expressed as a presumption of entreaty" (258): an entreaty by Tamir Rice to be able to play safely; an entreaty by Natasha McKenna to be protected while in a mental health crisis; entreaties by Eric Garner and Ersula Ore to be treated with dignity and respect; an entreaty by Ma'Khia Bryant to be restored to a safe and livable circumstance. The videos we have considered contain direct evidence of such entreaties, if watched in an un-sutured mode.

There is some hope that videos can play a role in what Courtney Baker calls "humane insight": "an ethics-based look that imagines the body that is seen to merit the protections due to all human bodies…. It is a look that turns a benevolent eye, recognizes the violations of human dignity, and bestows or articulates the desire for actual protection" (2015, 6). Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor (2021) argues that although the acute moment of protest following the release of the George Floyd video has passed, it "lifted the horizons of what could be demanded from elected officials and the private corporations that are at the center of this economy" in ways that have persisted. There is evidence of a sea change in thinking about policing, crime, and economic opportunity, as well as increased recognition of racial inequality. "These ideas are not easily categorized: they do not belong to particular camps, advocating particular things. When ideas are in flux, it means that people are open to change."

Raiford notes that "a focus on a photograph's *temporality*, its pastness … can engender the limitation of political activity" (2011, 218; emphasis in the original). But still and moving images can be curated to support "a critical black memory that allows for a reactivation of activism in the present

through an engagement with the past" (231). Both purveyors and viewers of video can participate in liberatory projects that use videos to cultivate un-suturing, humane insight, critical memory, and political change, if we cultivate forms of looking designed to resist the identification of the Black body as the explanatory locus of violence and maintain keen awareness that videos do not speak for themselves.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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