
by

Yael Emrav Horowitz
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“There will be no pictures of pigs shooting down

Brothers on the Instant Replay...

The Revolution will not be Televised.” -- Gil Scott-Heron
INTRODUCTION: VISUAL HISTORIES AND RESISTANT LEGACIES

“The distillation of experience from which true poetry springs births thought as
dream births concept, as feeling births idea, as knowledge births (precedes)
understanding” -- Audre Lorde from Poetry is Not a Luxury

Film is simultaneously an artifact and an ephemeral experience. Film is an artifact because while it is created as a result of contemporary moments, it exists past that time. It is an ephemeral experience because it has specific meanings and connotations when watched in the original historical moment. As both artifact and transient form, film is an art form that relies on the manipulation and control of audience’s emotion. The films that are valued and canonized have affective value, they are telling of what a society values and deem worthy of preservation. Therefore, an understanding of film history when put side by side with knowledge of African American histories can demonstrate the significant impact that film and visual representations of race and racialized violence can have on social movements. If one believes that all art is political, then film, because of its mass dissemination occupies a specific cultural and social position.

The aesthetics of a film cannot be entirely separated from its ideology. Films are often marked as canonical without consideration for what ideologies are being made classic. “Canonized items maintain their position as orientation points in the cultural market regardless of its vicissitudes” (Sela-Sheffy 145). These items are lauded as canonical without the flexibility necessary to acknowledge changing
cultural tides or values. The canon exists as a primarily stagnant entity, negating ideas of cultural progress or revolution and maintaining foundational ideologies. Ideologies like white supremacy are foundational to the establishment of the United States, it follows then that the canon would be shaped around it. As scholar Ed Guerrero has observed “commercial cinema in the United States, from its inception in Thomas Edison’s 1890 ‘peepshows’ to the megabudget entertainment packages of present day Hollywood, has pretty consistently devalued the image of African Americans and other racial minorities by confining their representations within an ideological web of myths” (Guerrero 8). Mapping this history can be done by starting with Thomas Edison’s Kinetoscope and identifying ideological trends and threads that remain consistent throughout film history. Thomas Edison wrote in October of 1888: “I am experimenting upon an instrument which does for the eye what the phonograph does for the ear” (“Motion Pictures”). Thomas Edison and his team then subsequently built the Kinetoscope. Audience members would pay a small price and be able to, one at a time, watch short films ranging from fifteen to thirty seconds long. Between the years of 1890 and 1900 Edison and his crew made 38 known of films (“Thomas Edison”). Some of the earliest examples of successful commercial cinema confirm that they traffic in stereotypes, violence and spectacle. In order to sell and make a profit films had to be spectacular. The conception of what is a spectacle is wrapped up in ideologies of exoticism and otherness. Thomas Edison’s early films, for example, relied on exotic performances and spectacles. His film Hadji Cheriff one of many produced in 1894 (see fig. 1.1) consists of twelve seconds in which a man, dressed in a robe, does a series of back flips. No information about him is given within the film,
he exists only within the world of the film to perform and please. Filmed within a precursor to Edison’s famous Black Maria studio, the black background takes away any potential context, furthering the spectacularization the subject/object of the film. When the blank background is put in a visual conversation with the only visual marker of culture- the robe-like costume, we are left with a snapshot of an exotic spectacle, not a full human. This film, along with other films like *Imperial Japanese Dance* (1894), and *The Buffalo Dance* (1894), which both showcase dances in full regalia without context or background visuals and with a stationary camera that separates the audience from the staged spectacle, all demonstrate that from its earliest conception cinema was invested in a showcasing the “spectacle of otherness” (Fortmueller).

Film shifted from just being displays of pure spectacle towards containing more narrative content at the turn of the 20th century. As the formal techniques of storytelling shifted, directors needed to rely on different tools to make their narratives accessible. The use of commonly known stories and tropes allowed directors to hone their new narrative and technical skills while ensuring that the audience would pick up on the plot. Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, an anti-slavery novel
written by a white woman abolitionist who framed the enslaved people as docile and harmless, “was the 20th century’s most frequently filmed book” (Railton). The novel follows the story of two enslaved people, Tom and Eliza as they are sold and as they traverse the antebellum South. The book itself is canonical and “the character of ‘Uncle Tom’ has become synonymous with servility and self-hatred” (Martin). It is not a coincidence that the canonical story “became the subject of no less than eight screen versions,” the film “depicted blacks as docile victims, totally subservient to whites” and so was palatable to white audiences in the North (Guerrero 12). The multiple versions of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* came at a time when “the first generation of movie-goers had to learn the new technology’s language of storytelling...the lessons needed to be as accessible as possible” (Railton). The movie goers would have been familiar with the story both because it was released in serialized format, adding to the nature of spectacle through suspense, as a complete novel, and it was highly proliferated through Uncle Tom Shows which ran almost non-stop from the 1850s through the 1890s - staged productions that utilized spectacle and blackface. It makes sense then that technological innovations went hand in hand with the reanimation of old stories and fundamental tropes. For example, a scene that is often repeated in each version of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* is the slave auction. The slave auction is an iconographic element within depictions of slavery. Thomas Edison produced a version of the film in order to help further facilitate a transition from full spectacle to narrative film, relying on the stories iconography and familiarity. In the 1903 Edison version of the film, a full ninety seconds are devoted to the scene which is highly significant in a nineteen-minute film. The scene is set up in a way that makes use of
familiar poses and tableaux (see fig. 1.2). The slave auction is a trope that gets used freely in both early and contemporary slave narrative films. The aesthetics of it, with a busy frame full of people, use the moments iconographic power to add to the entertainment and spectacle of the film. The entertainment experienced is derived from intense moments of trauma. While the intention of the original story was to get the audience to be ashamed of and upset about the South’s “peculiar institution” the film still relishes in the spectacle of the auction - reenacting moments of intense violence. Additionally, up until the 1914 World Film Corporation version of the film, all the primary African American characters were played by white actors in blackface. This was familiar to audiences of the time as the films often used “exaggerated racial markings conventional to minstrelsy” (Hardy 416). The use of blackface in films to signify racial otherness while not desegregating film sets, is a common thread in earlier films like the *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* versions and later but equally as canonical films like *The Jazz Singer* (1927) and *Birth of a Nation* (1915). Furthermore, *Birth of a Nation* attempts to refute the images of Black docility projected by *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* to make an argument that white America must be unified to confront and control a more severe racial threat.
As author Vincent Rocchio has acknowledged “Birth of a Nation” is all too often given its status within film history despite is participation in the process of racism” (Rocchio 29). It is often lauded as one of the first full feature length films, constantly being referred back to within Film Studies. The aesthetics of the film are lauded as a “watershed moment” without an acknowledgement of the violent racism portrayed and enacted as a result of that film (29). Griffith utilized grandiose scenes, complex narrative storytelling and sophisticated editing to create compelling stories that were wildly successful. Griffith is often lauded as the pioneer behind cross-cutting, an editing technique wherein a scene jumps back and forth between different narrative components. This fact is often stated without an acknowledgment of how the technique can be utilized to create oversimplifications and ideological juxtapositions. It leads the audience to make certain associations. PBS, in their series American Masters, calls Griffith the “Father of Film” and Birth of a Nation the “first masterpiece of cinema” only acknowledging at the end of the section the grave racist implications of the film (“D.W. Griffith”). Griffith is seemingly never held accountable for his ideology, it is always chalked up to be an unfortunate side-effect

Figure 1.3: Composite of Sets. Left 1903, Right 1915. Film Frames. U of Virginia.
of the times. Birth of a Nation relies on the use of previously understood tropes and icons in order to communicate its narrative and ideology. Exemplary of this is the presence of the small cabin in Griffith’s film (see fig. 1.3). The use of an almost identical set between the two films demonstrates that Griffith was building off of and attempting to invert Uncle Tom’s Cabin’s legacy. “What Griffith’s cabin symbolizes...deliberately inverts most of Stowe’s meanings” as the cabin becomes the “specific place at which the new ‘Aryan’ nation is born” and the North and South are reunited (Railton). The “ideology of racial subordination and difference are not produced in a formal, aesthetic vacuum devoid of political concerns or historical influences” (Guerrero 10). Uncle Tom’s Cabin was a historical influence on Birth of a Nation, used to further a set of contradictory political concerns.

The black characters in the film are played by white actors in blackface, this is not just because that was typical of the time but because “Griffith considered [the task of segregating casts] essential for upholding the virtue of white female stars” (Hardy 416). White feminine virtue is a cornerstone of the narrative, and it informed more than just what was on the screen. In response to the protection of white womanhood, “Birth of a Nation represented Black males as sexual monsters in order to justify a narrative in which Black males were subdued by white males” (Wartenberg 166). In the film, “the KKK is seen as the defender of Southern rights, property, and honor -- especially of the sexual purity of women...the conventions of screen narrative and representation transform the KKK into heroes with whom we are expected to sympathize” (Vera 268). The Ku Klux Klan was originally formed in 1865 by Confederate army veterans. From 1865 until 1871 it was active in violently
combating progressive changes that came about as a part of Reconstruction. In 1871, a law was passed giving the federal government the agency to prosecute and convict Klansmen, rendering the KKK relatively inactive until the 20th century (Wormser).

The Klan epitomizes white supremacy, casting them in a heroic and sympathetic light as the “saviors of white America” is an active endorsement of homegrown American terrorism (McNeill).

Seeing *Birth of a Nation* as “a narrative about the need for the reconciliation of the divided white self” fits with its contemporary moment (Vera 269). A contemporary review of the film celebrated the fact that it was “laid, played and made in America” marking it as a national story and artifact (Variety). The film came at a time of racial anxiety, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) had been formed six years prior to its release, and was riding the wave of intensified racial violence and lynching of the 1890s and 1910s (see fig. 1.4). The NAACP’s journal *The Crisis* published a sobering article in a 1915 volume tracking American lynching. Within the article the author stated “all this goes to show how peculiarly fitted the United States is for moral leadership of the world” (“The Lynching Industry”). At a moment when the United States was rising as a global and imperial super-power *Birth of a Nation* was making a case for white unification and a strong national-read, white-identity.
Birth of a Nation was not only “sympathetic to the South but ultimately conciliatory in an effort to reconcile the divided white self” but was also incredibly violent (Vera 269). Almost as soon as the film was released, KKK activity spiked. This new tradition of intimidation stems from the KKK being “exhilarated by Griffith’s sympathetic portrayal” (Koerner). While the KKK had been active after the Civil War to continue the Confederate legacy and counteract Reconstruction, this new manifestation was more concerned with maintaining Jim Crow and Christian fundamentalist or white supremacist social mores (Wormser). As the official laws and standards concerning race relations changed in the United States, the KKK continuously responded by attempting to maintain a white supremacist status quo.

One of the major cinematic and historic moments in the film is a burning of a cross, a ritual the Ku Klux Klan did not subscribe to prior to November 1915 (see fig. 1.5). According to historians, it was in November of 1915 when

“a dozen or so Georgians gathered to jump-start the long-defunct Klan on Stone Mountain...The group used flashlights to find its way through the dark led by William J. Simmons...Griffith’s film was later said to have inspired the men into action...He and his followers on that night gathered stones to build a makeshift altar. The used pine boards soaked in kerosene to make a cross. Then they lit it” (Lehr 278).
Griffith himself shared some of the same roots as the KKK, he was born in rural Kentucky and was the son of a Confederate colonel ("Biography"). The white history of the South and the Confederacy were personal and intimate family matters for Griffith.

Mainstream film is disseminated widely enough that it can have a sociopolitical impact outside of the movie theater. It was not surprising, then, that "immediately after the film's release, the Ku Klux Klan experienced a surge in membership, and it continued to use the film as a recruiting tool for decades after that" ("100 Years Later"). In ten years, between 1915 and 1925, the KKK’s membership grew from one

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*Figure 1.5: D.W. Griffith. Cross Burning in Birth of a Nation. 1915. YouTube.*

*Figure 1.6: Maps of Klaverns. 2016. Virginia Commonwealth University.*
Klavern in Georgia to a few thousand to almost four million people, spreading from the South to New England, the Midwest, and the West Coast with more than 2,000 local units ("Ku Klux Klan") (McNeill). The maps show the growth of local KKK chapters, known as Klaverns, between the years of 1915, 1920, and 1925 (see fig. 1.6) ("Mapping"). Not acknowledging the serious and tangible impact that film can have, denies its power and responsibility. This power was recognized from the start. The film was widely celebrated and acclaimed, it was “the first movie ever to be screened at the White House. The idea was pitched to the president because he “simply had to witness this amazing new form of media and, in particular, Griffith’s film” (Lehr 150). This reasoning points to the marriage of innovation and ideology, it was not just that the president had to be privy to the spectacle of cinema but that the story he saw was also significant. Woodrow Wilson reportedly called it “history written in lightening” ("100 Years Later"). “The subject matter [of the film] played into his interests” giving more power to a film that was in line with what the contemporary president believed (Lehr 151). Wilson is a part of the substantial legacy of racism in the White House: he “was a loyal son of the Old South who regretted the outcome of the Civil war” (Keylor). He was a contemporary and friend of Thomas Dixon, the author of the inflammatory novel The Clansman on which Birth of a Nation was based. In correspondence between Wilson and Dixon, Dixon wrote that “he was going to dedicate his next novel to Woodrow Wilson” (Lehr 123) During his presidency Wilson “oversaw unprecedented segregation in federal offices” and in a meeting with William Monroe Trotter, a Harvard graduate, and accomplished write, and an influential African American activist, Wilson stated “segregation is not a
humiliation but a benefit, and ought to be so regarded by you” (Lehr). As Wilson “offered only a cold shoulder to Trotter’s urgent insistence on being heard [he] happily accepted New Year’s greetings from his racist write friend,” Thomas Dixon (Lehr 123). *Birth of a Nation* was Woodrow Wilson’s story and family history, the film fit so exactly with the hegemonic white supremacist society of the time while also furthering direct violence.

When *Birth of A Nation* premiered, the NAACP, led by W.E.B. Dubois, attempted, albeit unsuccessfully, to ban the film from public theaters and because the film was “reputed to have inspired a new wave of terror by the Ku Klux Klan, it was also denounced by the NAACP” (Vera 266). On May 10th, 1915 the Boston Globe published an article with the headline “Hold Midnight Protest Meeting: Colored People Denounce “Birth of a Nation” Again, Those Held Responsible for its continuance criticised” (“Hold”). In 1915, there were 148 articles written in the Boston Globe about the film, its reception and the subsequent protests. William Monroe Trotter, founder of *The Guardian*, a Boston newspaper, spearheaded a fierce campaign to get the film censored and banned. The campaign in the media and through the government to get the film banned was coupled with direct action; a *Boston Post* front page headline from 1915 reads “Army of Police Nip Theater Riot in the Bud: 11 Arrests Follow Attempt of Colored Citizens to Purchase Tickets for ‘Birth of a Nation.’” (Lehr 221). “It was in this role, that of creator and mediator of opinion, that *Birth* projected itself into the continuum of cinema history” and alongside that continuum are histories of subversion and resistance (Guerrero 15).
Cinema, from its conception, contained images and narratives that reinforce white supremacy. Alongside those images are pictures and protests that were created in response to and in order to subvert the visual violence enacted. As *The Birth of a Nation* was gaining success the NAACP utilized various strategies of resistance. They “tried to help get a competing film going to rebut Griffith’s” but because of industry standards and financial constraints were unsuccessful; this example serves as a microcosm of how stories get told in Hollywood and which ideologies are privileged (Lehr 174). The NAACP’s next strategy was to try and invoke censorship laws, creating an uncomfortable tension. Journalist Dick Lehr examines the principles of resistance used by the NAACP noting that “as nettlesome in principle that censorship was to civil rights opponents of the film, back then it was, tactically speaking, the weapon du jour” (Lehr 177). This example of resistance to a film and attempts to control a narrative are indicative of a more constant struggle. While the struggle to get the film banned was not successful “the film helped to give the NAACP a focus for their political efforts, and it motivated the black press to publicize the importance of investing in black film production companies and black theaters” (Siompoulos 113). Art and film have political power, both in its creation and distribution and we continue to see examples of the struggle for just self-expression play out.

Oscar Micheaux, the brilliant and underrepresented African American filmmaker, released the pioneering film, *Within Our Gates*, in 1920. The sophisticated silent film that dealt with issues of violence and representation premiered five years after *Birth of a Nation*. Oscar Micheaux was an African American film director from Metropolis and Chicago Illinois who got his start from
writing his novel *The Homesteader* and then producing a subsequent screen adaptation in 1919. “Micheaux’s movies were known as ‘race’ films - made by black filmmakers, with an all-black cast for a black audience” (“Oscar Micheaux”). This film “provided a rebuttal to Griffith’s depiction of black violence and corruption with a story of injustices faced by African Americans in a racist society” (Siompoulos 111). From the earliest release of *Birth of a Nation* “Micheaux and the leadership were involved in a pitched battle against Griffith and his audience” (Green 1).

Micheaux was involved in long term challenging the film both on and off the screen. A scathing letter he wrote in 1927 to the Virginia State Board of Censors, who were concerned about his film *The House Behind the Cedars* said “there has been but one picture that incited the colored people to riot, and that still does, that picture is the ‘Birth of a Nation.’” (Green 1). His reference to Griffith’s film twelve years after it was released demonstrates the long term and lasting effects the film had on the industry and on race relations. *Within Our Gates* is a direct and resistant filmic response to Griffith’s work. The film is complexly constructed and uses many of the same classical Hollywood aesthetics that Griffith’s film relies on, touching on similar themes of lynching and violence but from a very different angle. Micheaux’s characters are “without a doubt casted, dressed and photographed to approximate Griffith’s aesthetic” and to undermine his ideology (Green 1). While there are similarities, “the grandness of Griffith’s conflict is supported by an analogously grand style. Micheaux’s content is less Manichean and his style less grand than Griffiths” (Green 4). Why, though, has Micheaux’s film not been marked as equally canonical? If Griffith’s grandness is part of the reason *Birth of a Nation* is seen as canonical and
that set of aesthetics is wrapped in a specific ideology then the formation of the canon itself is marked by the ideologies of white supremacy that Griffith aggrandized. “In *Birth of a Nation* cinematic spectacle and provocatively expressionistic editing were being experienced as an attack on the black community, it made some sense for a black filmmaker to favor a less spectacular more expository style” (Green 6). Another partial answer to questions about canon formation and exclusion can be found in the reception of Micheaux’s pioneering film. “Micheaux’s films not only had problems with white censors; sometimes his films were criticized by prominent African Americans, who accused Micheaux of airing the black community’s dirty laundry” (Siompoulos 114). Must *Within Our Gates* always be discussed in comparison with Griffith’s film or is it possible for either of these films to stand alone? Micheaux’s accomplishments are plentiful; “he is credited with making the first full-length all-black silent film produced by a black company, as well as the first full-length, all-black total sound film” and yet he is studied far less than Griffith (Peterson 136). The images created by Michaeux make up a part of a long history of resistance that continues from the invention of cinema to its modern day uses. As time passed and “with the rise of the civil rights movement, black protest became increasingly focused on the film industry” (Guerrero 29). Further technological innovations like the television provided even more channels for expression and representation. Understanding how race is represented and explored in the United States’ visual culture is an important element of the struggle for liberation. As the socio-political systems shift and change so too does representation and expression.
It is not just a coincidence that moments of technological innovation go hand in hand with narratives that contain white supremacist ideologies. While formal technique was rapidly developing, it was still necessary for the audience to be able to understand the narrative and emotion of a film. Thus, in times of technological turmoil film directors relied on stabilized and racialized tropes that are so fundamental to ‘American’ life and culture. By the time that film was better established “Hollywood had firmly put in place a system of visual and narrative racism that privileged whiteness” (Denzin 20). The questions then become about whether film is an art form that can be utilized in movements for racial justice. If its original uses in the United States, and specifically Hollywood, was to exotify the ‘Other’ and normalize racialized violence then the work of making equitable and justice oriented film is inherently resistance. Just as film, as both object and art, holds affective weight, the act of filmmaking can be an intentional, emotional, and political process. In my process of making my thesis film *The Revolution, Televised* these histories were ever-present. I grappled with the ideas of film making as a tool for white supremacy versus film making as a tool for resistance. Within the pre-production process were moments when it felt as if film would always be more successful as a conservative art form. Representation is important and political, and thus aesthetics matter as much as narrative does. By exploring histories of visual aesthetics alongside important political moments and movements trends can be examined and actively reshaped.
Early 1900s: Lynching Photography, Portraits and Mugshots

“But Emancipation came and the vested interests of the white man in the Negro’s body were lost” – Ida B. Wells in The Red Record

The start of the 20th century came with significant changes and turmoil, both socially and technologically. Photography has many origins and many initial uses at this time. Similar to the use of Edison’s peepshow films, photography was also used to capture the exotic, the different and the spectacular. Often photography was linked to important historical and political events and people. In the United States “photography quickly became a part of American culture at every level - from practical and scientific, to the industrial, to the aesthetic, not to mention the whole world of amusement and entertainment that opened up with the advent of the camera” (Orvell 13). Exploring some of the different early uses for photography can illuminate the different ideologies attached to the technology.

Displaying moments of spectacle and important historic events was a consistent use of photographic technology. Matthew Brady captured critical and unforgettable moments of the Civil War. War carries a great deal of both trauma and national pride. Brady was one of the first photojournalists to realize and make use of the fact that “photographs were seen to carry a burden of truth that no other graphic medium possessed” (Orvell 61). Brady and his team of photographers set out to capture the truth of the Civil War, they created images (see fig. 2.1) that “changed fundamentally (though not permanently) the conception of war,” these images were
widely distributed (Orvell 63). Brady’s 1862 exhibit, “The Dead of Antietam” Brady displayed images that “received more attention at the time of the war than any other series of images during the rest of the war” ("Matthew Brady").

During this time, Brady was also concerned with capturing important historical figures. He took portraits of both Abraham Lincoln and Frederick Douglass, contributing two of the most iconic images of both of these men.

Being able to identify and recognize the self was an important and early use of photographs. “Above all, it was the photographic portrait that captured the enthusiasm of the general public” and in observing early portraits we can identify a few different uses (Orvell 19). Portraiture can be used to identify both the self and the other. Looking at the photography of Edward Curtis we can understand how portraiture can also be used to exotify and Other its subject. Edward Curtis was both a photographer and an ethnographer. Curtis participated in colonial exploration missions in order to photograph indigenous peoples of different regions - his success came greatly from the desire to see ‘the Other’ (“Biography”). His photographs do complicated emotional and intellectual work (see fig. 2.2). On the one hand his close up of an indigenous man’s face humanizes him and allows spectators to see the
emotion expressed. On the other, the indigenous subject is framed without context, allowing the spectator to observe without being aware of the realities of the man’s life or his socio-political situation. This image straddles the line between the private portrait and the scientific portrait, though it does seem as if “the photographer was seeking to record ‘objectively’ a subject who must be made to conform to a social type” (Orvell 31). This distinction in many ways must be made considering the gaze of the photographer. The gaze of an anthropologist is significantly different than that of a hired family photographer, thus it is incredibly important to understand the context in which images are produced. Curtis was able to bring back photographs from expeditions and make profit, gain fame, from displaying the exotic - making a spectacle.

As the technology became more accessible photography became a more mainstream and also private practice. A sign of a certain amount of prestige and social class was the ability to pay for a portrait of oneself or one’s family. Photography was increasingly sold as a service. In an attempt to invert the use of photography to define racial and social castes, many African American photographers
relied on portraiture to control representation. This path of resistance still acknowledged “the authority of the camera” (Orvell 32). The focus on creating empowering images of Black life demonstrates that “visual culture was fundamental not only to racist classification but also to racial reinscription” (Smith 3). In 1900, W.E.B. Du Bois organized an exhibit of photography entitled “Types of American Negroes, Georgia, U.S.A.” In many ways this exhibit seems like a direct response to the rising use of eugenic and dehumanizing photographs being circulated at the time. The photographer Thomas Askew was responsible for many of the images. When looked at as a unit, the photographs in the exhibit “formally resemble a wide range of disparate kinds of photographs, from the instrumental records of scientific and criminological mug shots to middle-class portraits” (Smith 7). One striking set of images use the “formal visual codes of scientific photography, repeating those visual tropes” with a different impact (see fig. 2.3). Replicated in this image is the grey background that de-contextualizes the subject, “the plain backdrop locates individuals within the institutional contexts that privilege identification and documentations” and thus rote classification (Smith 46). In these images Du Bois is not providing more context that would undermine the original form, instead he “uses scientific methodology to undermine racist scientific claims” (Smith 55). These images serve to highlight different and diversity as opposed to the
projected sameness, they do so using the same formal elements that originally set up the types they are attempting to refute. “Further while the first images in Du Bois’ 1900 Paris Exposition albums formally recall the photographs that eugenicists and biological racialists used to codify bodies in racial terms, Du Bois’s albums as a whole dismantle the physical coherence of the imagined racial type” (Smith 61). These photographs use similar aesthetics but imbue them with subversive ideologies in order to join answer the dominant visual culture.

Walter Benjamin, in his seminal essay *Little History of Photography*, explores the idea that photography cannot be simply classified as art, that there is “something that cannot be silenced, that fills you with an unruly desire” to understand some of the reality from which the photograph was produced (Benjamin 510). This, in many ways, creates a more explicitly political background for the image. It leads the viewer more directly to questions of how, why and where these pictures were taken and how close to reality they can be. Still there is a constructed quality to portraiture because it is a service paid for, the photographer and the subject has time to build an image they want the world to see.

Almost directly inverse from that experience and ideology behind portraiture was the developing idea of the mug shot. Just as there was a belief that reality would show through a portrait, so too did early 20th century folks believe that “a criminal’s inner character and pathology would be visible in his face and composure” (Wood 386). The mug shot has many resonances with the form of scientific portraiture discussed above, both relied on images to illuminate “phrenological correspondence” with behavior (Orvell 31). This type of photography was heavily racialized and in
many ways its historical origins can be seen in Joseph T. Zealy’s daguerreotypes of enslaved people (see fig 2.4). The images look eerily similar to both the modern-day mug shot and to Du Bois’ portrait series with subjects being framed frontally as well as in profile. Consistently, the lack of background of these images takes away all context, isolating the subject to allow “dehumanizing objectivity…[and] the cold, hard stare of the laboratory” (Smith 47). These images were commissioned in order to “support theories of polygenesis,” that different races were in fact different species (Smith 46). Mug shots or “prison photography furnished eugenicists with an invaluable resource for identifying those believed to be carrying the genes of delinquency and crime” (Maxwell 48). “Coinciding historically with the police mug shot popularized during the 1880s and 1890s” is the history of lynching photography and circulation - both forms of these images “enacted the aims of white supremacy in the starkest terms possible” (Goldsby 220). Mug shots, just like Zealy’s earlier images, “exist due to extreme differences in power between photographer and subjects” (Smith 47).

The mugshot and the portrait directly meet each other in lynching photographs. The victims in the pictures exist as supposed evidence of their own guilt, while the white spectators are often dignified and posed. A big difference between mug shots, portraits and lynching photography was that when Kodak
released their hand-held cameras it led to the “deprofessionalization of the practice of photography” (Goldsby 257). This meant that a standard bystander or voyeur could become the person to produce an iconically violent image. Unsurprisingly this minimized the staged nature of many photographs, the democratization of the technology meant that “Americans were free to view themselves and their world as they desired” (Goldsby 257). The Kodak snapshots are seen as more intimate and authentic portrayals of life. In 1888, George Eastman through Kodak released a camera that was accessible to amateur photographers, it was exponentially more portable than previous cameras. “By simplifying the apparatus and even processing the film for the consumer, [Eastman] made photography accessible to millions of casual amateurs with no professional training, technical expertise, or aesthetic credentials” (Fineman). The technological advances preceded aesthetic changes - both changed the meaning of photography. Both the professional and the more amateur lynching photographs are incredibly disturbing as they exist as representations of different violent elements. The professional photographs add to trauma because they demonstrate the willingness and excitement to profit off of racialized violence. It demonstrates how deeply connected capitalism and white supremacy are - in some sense these spectacles of racialized violence were so popular because they were profitable (see fig. 2.5). The posed nature of the photograph is clear in the image produced from the lynching of Frank McManus in Minnesota. Taken in 1882, before point and shoot cameras were accessible, the amount of time necessary to set up this shot was significant. This provided the mob with ample time to ready themselves and pose - creating an intentional spectacle. The photographer set up the image he wanted
to see, with the victim centered but in the background, the focus of the picture is simultaneously the victim and, also, the painfully present crowd and mob. There is little motion in the picture demonstrating that at that point in time the act was done and the picture was taken as a marker to remember it - the photographer is not occupying the role of participant because he must have been further removed in order to produce that image. The amateur photography demonstrates that it was not only a few extreme individual participating in these acts with bystanders around them but mobs of active people. “Where stereographs fixed the viewer in one place and drew out his engagement with the image, the
marvel of snapshot photography...was the camera’s mobility and capacity to produce visual encounters instantaneously” (Goldsby 258). The photographs produced by the point and shoot Kodak cameras demonstrate a willingness and drive to participate in violent acts and a desire to commemorate them (see fig. 2.6). In the 1902 series of images produced with a Kodak camera the series of events are segmented, there is a clear participation and movement of the photographer. The series of images were taken in quick succession and certainly from within the mob. The photographer was not at all removed from the crowd, indicating their more active participation. The series of images provide a narrative of events rather than a simple marker of them happening. The production of these images “necessitated the compliance” of those taking the photographs (Wood 375). These images exist as acts of support for white supremacy and violence, they are “the spectacularization of death” in an inherently racialized manner (Goldsby 223). The “snapshot’s credibility as authentic radiated from such notions of unprofessionalized simplicity, candor and familiarity,” the alignment of images with truth created a similar effect that was found in mug shots (Goldsby 257). The mere existence of the photograph proved for the viewer the supposed guilt of the victim, for how could they have suffered such a fate if they were not personally responsible for it. As more forms of imagery surface the discursive work of the photographs intensified. The “images of confident, restrained white men beside the bodies of debased black men could validate the racist convictions of the white southerners who gazed upon them, not only because viewers assumed the visual accuracy of the surface image but because they believed that the image made manifest interior truths and the essence of racial character” (Wood 382). Just as mug
shots were seen as a tool to demonstrate the guilt of its victims, and portraits demonstrated their grace, lynching photography tried to prove the victims guilty and the bystanders upright.

The white bystanders in most lynching photographs are posing as if for a portrait, marking and important event they attended. Meanwhile, the Black bodies that were subjected to intense violence serve as a reminder, for the white hegemony, of guilt. The proliferation of lynching photography was facilitated by the increased accessibility of cameras and film, and further by printed images. The history of technology and of socio-political events run a parallel course. Photography was becoming popular and accessible at the turn of the 19th century - around the same time that the photographs and postcards of lynching began to surface. Photography and cameras became further industrialized through the proliferation of “the visiting-card picture” (Benjamin 507). These early postcards could be bought and sent as defining mementos of faraway places and significant events. In 1910, the technology needed to produce postcards was further democratized with the creation of “real-photo” postcards. “The Rochester Optical Company, an Eastman subsidiary, introduced a small one-step automatic postcard printer that sold for just $7.50” (Sante 10). This allowed photographer to produce
visual souvenirs almost immediately. “As endlessly reproducible documents, photographic postcards could spread the news of lynching far and wide, claiming an ever-larger crowd of witnesses -- terrorizing and symbolically empowering ever greater numbers” while also being profitable for the creator of the images (Smith 121). The conversion of these images into postcards speedily marks them as iconic and turns them into long lasting artifacts. “By the first decade of the twentieth century, smaller towns also had local photographers, and itinerant photographers advertised their services in newspapers” (Wood 384). The creation of these images as postcards furthered their existence as artifacts (see fig. 2.7). In this postcard created in Duluth, Minnesota in 1919, the spectators and mob are shown with a grotesque intimacy. The three victims of the lynching, Elias Clayton, Elmer Jackson, and Isaac McGhie are foregrounded and central in the image, it is an image crafted with a violent pride. The inscription on the upper left hand corner matter-of-factly describes the scene and also contains the initials of the photographer. This was an image that could have been sold and brought into the homes of the members of the mob. The white faces peering directly at the camera are in want of recognition. With Zealy’s early images “the very status of these images as daguerreotypes makes their dehumanizing objectivity even more shocking, for daguerreotypes are generally regarded as keepsakes” (Smith 47). Similarly, the notion of postcards, which typically displayed idyllic scenes, is inverted with the creation of lynching postcards that were brought into the intimate and domestic realm. It disrupts expectations of the medium while simultaneously and quickly normalizing the violence within the image.
This spectacle normally existed outside but is still heavily connected to the realm of the domestic. Lynching photography exists as a reminder of how the confines and borders of white domesticity must be regulated. The lynching themselves exist as spectacles of white supremacist control over the domestic. When the images of these acts of violence were converted, and printed into postcards that were sold for profit they re-entered the realm of the domestic. Early photography was said to bring the “wonders and sights of the world into the parlour with an immediacy that was breathtaking” (Orvell 13). The wonders and sights of the American landscape undoubtedly included violent images of white supremacist rule. The physical artifact of the postcard exists within the realm of the domestic, it is a marker of a white supremacist ideology that informs the structure of the hearth. The white supremacist and violent currents within the realm of the domestic are deeply present within film history and specifically within the genre of melodrama. Melodrama was a genre of theater and film that was gaining much popularity at the same time as lynching photography. It relied heavily on “everyone’s ethical status [being] immediately legible” which within the visual world of film was often racialized and coded (Singer 46). “Melodrama’s visceral and emotional excess...prompted Ludwig Lewisohn...to associate the genre with the primal brutality of the mob” (Singer 40). This genre of film, that deals
deeply with the domestic, contains the same excess and hyper-realism that is so deeply disturbing in lynching photographs.

Melodrama and lynching photography meet each other in an explicit formal equivalence within D.W. Griffith’s *The Birth of A Nation*. Within the plot of the film a Black man, Gus, chases a white woman through a forest in an attempt to ask her to marry him. She chooses to jump to her death rather than face any domesticity that involves Blackness (see fig. 2.8). In this archetypal still from the film, the white woman is frantic because the Black man lurks nearby. Here, Griffith was relying on well-known sexual tropes of the threatening Black man and the fragile white woman. Many of these tropes were used as justification for lynching and Griffith linked the two sets of images. What happens during a lynching is that “according to racialized sexual codes, the white woman’s hysterical body is integrated back into the social body while the hypersexed black body is publicly scourged and destroyed as inimical to the social body” (Apel 57). These codes are a part of what facilitated many instances of lynching and are overtly present in Griffith’s film. The realm of the domestic and the social body, deserve all protection -
justifying any form of violence against threat. A white man witnesses this and then chooses to rally a newly formed chapter of the Ku Klux Klan to find and lynch Gus. The way the film is constructed signifies that lynching is an adequate response to a perceived threat towards the domestic, making the man who agitates the mob the hero (see fig 2.9). In the original release poster for the film, the man who commits the lynching is clearly identified as the heroic figure. He is alone on the poster, nobly riding a horse, an image that evokes thoughts of war time heroes. The pose here almost perfectly replicates the iconic imagery of 19th century French painter, Jacques-Louis David’s painting of Napoleon. The image substitutes one iconic hero for another, both images contain ideologies of domination and warfare. The public and private sphere are deeply linked in an effort to preserve white supremacy and prevent miscegenation. “Home, as a crucial element of melodrama, is often represented as its site of confrontation, indeed it is often precisely what is at stake within such confrontations” (Bennett). Birth of a Nation is an epic and a melodrama - it meets many standard genre conventions. Thus, melodrama deals with the themes of a raced and gendered sexuality in ways that are akin to narratives used to justify lynching.

The realm of the domestic was also a site of resistance. Thomas Askew, the photographer whose images were used in the 1900 Paris exhibit put together by Du Bois, created many images of the African American domestic space. Often, the images are of families in front of their homes (see fig. 2.10). The images are meant to refute the hypersexualized public notions of the Black man, instead “the family and house provide the scale by which the viewer is meant to measure his worth as a middle-class man and a racial representative” (Smith 105). Figure 2.10 shows a man
is framed – physically and visually – by his family and by his house. Many of images
put forth by Du Bois and Askew are meant to represent the ways that the domestic
sphere influences the
character of a person,
refuting racial
essentialism. Later in
the 20th century and
perhaps as a response to
the increased
proliferation images of
violence, James Van
Der Zee create portraits
of Black upper class families that were incredibly dignified and capitalized on the
politics of respectability. Similar to the images created by Du Bois and Askew, the
“photographs represent both the exterior signs of middle-class prosperity and the
more intimate realms of domestic interiors” (Smith 108). These images were issued
primarily as commercial portraits of families. Van Der Zee’s “imaginative studio
portraits and group portraits significantly enriched these popular genres and
provided...evidence of the new racial self-identity” called for in the Harlem
Renaissance (Orvell 120). Unlike the images created by mug shots and biological
racist photographs Van Der Zee’s images situated their subjects within dignified and
domestic contexts (see fig 2.11). There is an intentional building of an image that
happens within each of these portraits. The props used are clearly placed specifically
to frame the woman, they aim to be delicate and refined. These carefully crafted images display Van Der Zee’s “sensitivity and the pride he felt from living and working within the community...[they are] graceful images that challenged prevailing stereotypes” (Smithsonian). Van Der Zee understood “that his portraits...were not just for the client who commissioned them, but for history” (Tramz). This intuition casts the intentional choices made by Van Der Zee in a different light, it was not only motivated by capitalist gain but by the desire to craft a historical narrative as well. A subset of the portraits created by Van Der Zee were funerary portraits, commissioned by loved ones after a person had died. These portraits deconstruct the dichotomy of life being uplifting and death being oppressive. Van Der Zee demonstrates that even in death, dignity and beauty is possible (see fig 2.12). These portraits are a “meditation on death and loss, but also on beauty” (Tramz). The subject of the portrait is the center of the image, they are at peace in death, there are no visual cues to how they died. The image exists as an homage to the human being and their legacy and shared history with the person who commissioned the image. Van Der Zee often created double exposures in his funerary portraits, including spiritual poems or images. Van der Zee, in Figure 2.12 creates an image of God looking down on the deceased woman demonstrating the longevity of the soul and the
possibility for redemption after death. The beautiful images of death created by Van Der Zee are an answer to a “beauty that has been silenced” (Eternity). When contrasted with the images of death in lynching photography they provide a powerful example of what it means have autonomy in both life and death. These images counterbalance the violent images of lynching; they do so in ways that uphold class and respectability as the tools for racial uplift.

The images created by Askew and Van Der Zee create alternative and important narratives. At the same time, there is also subversive potential in the historical images of the lynching themselves.

The intellectual and emotional work required to make resistance possible when looking at these pictures is rooted in their visual composition. “One of the oldest conventions of photography, to include a figure as a surrogate for the viewer,” is consistently and overwhelmingly present in lynching photographs (Apel 6). The mobs and crowds of onlookers mirror the actions of those looking at the photographs in non-contemporary moments, especially a primarily white audience present in many modern gallery spaces. If the modern viewer avoids
looking at the mobs, in order to avoid identification or confrontation, they then allow themselves to scrupulously examine the Black body on which violence was enacted. “These photographs replicated the discourse of lynching narratives in starkly visual terms, rendering the ideologies embedded in this discourse both eerily immediate and eternal” (Wood 374). If the photographs and the ideologies are both historical and current, then the role that the voyeur plays follows suit. The images are not just artifacts of the past, but serve also as an important examination of the present. The work that must be done while looking at these photographs requires looking resistantly, holding ourselves accountable to these histories and not excusing oneself from them. While images of violence perpetuate and exact their own form of indirect and lasting violence, they also provide a pathway for necessary resistance. This form of resistance happens both in the contemporary moment and in the historical moment.

The photographs and postcards of American lynching were used to demonstrate the cruelty and inhumanity of racial violence across the United States and specifically in the South. Activists, intellectuals, and journalists found ways to use the photographs “to oppose their original purpose” subverting the intended effects of the visual violence (Apel 9). Using images for the purpose of resistance has been done since the images existed themselves. In the case of lynching photography, the images of violence created by white supremacy were repurposed in order to inspire anti-lynching activism. “Even in the moment when [the images] were most unashamedly used to celebrate lynchings as communal acts, those photographs remained unstable entities, public artifacts that contained all the elements of their own undoing” (Rushdy 67). These images were not met uncritically - just as they became
symbols and memorandums of white supremacy, they also became icons against racialized brutality. The struggle to control ideology raises important questions about whether or not these images would always exist solely as a “raw assertion of white supremacy [that] was inherently an evil that ought never to be displayed” (Rushdy 67). A 1937 issue of The Crisis featured an impassioned response to a letter that states the journal believed “that very often the sheer horror of lynching serves to rouse ordinarily lethargic people to action” (Crisis, 1937). Thus, the images that were once symbols of violent pride became repurposed as tools that highlighted horror and that spured people to action. As the use of these photographs underwent a transformation, they “were no longer causing racial pride but civic embarrassment” (Rushdy 68). As these images were repurposed and published through different forums they became “indictments of mob mentality” and evidentiary “of who was responsible” (Rushdy 69, 75). These iconic images that were once celebrations slowly were transformed into symbols of “a nation that permits such actions” (Rushdy 75).

Questions about aesthetics and violence are not diminished even as time passes because these images remain. The combination of the technological developments and the ideological aesthetics created images that are highly significant. The pictures informed understanding of violent scenarios by becoming novelties and by being consistently present. “Lynching photographs turn our attention to this relation between the common and the rare, the presumed and the unknown, the unimaginable and the image” (Goldsby 229). The transformations that take place as these images are being produced memorialize both moments and ideologies. This specific form of extreme violence relied heavily on voyeurism and spectacle. The
spectacle of violence and brutality becomes immortalized in the photographs of lynching - it is able to extend past specific temporalities. Modern viewers of the photographs join “the crowds that attended the original events, both groups of onlookers [are] brought to the scene because of the spectacle of the lynched body” (Apel 4).

In a more contemporary moment when these images were repurposed once again for projects like the exhibition and book *Without Sanctuary* there is still moral and ethical questions about the uses of such images. In March of 2000, after a brief opening in January, an exhibit of lynching photographs opened at the New York Historical Society and “fifty thousand attended the exhibition it its first four months” (Apel 3). As the exhibit grew there were added materials that “offered a less well-known history of activism and resistance among African Americans, a stark contrast to the history suggested by the helplessness of the victims pictured on the postcards” (Apel 3). The images, and the context they were presented in seemed to have oppositional aims. White viewers, looking at these photographs on the website or in the gallery, “examine what it meant for them to look at photographs whose original purpose was to celebrate, and whose transformed political purpose was to indict, white supremacy” (Rushdy 79). There must be a critical analysis of what role voyeuristic audiences are playing by looking at the images - are they occupying the same space as the original white mob? Whose right and/or responsibility is it to use and proliferate these images even further? “How does one understand pictures that are ripped from their original places and times and assembled in an almost unrelieved
display of murderous violence?” (Apel 4). In 2005, the United States senate passed a resolution that served as a formal apology:

“Declares that the Senate: (1) apologizes to the victims and survivors of lynching for its failure to enact anti-lynching legislation; (2) expresses its deepest sympathies and most solemn regrets to the descendants of such victims whose ancestors were deprived of life, human dignity, and the constitutional protections accorded all other U.S. citizens; and (3) remembers the history of lynching, to ensure that these personal tragedies will be neither forgotten nor repeated.” (Landrieu).

One of the writers of the resolution, Mary Landrieu, a Democratic senator from Louisiana, stated that “the impact of the pictures [from the Without Sanctuary exhibit] were overwhelming and proved to be a very educational and emotional experience…they helped bring greater awareness and proper recognition of the victims of lynching” (Smith 39). Just as The Crisis and those resisting lynching in the early parts of the 20th century used the images for activism and justice, so too in the early 21st century did the images have an important impact. These instances of the subversive use of lynching photography were almost one hundred years apart, demonstrating that the need for a systematic approach to address white supremacist violence is necessary and still incomplete. The gaze of the viewer comes from their standpoint within historical and political narratives and that cannot be ignored. For white viewers, their immediate alignment is with the powerful, with the mob and that subscribes a certain amount of responsibility and accountability. For Black viewers, the photographs are remnants of still present generational trauma. Additionally, the
images themselves hold meanings that weave themselves through historical contexts.

“The photographs’ formal composition can tell us more about how lynching’s cultural logic operated in another cognitive register across historical time” (Goldsby 219).

The aesthetic elements of the photographs reflect both the technology available and the ideology of the moment. One notable element of lynching photography are the crowds. Having many white faces beneath brutalized Black bodies was a repeated trope in these photographs. It sets up a specific aesthetic and structure that evokes ideas of violence. The presence of the mob repeatedly calls attention to the role, power and the use of an audience and of voyeurism. Acknowledging that power and understanding the ways in which an audience is constructed can be an important step in being able to manipulate and create alternative visual cultures, which also rely on an audience. The act of creating resistant images prompts questions about whether we, as viewers and as artists, are tasked with repurposing violent imagery, creating inverse images, or totally breaking free of the aesthetic format.
**Black Lives Matter: Smartphones and Police Brutality**

It is still hard to believe
that millions of us saw Eric Garner die...
Watching the video
I was reminded of the first lynching
*I quite, unintentionally, learned about* – Alice Walker

The spring and summer of 1991 became the modern point of origin for issues of police brutality and protests in response to racially motivated violence. This watershed moment was marked by video was recorded, on March 3rd 1991 on the corner of Foothill Boulevard and Osbourne Street in Los Angeles, of Rodney King, 26 years old at the time, being brutally beaten. A brief car chase, lasting 8 miles and involving both cars and a helicopter came to an end and “King was met by twenty-one police officers” and “in full view of all who were present, King was severely beaten by three white LAPD officers” (Jacobs 81). The incident was videotaped by George Holliday, a bystander who filmed the incident from his balcony. Holliday hurriedly released the shocking footage selling the video rights to a local TV station. By doing this he launched an important watershed.

![Figure 3.1: George Holliday. Rodney King Video. 1991. YouTube.](image-url)
moment for citizen journalism, while also bringing up important questions about the connection between profit and violence. The video was circulated widely and repeatedly on many news stations. The violence on of the video shocked the public, not only because of the brutality of it, but also because of its wide circulation. “The scene is indelibly etched in our collective consciousness” and within that consciousness “the primary image of the videotape, the brutality of the white officers toward the African-American victim, Rodney King, was easily related to earlier historic images of white police violence against African-Americans” (Strachan) (Jacobs 82). An incredibly striking element of the historic images is how they so clearly represent the size of the group of police officers (see fig. 3.1). In many ways, the image and event seem to reproduce the kind of mob mentality that is evident in photographic images and narrative accounts of lynching. However, the most urgent point to consider here, is that lynching, especially those committed in the United States, were often done extralegally while this form of public and collective violence was enacted by law enforcement and public servants. It is no surprise according to Jacobs, Strachan, and others that “police officers lost credibility by the videotape, and the strength of crisis was strengthened” (Jacobs 86). In the same way that photography was supposed to be able to represent an inalienable truth, the video of the beating of Rodney King represented a similar and dramatic shift in constructing news narratives. The video was building on a legacy of a violent and white supremacist visual culture - stirring people to action.

ABC News, one of the three major American networks in the 1990s alongside CBS and NBC, “produced eight separate stories about the Rodney King crisis” during
the early period of the videos circulation and over forty-one articles were written about it in the first week (Jacobs 84). One of the first newspapers to cover the story was <i>USA Today</i>, who on March 12<sup>th</sup>, published an interview with a police officer entitled “No way is beating proper procedure” (“No Way”). Many of them also mention the video with headlines like “Videotape’s crucial evidence in the case” from an April 5<sup>th</sup>, 1991 edition of <i>USA Today</i> or “Beaten driver wants share of video profit” from a May 5<sup>th</sup> <i>Sunday Mail</i> (<i>LexisNexis</i>). The narrative that was constructed by the mainstream media shifted throughout the course of the trial and subsequent events. Most of the initial articles were centered around ideas of police brutality and “official abuse of minorities,” as the trial and subsequent protests progressed the emphasis was placed on the political and official ramification such as the role the mayor played in trying to get the police chief of the time fired (Bowen) (O’Neill) (Jacobs 111). Even in a time of civil and racial unrest that came as a result of the video, the mainstream media still failed to represent the interests of those actively seeking justice. The revolution still was not televised.

In 1992, a jury acquitted the police officers who were initially indicted by the original grand jury. A Superior Court Judge had ordered that the trial be moved to Simi Valley, a primarily white suburb of L.A. over 27 miles away from where the beating occurred (“Rodney King”). The perceived tampering with the case results and the lasting nature of the video led to a massive set of protests and unrest, that occurred over five days, left fifty people dead, more than 2,000 people injured and caused an estimated $1 billion in property damage (CNN library). “The video of the beating was shown repeatedly on television, and when the police were acquitted of all
charges massive rioting erupted in Los Angeles” (Apel 73). The uprisings came in part as a response to the saturation of violent images in the media. There is a significant amount of trauma involved and invested in violent spectacles, and a fitting response to that form of trauma is protest. “White men have been the primary stagers and consumers of the historical spectacles [like the Rodney King videos], but in one way or another, black people also have been looking, forging a traumatized collective historical memory which is reinvoked at contemporary sites of conflict” (Alexander 79). As scholar Elizabeth Alexander rightly notes, “white-authored national narrative deliberately contradicts the histories [black] bodies know” (80). The video informs and shaped collective imaginations differently, according to generational and contemporary trauma and so at times of acute tension or crisis important political outlets like protests, uprisings and riots are necessary.

The images of and connected to the beating of Rodney King became both public and iconic because they were plastered over the news. It was through the medium of television that they entered the realm of the domestic. The television was advertised as central to the modern home, living rooms are shaped around its presence, and so broadcasting images of violence is inviting them into the domestic space. The images entered the realm of the domestic in different distinct forms, “the violence that is watched, this time on the television, is experienced, as it were, in the bodies of the spectators who feel themselves implicated in Rodney King’s fate” (Alexander 85). They also crossed over into cinematic realms. The Atlanta-born, Brooklyn-raised, Morehouse College educated director Spike Lee premiered his film Malcolm X in 1992. The opening credits, of this film, are intercut with “slow-motion
scenes from the gruesome, videotaped police torture of Rodney King” (Guerrero 1). Spike Lee used the iconographic and familiar aspects of these violent images to insist that “the issue of African American human rights, so central to Malcolm, is powerfully with us at this moment, socially urgent and ongoing” (Guerrero 1). Lee repurposed images of violence to make a haunting point about political resistance and the constant struggle for racial justice. Lee also asserted that there was a profound, disturbing, and clearly marked legacy through which the visuals of the Rodney King beating should be situated. By intercutting them with other iconic images, of an American flag burning, with the audio of Malcolm X speaking, Lee powerfully and emotionally visualized and externalized moments of generational trauma (see fig. 3.2). The opening sequence in *Malcolm X* ends with a soundbite of Malcolm X himself saying “we haven’t seen any American dream, we only know the American nightmare.” Malcolm X was an impressive and important Black and Muslim leader in the struggle for racial justice in the 1950s and 60s. He was famous and infamous for his well-
known 1964 speech that advocated for gaining civil and human rights “by any means necessary.” He was assassinated in 1965, the same year Rodney King was born. The temporal differences between when the film was made, the Rodney King incident and Malcom X’s speech are thematically reconciled by crafting a narrative that is simultaneously specific to Malcolm X’s life while also being indicative of larger extended narratives of race in America. Still, the image itself exists in a cache of trauma - “the barbaric spectacle, broadcast on global television, of Rodney King being beaten by white police officers in Los Angeles have left no doubt in the black social psyche that America is still a racist society” (Guerrero 161). Film historian and professor Ed Guerrero, writing in his influential and critical book *Framing Blackness*, notes the effects and power of images of racialized violence. While Guerrero is writing in 1993, his analyses and observations, unfortunately, are still highly relevant to our contemporary moment. Guerrero believes that “the stark videotape, the acquittal of the four white police officers, and the uprising that followed it marked a consciousness-shaping moment for a whole new generation of Americans” (162). It is eerie how relevant that belief feels in 2017, a time of Black Lives Matter and various videos of deadly police brutality.

Almost 20 years after the infamous Rodney King beating occurred, Oscar Grant was shot and killed in the early hours New Year’s Day of 2009 on the Bay Area Rapid Transit platform of Fruitvale Station in Oakland, California. Oscar Grant was with friends, returning home from celebrating the new year. Oscar Grant, a father to a four-year-old girl, was 22 years old at the time of his death. The events were captured by many cameras, many belonging to individual’s cell phones and “multiple
videos of the incident from various angles were uploaded to the internet within a few days” (Anthony 1281). Local news sources drew comparisons between this incident and the Rodney King beating, primarily because of the central reliance on the visual imagery to proliferate information (Egelko). A week after the shooting, the *Contra Costa Times*, based in California, quotes professor Samuel Walker saying “The first step in this was Rodney King in 1991, when there was a video camera. That's not so common, but cell phone cameras are now almost universal. It adds some independent documentation to these incidents. They're not perfect by any means, but it adds some documentation.” (Richman). *The Charleston Gazette* published an article following the case that stated that the murder of Oscar Grant “was among the most racially polarizing cases in California since four Los Angeles officers were acquitted in 1992 in the beating of Rodney King” (“California”). While the video of Rodney King was disseminated primarily on the television, references to the Oscar Grant video and its contents had saturated the internet as well, the video had gone ‘viral.’ The multiple videos of Oscar Grant’s death were shared on multiple platforms, ranging from print newspapers to the nightly news to YouTube and Facebook. The videos that circulated were almost always labeled a “horrific spectacle,” and that memorable phrase harkened back to the spectacularization of Black death present in lynching photographs (Ferrer).

Non-indictments and convictions are tragically typical in cases involving white public servants/officers and Black civilians, the justice system consistently fails miserably to hold their own agents accountable. The officer who shot Oscar Grant, Johannes Mehserle, a 33-year-old BART officer, was convicted and found guilty, not
of murder but of involuntary manslaughter. The trial started in June of 2010 and was
over by July and was moved to Los Angeles instead of taking place in Oakland,
which looks eerily similar to what happened with the Rodney King case. None of the
jurors were black, seven of them were white, which in and of itself sparked outrage
and headlines like “No Black Jurors selected for Oscar Grant murder case”
(NewsOne). Mehserle was sentenced to a 2-year imprisonment. He was released after
11 months (“Ex-BART”). This verdict, even as mild as it was, is unfortunately
surprising. Understanding why the verdict in this case looks significantly different
from many of the previous and future no indictments may have something to do with
the type of visual imagery that preceded and followed the case. It was especially
important and significant to prosecutors and defense attorneys in this case that
multiple videos from many angles existed and were available (Egelko). One author,
Mary Grace Anthony aptly noted that “the various cellphone videos in particular have
prompted much public debate about the nature of the shooting and are expected to
feature as evidence at Mehserle’s trial” (Anthony 1292). The clear technological
difference between one man with a camcorder and a group of people with
smartphones is significant in the framing of narratives and the results of cases of
police brutality. Additionally, the fact that Oscar Grant’s murder was one of the first
police brutality tragedies to “go viral” is highly significant. As more videos of police
brutality and killings are circulated it is possible that the American public and psyche
are saturated with the images of violence, and that they are becoming numb. There is
a real possibility that as these images of violence become normalized by their
continued and unrelenting presence on social media, the public is more likely to become complacent.

Similar to the way in which pioneering film director Spike Lee further iconographed the videos of the Rodney King beating, the young, Black, Oakland director, Ryan Coogler made a heart-wrenching film surrounding the unjust murder and brutal videos of Oscar Grant. Whereas, *Malcolm X* was topically but not narratively connected to the video of Rodney King, *Fruitvale Station*, Coogler’s first feature film, builds an auditory and visual world around the videos of Oscar Grant’s death. Coogler’s film opens in a manner extremely reminiscent of Lee’s *Malcolm X*. Over a black screen the audience hears two people making New Year’s resolutions. The film then quickly cuts to an actual, documentary video recording of Oscar Grant’s murder and the harrowing footage plays in full without any intercutting until the audience hears the sound of a gun being fired. As soon as the shot is heard, the film cuts to black and we hear the sounds of a subway car full of shocked and distressed observers. It is only then, with a sound bridge of bystander’s reactions, that the title of the film appears (see fig 3.3). In some ways, Coogler is building on the formal elements that Lee originally used. Perhaps because the audience would have been more accustomed to violence, the video was able to
play in full without any cross cutting. Coogler creates an incredibly powerful
sequence that relies on recognizable iconography. The sequence was crafted under the
assumption that the audience would understand the video they were watching, the
larger implications of the documentary footage, and the meaning of the title *Fruitvale
Station*. The film then goes on to trace the day leading up to and through Oscar
Grant’s murder. His death is dramatized on the screen, in ways that recreate and
reproduce iconographic and traumatic images. In the dramatization, the audience
already knows what is going to happen, they have seen the documentary footage of the same event.
However, because it is a re-creation there are certain formal devices used to accentuate and punctuate the trauma. The film uses a close up of Michael B. Jordan, who played Grant. The close up continues the mission of the film, it deeply humanizes and intensely personalizes Oscar Grant’s story (see fig 3.4). As the scene continues the film recreates some of the intense visual cues from the phone camera footage. The shots become increasingly shaky as the situation escalates and in this way, is referential to the videos captured by bystanders. In one instance, a frame is

*Figure 3.4: Ryan Coogler. Close up from Fruitvale Station. 2009. Netflix.*
filmed over the shoulder of a man who is filming the event on his phone, the audience cannot escape the lighted screen of the phone that occupies the foreground (see fig 3.5). Carefully crafted frames like this are repeated and interspersed with the action. While the sequence is certainly about the violent death of Oscar Grant, it also contains subtexts about the creation of a visual and iconic event. The nature of the medium, with its cuts and different angles makes it so that the violence is delayed and punctuated in a way that was not possible in the original recordings of the event. The sound fades away after the piercing and ringing sound of the shot is heard in the film, thus the editing recreates the same sound design from the beginning of the film - directly connecting the different visuals. In an interview, Michael B. Jordan, the actor who plays Oscar Grant, commented on filming on the actual platform where the event took place, he said: “the place just adds another level of intensity that you couldn’t fake. If we shot it at a studio or in LA or anywhere else, I think being at the actual location added so much value for me as a person, as an actor, it’s something to pull from” (“We Got This”). The film won both the 2013 Audience Award and the Grand Jury Prize at Sundance. The film is powerful, and it challenges many of the racist images constantly created by Hollywood, the film “knows all that history” (Boone). What role, though, does the

Figure 3.5: Ryan Coogler. Frame from Fruitvale Station. 2009. Netflix
recreation and dramatization of death and trauma play in creating and crafting this chilling narrative?

The choice to dramatize Oscar Grant’s death was an intentional one, one that faced off with trauma directly. Professor of Sociology Johnathan Markovitz reminds us that “while the story was picked up around the country, the extent of the coverage never approached that of the King case. Ironically, it might be the fact that the video was so stark that kept it from receiving greater attention, since few stations are comfortable airing footage of dead bodies” (Markovitz 77). In 1991 information was primarily disseminated through the television and written news sources. Nearly two decades later, in 2009, the video was widely circulated even if news stations were not broadcasting it. Although the assertion is hard to prove, Oscar Grant’s death is regarded by many as “the first to be filmed and uploaded onto the web, causing outrage and tragically setting the stage for police killings to come” (Nash). The public outrage after the Oscar Grant incident is often partially attributed to being “stoked by YouTube videos of the incident posted by witnesses,” again providing a direct link between the visual material and the public’s response (Blaisdell). While mainstream news sources were reluctant to broadcast the whole video clip the public still had access to it. Two technological developments were responsible for this shift. YouTube, a short form video streaming platform, went live, in 2005, joining a host of other online platforms that allowed for the crowd sourced sharing of videos. YouTube imagined that the platform would exist as “the ultimate reality TV” (Graham). By the end of YouTube’s first year it had amassed over 200,000 users and views on over 2 million videos per day (Graham). This interface was made possible by the increased
number of personal video cameras, many which were now available as a part of smartphones. Three years before YouTube and seven years before Oscar Grant’s death, in 2002, the first phone with an integrated camera was released (“Five Major Moments”). Once these camera-capable phones were released, the market and technology expanded rapidly. The first iPhone was released in 2007 and by the end of 2008, 32% of Americans owned a smartphone (Dolan). These rapid technological advancements all played a role in the creation of the video of Oscar Grant’s murder. The images of his murder would not have been as widely disseminated without accessible technology to capture the event, or without a platform to share the visuals. The connection between the proliferation of the images and the case’s widely known nature is made abundantly clear by cultural references and the continued use of iconography. Blue Scholars is an American hip-hop group based out of Seattle Washington. They released a song entitled “Oskar Barnack ∞ Oscar Grant.” Oskar Barnack is attributed as the inventor of 35 mm photography. The song links the legacy of photography and the history of police brutality, it starts off with a beat made by the mechanical whirring of a camera. Lines like “Shoot the cops/Take your cameras out your pockets people” and “But guess what the people got a weapon of their own/The lens and a shutter built into a mobile phone” comes in over the sounds of the camera – linking these histories further and providing a tangible method of resistance using visual imagery (“Blue”). The further democratization of technology meant that videos of police brutality were more widely accessible and that the public no longer had to rely solely on cohesive, constructed narratives.
The Black Lives Matter Movement (BLM) was initially founded in February 2012 as a response to the murder of Trayvon Martin, a 17-year-old high school student visiting his father at the time of his death. Trayvon Martin was killed by George Zimmerman, a 29 year-old man who moved to Florida after graduating from a Virginia high school, he was the captain of a Neighborhood Watch team, a vigilante form of security and surveillance (Francescani). The trial of George Zimmerman was long and highly publicized. Zimmerman eventually was found not guilty after crafting an argument about self-defense even though Trayvon Martin was unarmed. Patrisse Cullors, Opal Tometi, and Alicia Garza, three queer Black women, founded Black Lives Matter “as a call to action for Black people” after the trial. “It was a response to the anti-Black racism that permeates our society” (“Herstory”). The organization and its declared named has been used as an important rallying cry for justice in the face of police brutality. The movement grew as an increased awareness and opposition to publicized instances of police brutality and extralegal violence occurred, facilitating important protests and political direct actions. The extremely salient moments within the movement often are connected to the rapid proliferation on social media of images and videos of injustice. Black Lives Matter organized various ways to support and be in solidarity with the protests happening in Ferguson, Missouri in 2014.

The protests in Ferguson resulted from the shooting of 18 year-old Michael Brown on August 9th, 2014. Darren Wilson, the white police officer who shot Michael Brown was not indicted on November 24th, 2014. The Ferguson police left Michael Brown’s body in the street for hours after he had died, his death was filmed by cellphones. It was because of this that a series of images taken of this post-mortum
brutality and degradation were used by the news and circulated quickly and widely on social media. The visual record of the death of Michael Brown is much less comprehensive than previous videos. Jason Pollock attempted to address this issue in his 2017 documentary *Stranger Fruit*. The documentary premiered at South by Southwest and featured footage from earlier in the day that had never been seen before. The clip refutes the police’s original claim that Michael Brown had stolen something, an attempt to justify his shooting, instead it shows him engaging in a trade – trading marijuana for cigarillos (Barrie). When the film was released and the new footage circulated, a fresh set of protests erupted outside of the store in front of which Michael Brown was killed – demonstrating yet another link between visual imagery and political action (Cleary).

The title of Pollock’s film is highly significant as well. *Stranger Fruit* is taken from the Billie Holliday song *Strange Fruit*, which was about the lynching epidemic in the South. The titling of the film in this manner links Michael Brown’s death to the legacy left by lynching. Even with the depth and breadth of the research that went into the documentary, it is still difficult to find visual material of the actual altercation...
and murder but because Michael Brown’s body was left in the street for four and a half hours there are a whole host of images and testimonies that were collected during that chilling and grotesque time. The images that were created, although they were live video, in many ways were reminiscent of lynching photographs - taken after the fact and extremely morbid. The image of Michael Brown lying in the street shaped the narrative of brutality and neglect that followed the case. The images from Oscar Grant’s case were too brutal to be distributed on TV, but by 2014 a television audience had become accustomed to seeing images of death and the bodies felled by police violence. Some channels chose to block out the actual image of Michael Brown’s body, and focused instead on the accumulating mass of people at the scene of the shooting and the business in which the police were engaging (see fig 3.6). The difference between the coverage of the image when Michael Brown’s body is shown and when it is not is important, the choice whether or not to reveal his body directs the narrative and the focus. While the accounts of the actual shooting were disparate and contradictory no one was able to argue with the injustice and lack of respect involved in leaving his body in the street. The focus on the immediate aftermath of the murder as opposed to the murder itself allowed the rage and sorrow of the witnesses and people of Ferguson to fester and grow. Indeed, protests erupted almost immediately. The image that was made iconic from this incident was not the act of violence itself but the aftermath that points to the constant negation of any dignity in police brutality.

Dignity is consistently and constantly denied in cases of police brutality and racialized violence; these acts of brutality occur because of the systematic and
centuries long dehumanization that refuses to see Black people as fully human individuals but instead casts them as threats. Eric Garner was 43 years old when he was killed by NYPD officer Daniel Panteleo in Staten Island on July 17th, 2014. Panteleo used an illegal chokehold on Garner but was not indicted. Ramsey Orta, a bystander, recorded a full video of the grim event that was released to the media and also posted on social media. The video of Eric Garner’s death is one of the closest and clearest contemporary portrayals of police brutality. The comprehensive nature of the video combined with the crisp sound recordings that accompany the footage intensify its impact. Scholar Albert Stabler asserts that “Eric Garner...set an iconic precedent, in that his murder was recorded start to finish, seemingly erasing any legitimacy for the violence used against him” (Stabler). The completeness of the video combined with the audible cries of “I can’t breathe” creates a macabre and infuriating narrative that refutes any justification for violence. The visual record of Eric Garner’s death and the aesthetic qualities of it shape the construction of its surrounding mythology. The fullness of the video in many ways combines many of the elements of previous videos but this time they exist within one incident. Eric Garner is filmed as he is dying and when he is dead. This “lingering death is witnessed and captured by the camera, both as he is being choked by Officer Panteleo, and as he lies motionless on the sidewalk, waiting for paramedics but without any gesture at resuscitation by the police” (Stabler). The lingering quality of his death visually evokes the videos and images of both Oscar Grant’s murder and Michael Brown’s neglected-ness. In many ways, rage can be directed towards this specific incident because it encompasses so much.
The temporal proximity of the deaths of Eric Garner and Michael Brown essentially informed the American public’s and activist’s reactions. Eric Garner and Michael Brown had become household names by the end of 2014. Kashif Jerome Powell, an actor, activist and scholar links these events stating that “as we witness Michael Brown’s flesh lying in a pool of his own making for four and a half hours, or bear to hear Eric Garner’s last, suffocating cry eleven times repeated, we are reminded of memory’s cruelty,” we remember and are reminded of “those horrific practices of American-on-American violence historically known as lynching” (Powell) (Furlonge). The consecutive deaths and no indictment verdicts in these two cases inspired a fresh wave of protests across the nation. The connection drawn between police brutality and extra-legal lynching is a crucial one. A major element that these forms of violence have in common lies how they are communicated to the public through visual imagery and iconography. Additionally, the parallels that may be drawn between these forms of violence are essential to consider because they connect forms of violence that happen both through the state and without the state’s explicit consent but also without explicit condemnation. The connection is essential because it demonstrates how the tendrils of white supremacy reach both the systematic and the individual, showing how the two are intimately connected. Art and images that tell the story of the individual can be an important political tool precisely because of the connection between the personal and the political.

The videos of police brutality are not disconnected from the visual legacy of lynching photographs. They serve similar roles in some ways, simultaneously dehumanizing the victims and uncovering the racialized brutality both enacted and
ignored by the state. Albert Stabler sums it up by saying “the videotaped extrajudicial killings of unarmed black civilians in the US have demonstrated that, while public executions such as lynching no longer enjoy popular support, unofficial and unpunishable state brutality relies on shared denial, allowing viewers to revel in vicarious pain that is in turn attributed to the barbarism of a racialized Other.” (Stabler). Videos of police brutality, such as the ones of Eric Garner and Michael Brown, occupy a precarious role in the American social imaginary. They inspire justifiable rage and anger that transforms into public displays and protests and enable cyclical pain and denial. The repeated instances of violence that are recorded and distributed lead to a devastating emotional cycle: “anger turned into helplessness” (Adetiba). Just as there is serious intellectual and emotional energy that must be spent in understanding how we, as individualized viewers with unique identities, can relate to photographs of lynching; so too are we required to reflect about how our identities and experiences meet these videos. The emotional cycle, for the Black audience most often progresses to fear as well whereas a white audience can more easily ‘safely’ return to apathy and bystanderism.

Images of violence against Black bodies spur real political moments, in which the white supremacist foundations of the state are illuminated. When the police officers in the Rodney King case were acquitted protests and riots erupted almost immediately. Journalists ascertain that “only one factor differentiated the beating of Rodney King from those of scores of other African Americans: George Holliday, a white bystander, happened to record it on video tape” (Bernstein 121). The fact that the Holliday video existed and was circulated directly changed the course of events.
There is a marked difference in cases of police brutality and how they get treated by the media that is connected to the visual imagery tied to each case. Amadou Diallo was shot by four different New York officers, the officers fired 41 bullets, 19 of which hit Diallo but “the national media fairly ignored the trial…a distinct difference from the Rodney King trial contributed to this neglect: there was no videotape to be played over and over on the nightly news, or frame by frame from the witness stand, with each side battling over the meaning contained within” (Rocchio 4). Some twenty years after the Rodney King incident, George Holliday said, in an interview with NBC, that he “urged people to stand up and record when they see something wrong” acknowledging the power that visual imagery holds (Ortiz). There are narratives of resistance today that are constructed around the idea that filming the police is an important act (see fig 3.7). The protests that erupt at these junctures of American history involve activists “putting their bodies on the line,” putting themselves in harm’s way or allowing themselves to be arrested as resistant acts of civil disobedience. In this age of smartphones and social media, the images of the protest are also reaching iconographic status. As protesters, who “citizen activists” are getting arrested or are clashing with the police at protests, they are “reproduce[ing] the iconicity of the slain figure in his most perilous position” (Brooks 63). The day after the shooting of

![Figure 3.7: Frank Chi. Political Sticker. 2016.](image)
Oscar Grant, thousands of protestors enacted a very evocative posture when they lay on the ground with their hands behind their backs in front of police officers and chanted: “I am Oscar Grant.” During the protests after the wake of Michael Brown’s murder, protesters marched through the streets with their hands up, shouting: “Hands Up, Don’t Shoot.” After, Eric Garner’s death activist’s marched through the streets chanting “I can’t breathe” and counting to eleven, the number of times Garner was recorded saying those words in the video of his death. Often it is Black protestors who chant “I can’t breathe” while white and non-Black allies and accomplices serve as witnesses by yelling the count, this form of specified participation centers those most effected by police brutality and simultaneously, acknowledges the racial power dynamics that are at play in instances of police violence. Each time protesters use the unforgettable and inadmissible iconographic moments from the recorded deaths of these men to inform and to fuel their activism.

While the King, Grant, Brown and Garner cases discussed above are ones that mark important historical moments, there are unfortunately countless more videos of lethal police brutality. Each instance of police brutality is as grueling and painful as the next. Each instance demonstrates unique facets of violent white supremacy and the of proliferation of violent visual cultures. The case of Sandra Bland, a 28-year-old woman originally from Chicago, killed July 13th 2015 in Waller County, Texas, demonstrated the underrepresented narrative of Black women’s encounters with police brutality at the intersection of patriarchy and white supremacy. The Bland tragedy also demonstrated the far-reaching effects of brutality and injustice that extend far past the initial encounter with the police. The story of Tamir Rice, a
twelve-year-old who was shot and killed on November 22nd, 2014, in Cleveland, Ohio, raises important questions about the perception of Black childhood and children in America and the violence contained within those experiences. The footage of Tamir Rice’s death, captured by surveillance cameras, was circulated and shared. Despite the visual evidence, and Rice’s obvious innocence, no one was indicted. Philando Castile was shot after being pulled over in Falcon Heights, Minnesota. He was 32-year-old and was in the car with his girlfriend, Diamond Reynolds and her four-year-old daughter. Philando Castile’s death was live streamed on facebook by his girlfriend Diamond Reynolds. The technological feature Reynolds used to film the aftermath of the shooting, had been introduced only three months prior in April 2016. In the following months, the murders of Terence Crutcher, a 40-year-old man and father from Tulsa, Oklahoma, and Keith Lamont Scott, a 43-year old husband and father of seven from Charlotte, North Carolina, were also recorded using the Facebook live feature. New social media platform and technology has once again changed what it means to witness and to create a visual record. Indeed, livestreaming on Facebook is now “the go-to tool for black Americans to share their experiences with police brutality, and ideally, hold cops accountable by going viral” (Fussell). The complete and total lack of censorship or production codes in live streaming platforms allows for “easy accessibility and openness [that] are fostering a new type of intimate, personal broadcasting that proponents said can be extraordinarily powerful, as evidenced by the demonstrations that began shortly after the [Philando Castile] video” (“Facebook Live”). Facebook live has also been used as a tool for protest and resistance, actions are often streamed via the program and those who are
unable to attend the protest can participate virtually. The developments surrounding Facebook live and the events it captures demonstrates once again that the tools for proliferating violent images are simultaneously tools for resistance, and perhaps the violent images they create are made to subvert dominant media narratives about everything being normal and okay. Images of police brutality, created by the victim’s loved ones, memorialize the victims, mark their unjust demise and disrupt the stream of consciousness projected by mainstream media.

The eight-year period between 2009 and 2017 saw over 1,343 Black people killed by police (Townes)(Lee)(“Police”). These devastating statistics are difficult to find and required being sourced from many different locations. That it is difficult to compile these statistics is significant in and of itself. Scholars and statisticians note that “officials within the Justice Department keep no comprehensive database or record of police shootings, instead allowing the nation’s more than 17,000 law enforcement agencies to self-report” (Lowery). The lack of federal oversight from the suggests at minimum their lack of acknowledgment of the racialized and social epidemic of police killings. The videos of police brutality in many ways resist against this form of neglect. The recording and witnessing of these deaths is important, and when this is not assessed by the responsible agencies, the abuse of power by law enforcement agencies then goes unchecked. The videos of police brutality provide one manner to check and challenge these agencies in a way that is humanizing and individualized. The videos are powerful, on the one hand, because they tell the stories of individual people who were unfairly and unjustifiably murdered. The videos themselves, though, cannot provide the necessary context to demonstrate the
epidemic and endemic nature of police brutality against Black people. These videos
must be woven into much larger narratives that situate our current political moment in
histories and legacies of both white supremacy and resistance.


Malcolm Ferguson. Amadou Diallo.
Potentials for Subversive Filmmaking

“The role of the revolutionary artist is to make revolution irresistible” -- Toni Cade Bambara

Subversive filmmakers understand the foundations of narrative film and the ideological trends that have remained relevant in the world of cinema, and thus make intentional choices accordingly to resist and revolutionize. Knowing that “Black bodies in pain for public have been an American national spectacle for centuries” filmmakers have a responsibility to create alternative images (Alexander 78). The dominant visual culture of the United States is flooded with violent images, from the settler colonial images typical of the Western to the banal violence of action films to the consistent and systematic portrayal of excessive violence against Black bodies. Responses to these images can be crafted in ways that use the aesthetics and formal elements of mainstream images to subvert their ideologies. Imagery and visual vocabularies play essential roles in the formation of contemporary ideologies and they are a major vehicle for disseminating information. The way in which these ideologies affect form and aesthetic, then, cannot be brushed aside or overlooked. Ideology and images combine to form visual culture, which often reflect the hegemonic attitudes of the time. The creation of subversive images adds to an alternative visual vocabulary that can be used for resistance. Throughout the production of my film, there were multiple aesthetic and narrative choices I made in an attempt to situate myself and my art within the legacy of resistant visual culture.
The film I wrote and directed *The Revolution, Televised* deals heavily with the realm of the domestic. It is the story of a young Black man named Lucas who babysits for a white single mother upper-middle class household, the family consists of Noa and Maia. The narrative takes place during in the Fall and Winter of 2014 when the consecutive “No Indictment” rulings were released in the cases of Eric Garner and Michael Brown. The film features a small cast of three actors, and runs fifteen minutes and 57 seconds long with a total of eleven scenes. The film takes place almost entirely in Maia and Noa’s home, prominently featuring the realm of the domestic. The stories and lives of Eric Garner and Michael Brown framed and inspired the narrative I created. The images of their deaths are relevant to the film but I made an intentional decision that I would not display the videos of their murders or revisit the gruesome details of these cases. The TV, and the new clips displayed on it, featured heavily in the film both as a marker of a political and simultaneously domestic space and as references to current events that the audience would have lived through and with which they would have been familiar (see fig 4.1). In this still from the film, the TV is framed by the actors and the set. It is visually centralized because of the essential role it plays in the narrative. The sound design of
the film also serves to centralize the influence of the television set. The sound of the news clips extends past the visual, providing an off-screen reminder of the framework through which to understand the character’s relationships. Even in the most intimate moments, such as a mother putting her daughter to bed, the domestic realm is invaded with the sound of the news and the violence describe by it. The frame displayed as figure 4.1 comes from the second scene of the film, it introduces the motif of the TV early on, designating it as central. Additionally, the cameras on the ledges by the columns point to the voyeuristic legacy of film and images of violence. The screen is showing images of Michael Brown, but the film cuts before the actual footage of his death is shown. Dealing with images of violence while simultaneously acknowledging and being mindful the trauma that those images reproduce was a central goal in building the film. TV is one of the main sources of media, especially when considering violence.

There was a moment on set, after we had finished filming the television for one of these sequences when the crew sat around silently and continued watching the TV screen after the camera had stopped rolling. We were watching the news sequence about Eric Garner’s murder that included the footage of his death. The crew found the images haunting, even though they had seen them many times before and even though the film was specifically about these images. The set was busy and bustling but in that moment things felt eerily calm. The sense of quiet that overtook the room was a direct response to intensely violent images. It was in these quieter moments that I had questions about the morality of the film I was making. Who was I to ask my crew and cast to watch this grim footage again? Who was I to put that on the audience? I
realized that in order to feel okay about the trauma I was using I needed to feel like
the story we were telling was enough to counteract that violence, was resistant
enough in the face of visual violence. It is not something that is easy to measure.

I chose a minimalist but carefully crafted style in an attempt to distance the
film from the realm of the domestic presented by melodrama, that involves intense,
and often coded spectacle. While there are definitely actions in the film that are coded
- like Lucas removing his hood after he watches the news - they operate in a world
that is deeply tied to politics and “real-world” events. When lynching photographs
were brought into the realm of the domestic they informed that space and the
complicity of all those to whom the photographs belong. These photographs in some
ways transgressed the realm of the domestic, while simultaneously regulating its
borders. Images of violence enter the realm of the domestic in my film but instead of
becoming a part of the moral fabric of the home, they create tension and confront
both the characters and the viewer. I constructed a minimalist set and I also chose to
have a relatively small cast. There were only three characters - Lucas, Noa and Maia -
and in many ways each character is a protagonist. There are no secondary characters
and there are no passive characters. The audience has to watch actively in order to see
themselves in one or more of the characters as they are not allowed to be voyeurs. No
crowds exist in the world of my film because they do not exist on screen. I confronted
the fact that the mob was a large part of the narrative and visual language of lynching
by making a story that was inescapably personal. Doing so, I believe, would attribute
greater responsibility to the individual and thus to the viewer. None of the characters
can be passive because they actively have to be shaping the spaces they inhabit, they
are one of three who can do that. The intimacy presented by the trio counteracts visuals of groups of people, ideally it would present a syphoned off intimate version of a much larger history. In an attempt to push back against voyeurism, it requires the audience to engage directly with the images, to see the characters non-passive reactions and to ask themselves - what would I do?

The careful simplicity of mise-en-scene assures that there will not be distracting elements of the film. It is not a film about heroics or melodramatic grandeur but an intimate portrayal of a relatable family (see fig 4.2 and 4.3). The triad present in the images is often replicated throughout the course of the film. The triad shifts visually as the power dynamics within the film are displayed. In figure 4.2 there is continuity between Maia and Lucas, both in black, both at the same level on the couch.

Noa seems like the odd one out in her grey top, but visually holds more power. She is central in the frame and the gazes of Maia and Lucas direct the audience’s gaze. Figure 4.3 reveals that the power dynamics have shifted: the triad is in a new position and the color scheme

Figure 4.2: Yael Horowitz. From The Revolution Televised. 2017.

Figure 4.3: Final Shot from The Revolution, Televised. 2017.
of the costuming has changed. Lucas, dressed in white, becomes symbolic of innocence. Maia remains in black since, in many ways, the film documents her coming of age story. Her dark costume reflects the awakening changes she has experienced as she has grappled with the reality of police brutality and white supremacy. Additionally, the black costume reflects the previous protest scenes and mimics the de jour costume of modern protests. Noa remains in grey, a color that hints at her lack of change over the course of the film. The narrative and costume choice for Noa also reflects the idea that sometimes, political ideologies are generational and that there is a specific role for youth to play in pushing older generations to confront their reality. Figure 4.3 comes from the end of the film. It is significant that in this scene they have left the realm of the domestic. The space of the street is a liminal and fraught one.

The street is a public domain that connects different private realms. It is the site of violence, both the murders of Eric Garner and Michael Brown happened on the street. It is also the site of protest, control over and ownership of the street is a contentious issue. A state-imposed curfew was put in place in August of 2014 in Ferguson in an attempt to keep protesters off the streets. As the protests continued “police pushed [protestors] back
by repeatedly firing tear gas, and the streets were empty well before the curfew took
effect at midnight” (Schuessler). The street is a site of domination and of reclamation
(see figure 4.4). Having the cast and crew occupy the street in order to film the final
scene, as well as having the final scene, which does not involve images of violence,
take place on the street are both multi-layered acts of protest in and of themselves.
The images created for The Revolution, Televised exist in conversation with other
images of power, protest and domination. They display the relationship that
characters have to each other, they are about combining the personal and intimate and
the political. These images can take on more than just an all-out expression of
violence, they are involved in a different forms of ideology building.

Film and photography have slightly different origins and histories. Still, I
wanted to work resistance to violent still images into my thesis because the images of
lynching become so perversely iconic that they extend past the medium of
photography itself. “In early cinema, for instance… lynching was a recurrent,
organizing sight—even in American movies” (Goldsby 224). There are multiple
moments in the film where Lucas is caught in a portrait. I achieved this sense by
allowing the camera to linger on him as he remained still in certain positions. This
stillness can be compounded in the editing process by keeping the image on the
screen for a few extra frames then seem expected. As I was editing I found myself
needing to remind myself that I could take the time that I needed, I could make brave
choices in letting shots linger intentionally, it felt like a subversive act that reaffirmed
that this story had the right to take up space. The portraits created by the framing and
editing of Lucas do not exist in a vacuum. They build on a legacy of African
American portraiture established and expanded by Thomas Askew and James Van Der Zee but they do so in a way that is not entirely tied to class. The Lucas that the audience knows is primarily a baby sitter. His source of income is a job that requires care-giving and emotional labor; both are efforts that are often relegated to and expected of women. It was an intentional choice, too, to build this character as a Black man who is also a babysitter since that could invert some of the established filmic tropes. Lucas is not hypersexualized as many Black men in film are nor is he a woman which distances him from the classic Mammy type. The portraits that I created of Lucas attempt to acknowledge and subvert those well-known tropes. One of the portraits in particular makes use of other iconic imagery to situate the film within a certain artistic legacy (see fig 4.5). The image created in the film of Lucas in the library, leaning back was meant to replicate the color scheme, lighting and posturing of Gil Scott-Heron, whose work served as the inspiration for the title of the film. Connecting Lucas to the legacy of Gil Scott-Heron through portraiture connects him to a tradition of resistance. Scott-Heron “is an important literary figure from the Black radical tradition, as his records provide an important
extension of the legacies of Black Power and the Black Arts Movement” (McClure 4). Gil Scott-Heron’s famous song/poem The Revolution Will Not Be Televised was first released in 1970, it built and expanded on “a popular slogan of the 60s, “the revolution will not be televised”... that just because the capitalist press does not record history does not mean that history is not being made” (Ture 194). Both the film and Lucas are situated within the narratives of Black radicalism and subversive media, while they directly confront the mainstream media and its proliferation of a violent visual culture. These portraiture moments should allow a moment of respite for the audience. Additionally, if portraits were originally intended for the American white petit bourgeois, then invoking that style for Lucas, a Black man working a care job, can be seen as an image of resistance. Similar to the questions invoked by the portraits of the 20th century, the audience should ask themselves, how much of this is reality?

Questions arise about the efficacy and ethicality of using violent images to inspire action. Do photographs of lynching replicate violence regardless of the context? Is looking at the images, or having them be placed in front of you an act of violence in and of itself? Does the frequent replication of these images numb people, can it be oversaturating? These are questions that were being asked and should be asked about the repurposing of violent images. They are questions that are still highly relevant today. They arose throughout the filming process as well. They are questions that situate the film within a specific artistic legacy.

The questions of political awakenings, the use of documentary footage, and historical legacy are present in many films that served as inspiration for The
Three of the films that were highly influential in both the production of my film and the writing of this essay were Spike Lee’s *Malcolm X* (1992), Ryan Coogler’s *Fruitvale Station* (2013), and Reinaldo Marcus Green’s short film *Stop* (2015). These films address issues of systematic police violence through individual stories and narratives while simultaneously providing a larger context to the original videos of police brutality. A context that is necessary to confront. These films each take place in a specific historical context, *Malcolm X* straddles the context of 1992 LA and the riots while simultaneously tying it back to the 1960s leading up specifically to Malcolm X’s murder on February 21st, 1965. *Fruitvale Station* takes place during the incredibly specific 24 hours between December 31st 2008 and January 1st 2009. *The Revolution, Televised* takes place over the summer and the winter of 2014. *Stop*’s specificity comes from the specific temporal moment in the characters’ lives and the real world location, referenced in the dialogue. Each of these films use documentary material and current events to craft a narrative. Each of these films contain specificity and visual markers of time and place and all of these films rely on the audience’s familiarity with the iconography of violence.

*Malcolm X, Fruitvale Station, and Stop* all reproduce certain iconic moments in order to reel the audience into a specific narrative and set up an intentionally crafted emotional cadence. The reproduction of the iconography of violence requires the viewer to understand the film on multiple levels. The presence of documentary footage intimately ties the viewer to a non-diegetic reality, it contextualizes the emotional nature of the narrative in a larger historical context. In *Malcolm X* Spike Lee often makes aesthetic choices that blur the lines between the diegetic and
extradiegetic/historical realities. When Denzel Washington as Malcolm X is at a press conference, for example, Lee cuts to footage that is meant to evoke the documentary or news footage aesthetics (see fig 4.6). This scene in the film switches often between full color and black and white footage. Often that is a technique used to bring in real documentary or news footage. However, the black and white shots are still of Denzel Washington and not Malcolm X and by maintain focus on Washington, Spike Lee disrupts the distinction between fiction and reality, creating a historical hyperrealism within the world of his film. Ryan Coogler both recreates documentary footage with his actors and within the diegetic realm of the film and he also uses actual documentary footage to frame the narrative. Coogler opens the film with the real footage of Oscar Grant’s death and at the end of the film he also incorporates documentary footage. The images that Coogler displays are images of the after effects of the murder. The film closes with typed facts about events that transpired in the aftermath of Grant’s death before cutting to images of protests and memorials (see fig 4.7 and 4.8). Framing the narrative between the death and a memorial creates a holistic sense of memorialization and remembering - the film actively labels itself a form of remembering and honoring. This does similar temporal work that the Rodney King video in Malcolm X does - it provides different but still specific moments through which the audience can relate to the narrative. The
different visuals are tied together through the same formatting of the text at the bottom of the frame that serves to situate and contextualize the image. The continuity in the framing of the narrative makes the audience ask what happens after these deaths, how does the community heal, what is the necessary or just response. The narrative created over the course of the film is all situated after the actual death of Oscar Grant, creating multiple temporalities through which the audience can experience the film.

The iconography, in Stop, comes from a different source, pushing the limits of the conventions previously set. Stop does not use documentary footage the way in which the other three films do but it is still temporally specific and visually related. I drew on Stop as direct inspiration, in the creation of my film The Revolution, Televised. Stop features Zyric, a young Black high school student who is walking home at night. The film, which is only ten minutes long, follows him on his route home. As he is walking
along the side of the road, with the hood of his sweat shirt up and over his head, lights begin flashing before a cop car comes into view. Reinaldo Marcus Green makes use of familiar images and sentiments to lead the audience to certain emotions. The familiar fear and worry arise at the sight of a young Black man walking home with his hood up. The audience’s fears are realized when the cop car approaches and Zyric further validates those fears by taking his hood off (see fig 4.9). This film is made in an explicitly post-Trayvon Martin moment. The rhetoric that surrounds Black youth, hoodies and the cops is familiar to an audience. The frame centers the main character. It uses off screen lights and sounds to increase the tension, a technique often used in horror films. The film externalizes a feeling and set of events that those who have had similar Black and American experiences, intimately know, simultaneously validating and confirming them. The film both educates and reminds white audiences that this is a reality that they do not have to live - it places them in a position of privilege without focusing on them. The film uses the iconography that is connected to the death of Trayvon Martin and instances of police brutality without directly referencing the

*Figure 4.9: Reinaldo Marcus Green. Frame from Stop. 2015. YouTube.*
events within the world of the film. It builds on the work being done by films like *Fruitvale Station* without replicating its same structure. The camera movement in this short film is almost entirely motivated by character movement, tracking back to follow his path. This in turn humanizes his character and evokes a great deal of pathos from the audience. The audience is with Zyric before and after his interaction with the cops - extending the narrative past the potential danger to present a more full picture of his life. In this way *Stop* fits with the conventions and traits found in both *Malcolm X* and *Fruitvale Station*, all three films humanize victims of white supremacy, shaping the narrative our their lives and situating them in specific historical moments and legacies. The power of film as a medium in this respect is that it is able to deal in both pathos and politics at the same time, without one detracting from the other.

I link *Malcolm X, Fruitvale Station, Stop* and *The Revolution, Televised* in an attempt to identify and analyze a specific sub-genre of race films being made in the United States today as responses to issues of white supremacist violence and police brutality. These films exist tied to important legacies of resistance and to different political movements like Black Power and Black Lives Matter. These films are personal to the filmmakers, they reflect the artist’s political ideologies and they grapple with legacies of violence. They are each historically specific but have standing implications for the viewer’s contemporary moment. Each film is somewhat self-referential, exploring the conditions that created the need for this story to be told and following through with brave and explicit narratives.
Situating the Artist and Conclusion

“Rooted beneath these acts of artistic liberation, produced by the soul’s inherent expressive nature, is the artist’s pain” – Christine Joy Ferrer

I remember coming home to my slanted red house on Pine Street, my sophomore year, on the cold night of December 3rd, 2014 to a house that was somber and quiet. Together, my house mates and I had our computers open and were checking our phones for any news about the indictment of Daniel Pantaleo, the killer of Eric Garner. As the news about the ‘No Indictment’ was released a heavy silence remained. None of us were surprised, but it was a moment of realization that we had entered a new era. Acts of police brutality and state violence against Black bodies have been happening since the inception of the police and of the state, and before then too. What is new, is that we have entered into a moment where movements like Black Lives Matter are actively shaping and resisting the discourse. We are coming of age in a time of Black Lives Matter and we must make choices accordingly.

This is a project about history, identity and memory. It is a culmination of four academic years of grappling with the white supremacy present and ignored in film and Film Studies and the histories of resistance that I have learnt about through the African American Studies Program and the Center for African American Studies. It extends past the academic, becoming an outlet for expression of feelings that came from watching the news, participating in protests, community organizing and activism. This is a project that is not detached from acutely local legacies of activism.
The film and the paper was born from the work of the organizers of on campus moments like AFAMiswhy, that fought for the resiliency and vibrancy of the African American Studies Program, IsThisWhy, the Student Union, and the recent organizing done by film students in an attempt to reform the Wesleyan film department. The creative process became an outlet for the emotions and thoughts experiences and inspired by these moments of activism. It became increasingly necessary, demonstrating that for me, there was an essential and intrinsic link between my art and my activism. Activism, the organizing and orchestrating of bodies in different spaces, participating in unique ways, can be art. And art, with specific attention paid to its ideology, can be activism. Oscar Micheaux once said “Your own self image is so powerful, it unwittingly becomes your destiny.” Film is a powerful tool in shaping both self image and the images of important communities, it is important that the self and the communities have access and the right to authorship of that image. As activists and accomplices we need to both make space for self-creation and create images of communities we would want to see. The destiny we envision through activism can also exist on the screen. In our current political existence, we must consider issues of race, police brutality and white supremacy in our activism and art. When framed within these political movements and moments, the role of the artist is to confront the visual legacy of violence with a continuing cultural history of resistance - to televise and articulate the revolution.
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