

Scenes of Subjection: Women's Voices Narrating Black Death

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Abstract

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Keywords

Music (Subfield), American Studies, Article, Black Studies, Digital Media, Field Recording



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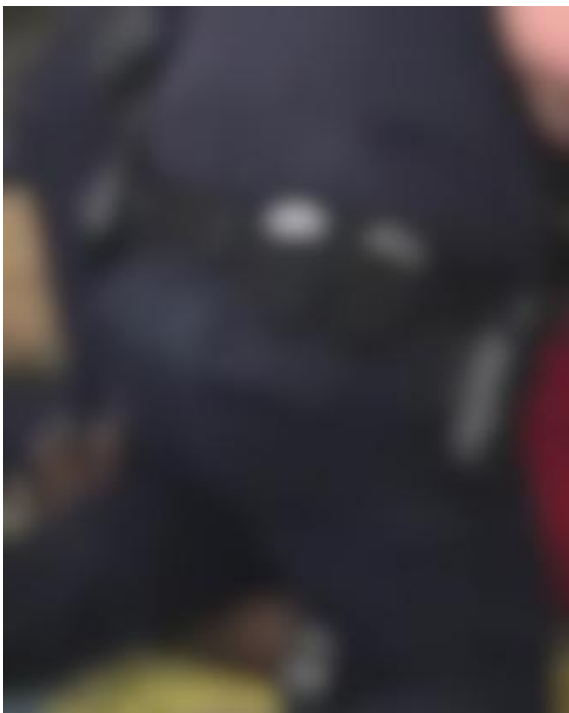
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This past summer 2016, U.S. President Barack Obama arrived in Warsaw and [delivered an unplanned statement on the brutal police shooting deaths of two black men](#) that had just occurred within one day of each other, Philando Castile in Minnesota and Alton Sterling in Louisiana. Obama was speaking from afar on the structural relationship between two events that should trouble “all of us Americans.” Obama spoke pointedly to the fact of “racial disparity” in police shootings and in the justice system more broadly.

Since November 2016, it has felt as though a space of sanctioned public discourse—still in the making since Reconstruction—has once again become smaller and, in a manner of speaking, unhearing. Quite simply, Obama’s statement meant that identification could not compass the ground of an imagined community. A white listener could not say, as with gun violence in general, “he speaks of someone who could have been me, therefore I am troubled.” Again, identification with white experience asserts itself as the ground of “we.”

The [death of Sterling](#) had been captured on cellphone video that showed the police holding him down before shooting him. The video was taken by a store owner who was friendly with Sterling. The ground of a white viewer’s identification is here easily acceded. That viewer might say to him or herself, “I too could know someone who I don’t believe is violent or dangerous; I too might wish to protest or prevent his or her unjust murder.”



still from cell phone video of the police shooting of Alton Sterling, cropping/ blurring by JS, SO!

The [shooting of Castile by police officer Jeronimo Yanez](#) was not captured on video; there is no visual evidence of the event made by a bystander. Instead, Castile’s dying moments were captured

on live video stream by his girlfriend, a black woman, Diamond Reynolds, who orally narrated the immediate aftermath of the event while it was happening. There was no rescue that could have been attempted by Reynolds. Even though Castile was alive and Reynolds's daughter sat in the back seat, the effort immediately—and of necessity—turned to testimony. The camera—but also narration, putting into words the event that was still unfolding—afforded Reynolds and her daughter some measure of protection against the officer's gun still aimed in the car. Reynolds no doubt imagined the recording would be used as evidence in a court of law. If she herself did not survive the event, the recording would have already been seen by a public and archived by live stream; her voice would still testify within it.

What does it mean, on an ethical level, for a black woman to narrate the spectacle of a black death? What does it mean for me, a white woman, to listen to that narrative or read a transcription, knowing that I will never be called upon to narrate the death of my loved one while it is happening, and then to write of it, to narrate it to you?

To feel emotionally impacted by an image of another person, [Kaja Silverman argues](#), is to imaginatively project oneself into the visual field. This identification for Silverman can be fractured, multiplied and redirected in ways that richly expand the parameters of ethical life; but at base, one must be able to project oneself into the image.



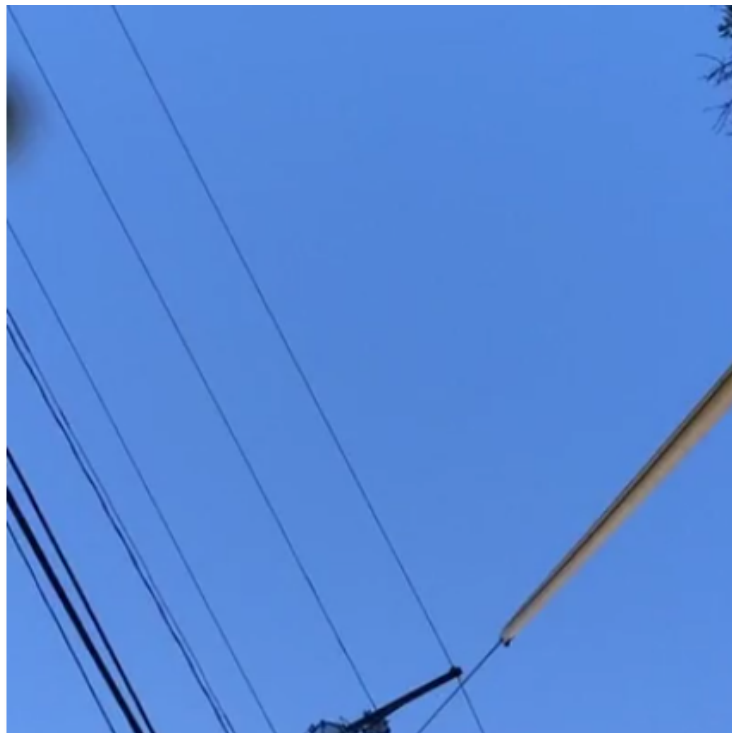
still image from Diamond Reynold's live video feed of Jeronimo Yanez's shooting of her boyfriend, Philando Castile, Cropping/blurring by JS, SO!

In contrast, testimony is to assert that some juridical order has been perverted for an individual and to seek adjudication. But it is also to critique the boundaries of public life: it is to insist that

to listen to or receive a narrative is to recognize an another who is not—and could never be—you. To recognize another is to affirm the singularity of the other's life, a life that has been or can be lost or brutalized. Identification cannot be the sole ground of political action around unjust death: one must be able to say to oneself, "that was not me; that could not have been me; someone singular has been lost; I am troubled nonetheless."

In *Scenes of Subjection*, Saidiya Hartman shows how 19th century white abolitionist sentiment was first organized by the spectacle of the black body in pain. White abolitionists often recounted the feeling of "what if that were me?" or "what if that were my family?" Hartman shows how the black body in American life takes on what she calls "fungible" form. If as a commodity, that body must be exchanged, then as spectacle, that body must also be a projective screen for identification where the white viewer emplaces him or herself in order to feel sympathy or outrage. Such sentiment, Hartman insists, is merely feeling for oneself.

Much of the recent discourse surrounding viral videos of black death has concerned looking or "not looking," or what Alexandra Juhasz calls in a [recent essay on her decision not to watch Reynolds's video](#), "surfeit images." But these are not simply images—they are narratives and testimonies. Later in this post, I return to what it means to speak of a "voices" in this context—some of them written and some of them mediated by retelling.



*Diamond Reynolds narrating after her camera falls,
Instagram screen capture by author*

A long history of black women's acts of testimony is occluded in the emphasis on the newness of the new media event and the "convergence" it affords. As Juhasz notes, new media scholar [Henry Jenkins](#) describes convergence as the spreading of media events across mediums and formats. Juhasz felt "compelled to join the fray of discourse that surrounds, reproduces and amplifies the video I have not yet seen." She describes the sense of "knowing" the video without watching because of its convergence across platforms as well as its historical repetition. But convergence is, in the term long afforded by literary discourse, a narrative. Reynolds told the story in real time; one person may have watched the video, in full or in fragments, and told the story of the event in a status update, in conversation, or in a text message. The convergence relates Reynolds's live stream to a long history of testimony, testifyin'(g), and unofficial or counter-history that has long been held by both oral and print culture across the black diaspora. It is how one "knows" in advance that Castile's death is "like" so many others before him.

But this advance sense of "knowing" overleaps the singular voice that mediated the video of a singular death. To feel oneself to know in advance is to have internalized, but then occluded, the other. I say this because convergence is premised upon fungibility. Reynolds's narrating voice is "like" many voices before hers; she occupies a place in a long historical field. At the same time, the singular always interrupts fungibility as an untenable ground of ethical life. Quite simply, the choice is as follows: you can avert your gaze and still participate in public outrage, but you're missing something important if you don't listen or attend to narrative, if you don't amplify its particular domain.

When Reynolds narrated what was happening in the car at that moment—when that narrative is again repeated by people who watched or read of it, as I am now—an alternate and urgent relation is demanded by the narrating voice: neither projection nor identification, but recognition. In this post, I want to explore how this is the case. I will bring to the discussion my understanding of what has long been a concern in American literary studies, one that corresponds to the entry of black women into American literature and public discourse: testimony. Under what conditions have black women been called upon to testify and how does this kind of testimony get mediated?



Image by Flickr User Johnny Silvercloud, Taken 15 November 2015, ([CC BY-SA 2.0](#))

On September 24, 2016, the *New York Times* released a cellphone video of the death of [Keith Lamont Scott in Charlotte, North Carolina](#). Police shot Lamont outside of his car. The police claimed—and continue to claim—that he was holding a gun. Several videos from different vantage points have emerged since Lamont's death. The presentation of videos mainly confirms a contemporary epistemic and ethical relationship to the visual, a new twist on an old sensory formation that continues to organize American social and political life. Repeatedly, people express a hope, or the belief, that some angle or some vantage correctly adjoined to another angle alone will answer the questions of “what happened?”

President Obama has called for more body cams for police, the underlying logic being that, if recorded, police brutality will become more preventable as it becomes more officially visible. However, the issue remains that the relationship to visual evidence always-already concerns the racist optic that organizes the black male body for a white gaze in advance as “threat.” Judith Butler, writing in 1993 of the Rodney King trial in the essay “[Endangered/Endangering: Schematic Racism and White Paranoia](#)” in the [Reading Rodney King/Reading Urban Uprising](#) anthology, reminds us that “The visual field is not neutral to the question of race; it is itself a racial formation, an episteme” (17).

This post does not focus on the urgent question of how white supremacy has historically marshaled the black male body within the racialized regime of the visible. [Ta-Nehisi Coates](#) and [Jackie Wang](#) are among those who have provided recent and pivotal accounts that orient me as I write.

Instead, I want to shift our contemporary conversation about white supremacy, racist policing, and black life and death by addressing the ethical place of black women's voices as they narrate the spectacle of black death. The question is not, can black death be seen within a white optic? I think the answer is no, it cannot. Time and again, the amassment of images insists that no amount of video footage can or will change the optic. Race is no doubt a visible artifact.

Can hearing differently augment and change its regime?

Jennifer Stoeber has recently asked after “the sonic color line” as a rejoinder to W.E.B. Du Bois’s 1903 insistence in *The Souls of Black Folk* that the “problem of the 20th century is the problem of the color line” (3). The problem of a line or threshold suggests the possibility of crossing and, with it, amalgamation. For Du Bois, the need and demand for crossing moves in one direction: the white consciousness should experience, not what it is to live as a black consciousness, but that her own consciousness, indeed very life, is inextricably bound to the other it repudiates. For Du Bois, this transformation—even in the act of writing—was intimately linked to song and narrative. Stoeber reminds us that, though writing, he implored his reader to “hear” him.

As I sifted through the news in the weeks following Scott’s death, I kept returning to this question: what does it mean for the voices of black women to become politically audible and intelligible as narrators in a society that still insists on identification as the only ground for ethical life? At the same time, what does it mean for a black woman to become a voice for another, to survive a death and tell the story where another cannot?



NYC action in solidarity with Ferguson. Mo, encouraging a boycott of Black Friday Consumerism. Image by Flickr User The All Nite Images, (CC BY-SA 2.0)

The majority of the police brutality that has received widespread public scrutiny is the visible violence against black males. As the [#sayhername](#) hashtag was meant to illustrate, black women are more invisible as subjects of racist violence. When Castile was bleeding out in silence, Reynolds took the camera and became his voice for him. The ground was suddenly shifted away from the visibility, toward audibility. I include within its matrix the significance of [Sandra Bland](#) who, using her phone's video camera, orally narrated her own arrest in her own voice.

In the U.S., white supremacy has attempted to make black voices historically inaudible as historical agents: slaves (not being citizens) were not originally allowed to testify in court, and even after Emancipation, black litigants could not testify against whites in some states. The demand for extra-judicial testimony has remained constant since slavery and Emancipation and it was the first point of entry for black writers into American literature. But the task of testimony—and making it “heard” in a manner of speaking—has long fallen disproportionately on black women, but this task brings to black women, as I will describe, an important power and ethical charge.



Ida B. Wells, 1893, Courtesy of the US National Portrait Gallery

In 1895, Ida B. Wells wrote [A Red Record: Tabulated Statistics and Alleged Causes of Lynching in the United States](#). The pamphlet provides statistics (the number of lynchings listed under year and purported crimes), but also narratives of specific events. In the Preface by Frederick Douglass, he writes, “I have spoken, but my word is feeble in comparison. You give us what you know and testify from actual knowledge.” She tells one story of a lynch mob coming to a house where a black man accused of a crime was being held while still with his family. As you read, I want to ask “where” Wells is as a speaker is and by what authority:

...that night, about 8 o'clock, a party of perhaps twelve or fifteen men, a number of whom were known to the guards, came to the house and told the Negro guards they would take care of the prisoners now, and for them to leave; as they did not obey at once they were persuaded to leave with words that did not admit of delay.

The woman began to cry and said, "You intend to kill us to get our money." They told her to hush (she was heavy with child and had a child at her breast) as they intended to give her a nice present. The guards heard no more, but hastened to a Negro church near by and urged the preacher to go up and stop the mob. A few minutes after, the shooting began, perhaps about forty shots being fired. The white men then left rapidly and the Negroes went to the house. Hamp Biscoe and his wife were killed, the baby had a slight wound across the upper lip; the boy was still alive and lived until after midnight, talking rationally and telling who did the shooting.

He said when they came in and shot his father, he attempted to run out of doors and a young man shot him in the bowels and that he fell. He saw another man shoot his mother and a taller young man, whom he did not know, shoot his father. After they had killed them, the young man who had shot his mother pulled off her stockings and took \$220 in currency that she had hid there. The men then came to the door where the boy was lying and one of them turned him over and put his pistol to his breast and shot him again. This is the story the dying boy told as near as I can get it.

Here, testimony is not to tell what happened to Wells herself, but to tell the story where the young boy cannot.

Is this narrative's ethical stance premised upon identification and fungibility? No, I think not. But it is premised upon self-absencing. Using the strategies of direct discourse and shifts in narrative voice (or the subject of the verb's mode of action), she absents herself as an "I" or first-person to mediate the story—until the very end: "This is the story the dying boy told as near as I can get to it." Her written tactics are vivid, and a reader perhaps imagines a scene. But the culmination of the image insistently returns to a voice: the dying boy's. It is only at the end of the synthetic narrative that she attributes the narrative to him as its witness. She writes in the third-person of an event she did not witness: she has allowed her voice to move around in space – from the site where the warrant was made, to the threshold of the family's cabin door, on the other side of the door, to the anonymous spaces of rumor, then away from the scene to the church, and back.

I'm reminded of a recently audio performance, *The Numbers Station [Red Record]*, where sound artists Mendi + Keith Obadike sonified Wells's statistics, using them as numbers to generate audio frequencies (some of the numbers being below 20 hz, the lowest threshold of human hearing).



https://youtu.be/PuLzv53gM_o

In a measured and restrained, yet breathy and resonant tone of voice, Mendi Obadike reads the statistics as Keith Obadike generates and oscillates corresponding tones. It is a study in repetition, as is Wells's pamphlet (racist crime, Douglass writes, "has power to reproduce itself"). And yet, both the pamphlet and the Obadiques' performance are a study in the singular: one female voice carries each of the numbers in their signification.

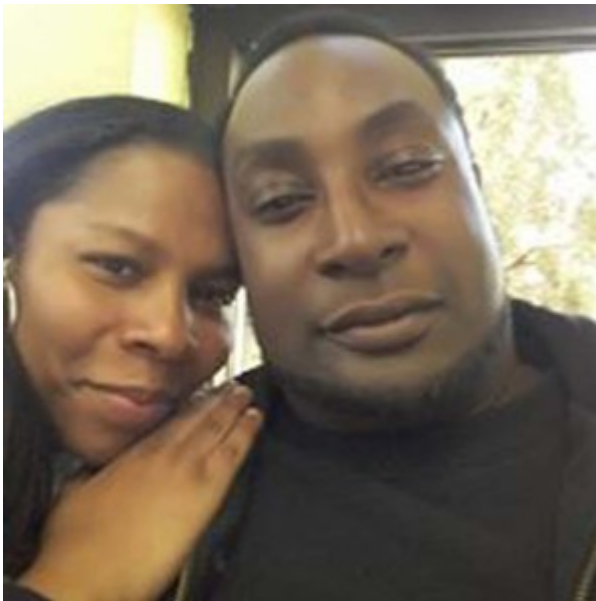


<https://youtu.be/Ww2vrBB9Gno>

Numbers Station is depleted or exhausted narrative space that asks that no images be conjured. The vocal style is impersonal, to be sure—the performer does not passionately react to the numbers. And yet, it is style that moves the voice into that region of the throat where Roland Barthes found the "grain," where timbre most resonates. It burrows in the human capacity for timbre as the singularity of every voice that says, "here I am."

When Roland Barthes asked the famous question, “who speaks?” in “[The Death of the Author](#),” he delighted in the impersonal domain of the literary, wherein writing becomes “an oblique space” no longer tied to the physical voice of the body writing. We can say that a physical guarantee of white life, its freedom of continuation underwrites the death of the author. In other words, one can die into text, relinquish the tie that binds the first-person to the body writing, and survive those deaths. It was not important for Barthes to ask, “who may die?” as in who might have the freedom of impersonality, and “who hears?”, as in who has the right to determine the meaning of the utterances. I want to address these questions.

Video technology means that one can record sound and image simultaneously—video having built in mics—yet cell technology makes video, as sound and image, even more accessible and disseminable. Often, the voices of those holding the cell phone at a distance are also captured, remarking upon what they are witnessing or trying to cognize, or they are simply breathing; these voices become a part of the narrative scene. Cell phone technology enables a new mode of witnessing, one connected to older antecedent technologies: the written word as a form of “voice” for black writers. Yet, there is something even more importantly material that gets lost when one focuses on the image of brutality rather than the narrative agency that can be harnessed by the act of recording. In the case of Reynolds’s video, this narrating is explicit. She puts into words what she is seeing. But this narrating can also be more implicit.



Facebook picture of Rakeyia Scott and Keith Lamont Scott

The video released by the *New York Times* of the police shooting of Keith Lamont Scott included the subtitle, as an introductory slide, that “It was recorded by his wife, Rakeyia Scott.” I pressed pause and, like Juhasz, felt myself unable to watch, stopped in my tracks by this matter-of-fact annotation. Scott had had to videotape the murder of her husband. It took some time before I

could return to the video itself, but immediately my thoughts return to Reynolds—*again*, a black woman had been thrust into the position of narrating black death at the hands of a white police officer, while it was unfolding. But I want to insist that the fungible quality is ethically augmented by narrating itself.

In what follows, [New York Times reporters Richard Fausset and Yamiche Alcindor transcribe Scott's audio](#) and summarize the visuals of the video rather than calling upon readers to view or re-view the video itself. I am choosing to provide the summary report—a narrative—in order to underscore the types of social and sensory positions that get taken up when one tells a story (in this case, it is a narrative of a narrative, since Rakeyia Scott is already positioned in the video as its participant-narrator). This account is not “what happened”—it is a narrative that tries to synthesize audio-visual information into a narrative form. If I also choose to repeat the narrative, rather than the video, it is in alignment with Hartman's ethical insistence that to repeat the spectacle of death is to reify it, as when she choose not to quote Douglass' narrative of witnessing the beating of his Aunt Hester in the introduction to *Scenes of Subjection*. Fred Moten, in [In the Break](#), rightly suggests in response that to turn away from an image is still to be caught up in its imaginary reproduction.

I want the reader to focus on how the *Times's* narrative conjures the scene while also involving certain decisions about what sensory data to include as internal to the logical order of events, harnessing adjectives, adverbs, and certain sensorial details. It is one platform of convergence:

Immediately, Ms. Scott said, “Don’t shoot him,” and began walking closer to the officers and Mr. Scott’s vehicle. “Don’t shoot him. He has no weapon. He has no weapon. Don’t shoot him.”

An officer can then be heard yelling: “Gun. Gun. Drop the gun.” A police S.U.V. with lights flashing arrived, partly obscuring Ms. Scott’s view, and a uniformed officer got out. From that point, there are five officers, most of whom appeared to be wearing body armor over plain clothes, around Mr. Scott.

“Don’t shoot him, don’t shoot him,” Ms. Scott pleaded, her voice becoming louder and more anxious. “He didn’t do anything.”

Officers continued to yell “drop the gun” or some variation of it — at least 12 times in 38 seconds.

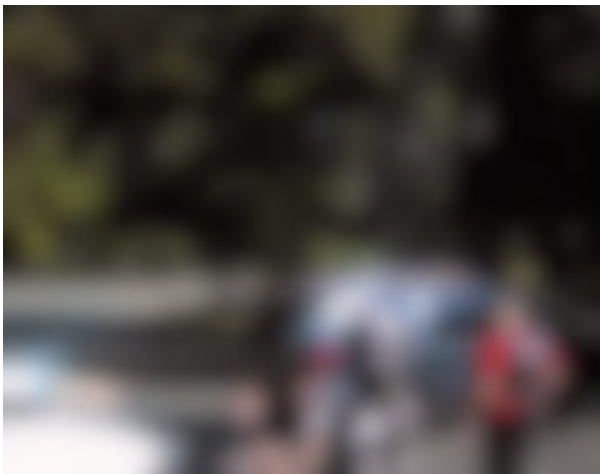
“He doesn’t have a gun,” Ms. Scott said. “He has a T.B.I.” — an abbreviation for a traumatic brain injury the lawyers said Mr. Scott sustained in a motorcycle accident in November. “He’s not going to do anything to you guys. He just took his medicine.”

“Drop the gun,” an officer screamed again as Ms. Scott tried to explain her husband’s condition. The officer then said he needed to get a baton.

“Keith don’t let them break the windows. Come on out the car,” Ms. Scott said, as the video showed an officer approaching Mr. Scott’s vehicle.

"Drop the gun," an officer shouted again.

Ms. Scott yelled several times for her husband to "get out the car," but on the video, he cannot be seen through the window of the S.U.V.



still image from Rakeyia Scott's video of the police shooting of her husband, Keith Lamont Scott. Cropping/blurring by JS, SO!

The above summary reproduces on the page how Scott's speaking voice suddenly thrust her into a position of addressing several auditors. In listening to the video, I can hear that she modifies her tone of voice to communicate to each addressee, speaking alternately in an imitate imploring tone to her husband and with sharper emphasis to the police. The tone of voice is also linguistic—the diction changes as the addressee changes ("Come on out the car" is so intimate and familiar to my ear somehow, a private grammar and tone suddenly thrown into the public space). She calls the police, "you guys," which strikes me as an attempt to tone them down, as it were, to bring them back into a human sphere from which they'd removed themselves. "Ms. Scott *tried* to explain her husband's condition"—I add this emphasis, because I think the journalist is channeling here the ways in which Rakeyia Scott is not being heard.

In narrating the scene of her husband's death, Rakeyia Scott becomes the absolute tie between that past of the image and the present of watching; I use the present tense, because it happens again, with each telling. Scott speaks, more silently and spectrally, to the audiences that will later watch and listen to the video she is recording, or read the transcript as synthesized by journalists or other viewers. In holding the camera, she imputes to herself a third voice as narrator, as did Wells in narrating the scene in *A Red Record*. This third voice, I am suggesting, is inaudible. It hovers next to her words with new force because, in the act of recording itself, *she is testifying*, offering a synthetic view as to reality. She creates a hearing space even though it is being foreclosed around her.

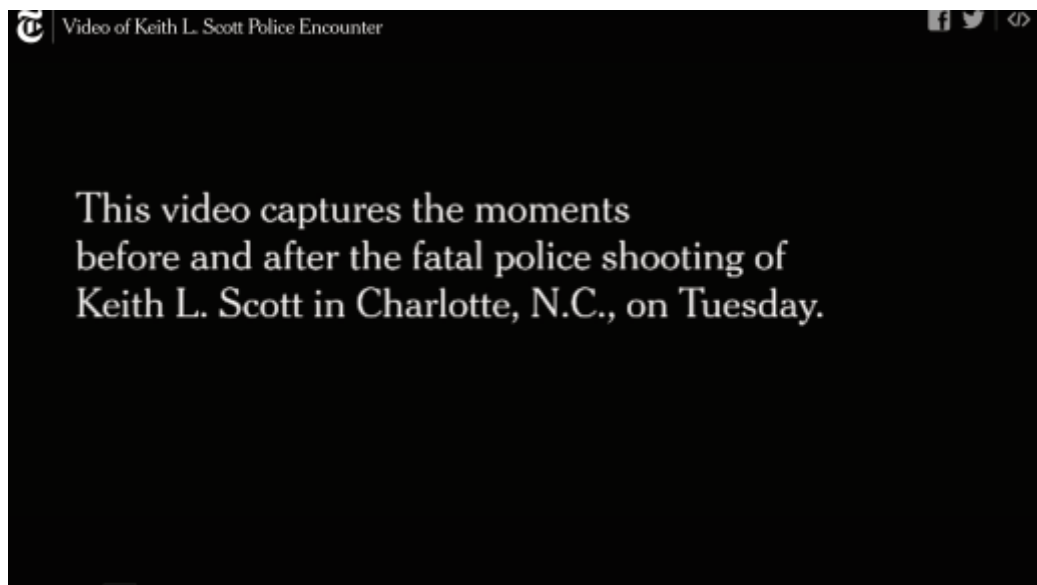
She is the only party in the scene who speaks to all addressees at once: her husband, the police, and "us." The police do not respond to her directly, as if she not there. Indeed, she is standing

somewhere outside of the scene as would a narrator. Because Rakeyia Scott holds a camera—outside of the frame—*while also* speaking, something of testimony gets activated. She has one foot outside of the event in the future after the video. She courageously separates herself from what is unfolding in order to constitute a narrative of the event; she mediates the scene. She not only puts into words facts that are not visible to the police, she issues pleas, commands, and words that carry the explanatory force of narrative, but also testimonial force because she holds the recording device.



still from the NYT's publication of Rakeyia Scott's video of the police murder of her husband, Keith Lamont Scott

By holding a camera, Scott directs her words not only to police, but toward a yet-to-be constituted audience. The recording device also activates the presence of a juridical gaze. She anticipates having to bring this event, not yet fully unfolded, before a court of law. But at the same time, her use of the recording device reveals the juridical sensorium as white. The device's presence indicates that, were Scott to remember and tell the story later in a court of law, *her words on their own would not be enough to guarantee their explanatory power*. The spectacle of black death cannot, on its own, announce its own truth within a racist optic. She says what the police (and a spectral jurist) refuse to see. She is forced to narrate because her voice is negated by the police, but also for those unknown viewers who will see this later.



still from the NYT's publication of Rakeyia Scott's video of the police murder of her husband, Keith Lamont Scott

There is hope, no doubt, that sometime after this scene has come to end, the video will find a place in the civic as a force of enacting law and justice, and above all, change.

At the turn of the last century, Du Bois wrote of “double consciousness” in *The Souls of Black Folk*, or the split incumbent upon black American consciousness to see oneself and then, to see oneself as the other sees you, “measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.” However, in narrating her husband’s death at the hands of American police in 2016, Rakeyia Scott was split in ways that are not fully compassed by double consciousness. This split into three (or more) not only marks the mediating place of black women in the spectacle of black death, but marks another ethical horizon where at issue is not only seeing differently, but hearing differently. As I’ve tried to describe, these ways of hearing are not an *identification with* (like me), but a *recognition of* (you are singular).

This is not yet to speak to the collapse of Scott’s voice after her husband’s murder. Continually occupying this position of testifying, Scott bravely maintains her hold on the camera, even when it means capturing her own screams when Charlotte police begin to shoot. She is both forms. Even then, in screaming, her voice retains its narrative power. Horrifyingly, she cannot change the sequence of events. But her voice continues to exist in belated relation to the scene and to the political afterlife of the murder as image.

With the digital, it becomes possible to reduce the space and time of testimony. With Reynolds, many watched on Facebook Live an event they were powerless to change in its unfolding. With Scott, the police gun shots *had not yet taken* place. I think the question is, were Rakeyia Scott white, would her words have been pro-active testimony of a not-yet determined event? Her words would have been lent a different power, a power to change events in their unfolding. In America, white testimony and black testimony bear fundamentally different ontological weight.



still from the NYT's publication of Rakeyia Scott's video of the police murder of her husband, Keith Lamont Scott

In repeatedly trying to answer the question whose recurrence haunts me—What does it mean for Scott to have narrated the murder and death of her loved one as it was taking place?—I am thrust up against the sense that we are in a new ethical moment and relation to history when it becomes possible—and necessary—for black women to narrate death to an unknown public as *it is unfolding*. This includes the moments before their own deaths, such as [Korryn Gaines](#), who was killed by the Baltimore County Police Department in August 2016, in her own apartment while holding her five year old son, who watched and himself suffered a gunshot wound. Like Reynolds, she broadcast her recordings via Facebook live.

Testimony is usually reserved for some time after the scene, and its hallmark is that it is belated. It must reconstitute a scene we can no longer see. The burden is on the narrating voice to conjure, with persuasion and conviction, the truth of the missing image, so that the story can in fact stand in place of the scene, merging with it on an ontological level. The live streamed video fundamentally reduces that distance in time, where the narrative now overlays the image, not from outside of it, but within it. They refuse the false juridical narratives that will, in the future, attempt to reframe the image in the name of “fact.”

In the differentiation of the senses, there is the order of the visible and the order of narrating voice that accompanies the image to give it sense, to retell its meaning somehow after. Scott insists on being there to narrate. That is not to suggest that somehow, because Scott speaks, she is more “present.” While the video is meant as future evidence, it also *lends a voice of recognition* in this ethical sense I have been trying to describe. Scott’s voice is split by the camera. Even if she herself were not to have survived the event, in narrating and taping, she becomes the medium for history (the persistent and unchanging fact of unjust black death). And yet, she is the vehicle for *this* death that matters in its singularity. She speaks as both, as history and particularity.

In watching and listening, I finally understand something of Hannah Arendt's argument in *The Human Condition* that speech and action form a fundamental unit. For Arendt, great deeds cannot happen in silence: they must be narrated and accompanied by speech. And yet the scenes Arendt describes couldn't be more different. This raises the issue of the conditions of narration: it is one thing to be speaking to your fellow citizens in a sanctioned forum. It is another to hold a camera as an officer holds a gun that might very well shoot you too.



Alicia Garza, one of the three co-founders of the national #blacklivesmatter movement in 2013, along with Opal Tometi and Patrisse Cullors.

What I'd like to preserve about Arendt's analytic is the union of speech and action. It is related to the role of the right to speak in the ancient polis, where one had to take responsibility for the possibility that one's speech might lead to the deeds of the community. But speech, for Arendt, is the function of action that makes it for others, that commits that action to the memories of others who can narrate it. In Arendt's view, the story does not end there. The fact is, one might not survive one's greatest deed. If one does survive, it would be in highly transformed terms. It is for others to tell the story.

In part, the ethical bond means our lives are in each other's hands, that the other is responsible for narrating where you cannot. We are always-already ethically bound as "witnesses and participants," as Frederick Douglass once described himself in his 1851 *Narrative*. He remembers himself as a six year old child not only watching, but listening to the scene of brutality against his Aunt Hester that he later recalls and transmutes into a narrative.

My hope is that this power of narrative is in the midst of opening another political horizon. It refutes identification as the untenable ground of ethics and action. We must act—or hold on to a sense of acting, even if its meaning and parameters remain unclear. As I reach the end of this essay, I can't shake the sense that that it is not enough to have provided an analytic for

understanding these videos and their voices in their long resonance with history. Nor does it feel right to say that these videos “do” something for us— they, and their narrators, demand that we do something *for them*. This mode of action begins in the attitude of hearing. Hearing testimony, Jill Stauffer describes in *Ethical Loneliness: The Injustice of Not Being Heard*, means allowing the unchangeable past to resound in the present. Only then can one “author conditions where repair is possible” (4).

It might be, then, that hearing itself is a mode of action, even if that action be much delayed. Hearing becomes action when formal power structures have denied its event as a source of repair. As listeners to the present and the past, we are neither projecting ourselves in the images nor imagining ourselves uninvolved in their scenes of subjection. We were all already there. And yet, to be “there” means to allow oneself to be exposed to another’s singular experience, rather than favor a collectively conditioned idea of what is known in advance. Who and where will we be afterward, is what remains. These videos and their not-yet determined afterlives become louder than the optic, if not in the word than in the sounds.

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