"Can you be BLACK and Look at This?": Reading the Rodney King Video(s)

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I still carry it with me all the time. I prayed for years for it to be taken away, not to be able to remember it.
BETTY SHABAZZ
on seeing Malcolm X's murder[1]

Memory resides nowhere, and in every cell.
SAUL SCHANBERG[2]

At the heart of this essay is a desire to find a language to talk about "my people." My people is, of course, romantic language, but I keep returning to it as I think about the videotaped police beating of Rodney King, wanting the term to reflect the understanding that race is a complex fiction but one that is perfectly real in significant aspects of all of our day-to-day lives.

No satisfactory terminology in current use adequately represents how I am describing a knowledge and sense of African American group identification which

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1. Marshall Frady, "The Children of Malcolm," *The New Yorker*, October 12, 1992, 78.
2. *Natural Health*, March/April, 1993, 42.

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is more expansive than the inevitable biological reductions of race and the artifactual constraints of culture. What do black people say to each other to describe their relationship to their racial group, when that relationship is crucially forged by incidents of physical and psychic violence which boil down to the "fact" of abject blackness? Put another way, how does an incident like King's beating consolidate group affiliations by making blackness an unavoidable, irreducible sign which despite its abjection leaves creative space for group self-definition and self-knowledge?

The colloquial adoption of *tribe* seemed for a time to speak to a history and group identification that is claimed rather than merely received, and theorized by the people in that group. It seemed to speak to the group recognition and knowledge that arose as a functional aspect of the originary rupture of the Middle Passage which gave birth to the African-American in all the violent and blank possibility of the hyphen, the slash. It seemed to suggest how a group organizes memory in a way that was useful to the project here of naming the ghostly or ancestral aspect of memory that vitalizes everyday life. But tribe carries with it a history of usage which erases difference and erects limiting, patronizing ethnic constructs, and this history eclipsed my attempt to reclaim derogatory usage.[3]

The stories of violence and the subsequent responsive group knowledges and strategies are compelling even in light of the profound differences between African Americans. This essay considers the inchoate way that black people might understand themselves to be part of a larger group. I mean this more than I mean political, ethnic, subcultural or diasporic. I am talking about what it is to think of oneself, in this day and age, as having *a people*.

Black bodies in pain for public consumption have been an American national spectacle for centuries.[4] This history moves from public rapes, beatings and

3. I am grateful to Carol A. Breckenridge and Saidiya Hartman for helping me think about this term.

4. I say "bodies" with an understanding informed by and indebted to Hortense Spiller's provocative meditation on "body" and "flesh": "But I would make a distinction in this case between 'body' and 'flesh' and impose that distinction as the central one between captive and liberated subject-positions. In that sense, before the 'body' there is the 'flesh,' that zero degree of social conceptualization that does not escape concealment under the brush of discourse, or the reflexes of iconography. Even though the European hegemonies stole bodies—some of them female—out of West African communities in concert with the African 'middleman,' we regard this human and social irreparability as high crimes against the *flesh*, as the person of African females and African males registered the wounding. If we think of the flesh as a primary narrative, then we mean its seared, divided, ripped-apartness, riveted to the ship's hole, fallen, or 'escaped' overboard." ("Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *diacritics* Summer 1987, 67).

lynchings to the gladiatorial arenas of basketball and boxing. In the 1990s African American bodies on videotape have been the site on which national trauma—sexual harassment, date rape, drug abuse, AIDS, racial and economic urban conflict—has been dramatized. The cases I refer to here are, of course, former Washington, D. C. mayor Marion Barry's videotaped crack-smoking and subsequent arrest; the Clarence Thomas Senate hearings; Mike Tyson's rape trial; Magic Johnson and Arthur Ashe's televised press conferences about their HIV and AIDS status; and, of course, the Rodney King beating. The cycle continues as the nation today sits transfixed before the O. J. Simpson case. In each of these traumatic instances, black bodies and their attendant dramas are publicly consumed by the larger populace. White men have been the primary stagers and consumers of the historical spectacles I have mentioned, 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.[5]

What collective versions of African American male bodily history do different groups of viewers, then, bring to George Holliday's eighty-one second videotape of Rodney King being beaten by four white Los Angeles police officers while a crowd of other officers watched? When these officers were first put on trial in Simi Valley, and when the jury came back with its not guilty verdicts, what metaphorization of the black male body had to have been already in place that invoked a national historical memory (constructed by whites), a code in which African Americans are nonetheless perfectly literate?

By presenting an archive of a series of cases I articulate the ways in which a practical memory exists and crucially informs African Americans about the lived realities of how violence and its potential informs our understanding of our individual selves as a larger group. The videotaped condensation produced by Court TV of the first, Simi Valley trial[6] reveals the ways in which freeze-framing

5. Here Homi K. Bhabha's observations on rumour and panic are useful, even as he veers from my own conception of how transmission—"pass[ing] it on"—takes place: "The indeterminacy of rumour constitutes its importance as a social discourse. Its intersubjective, communal adhesiveness lies in its enunciative aspect. Its performative power of circulation results in the contagious spreading, 'an almost uncontrollable impulse to pass it on to another person'. The iterative action of rumour, its *circulation* and *contagion*, links it with panic—as one of the *affects* of insurgency. Rumour and panic are, in moments of social crises, double sites of enunciation that weave their stories around the disjunctive 'present' or the 'not-there' of discourse. . . . The indeterminate circulation of meaning as rumour or conspiracy, with its perverse, psychic affects of panic, constitutes the intersubjective realm of revolt and resistance." *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 200.

6. "The 'Rodney King' Case: What the Jury Saw in *California v. Powell*," 1992, Courtroom Television Network. Courtroom proceedings cited are from this videotape.

distorted and dehistoricized the beating. It also displays how a language of black male bestiality and hyper-virility, along with myths of drug abuse and superhuman strength, were deployed during the trial. King was described as a "buffed-out" "probable ex-con," "bear-like," "like a wounded animal," "aggressive," "combative," and "equate[d] . . . with a monster." Closing defense statements continually named a "we," referring to the non-black racial composition of the Simi Valley jury. Attorney Michael Stone, speaking of Los Angeles police officers, concluded with "they don't get paid to roll around in the dirt with the likes of Rodney King." These sensationalist codes erased both Rodney King's individual bodily history within the event and a collective African American male bodily history, and supplanted it with a myth of white male victimization: hence, the statement by Sergeant Stacy Koon's laywer that "there's only one person who's in charge of this situation and that's Rodney Glenn King."

The narrative space between the nationally televised videotape and the Court TV version opens an avenue to think about what various national imaginations—primarily racially determined but also marked by region, class, gender—bring to the viewing of this episode. This space also raises questions concerning how bodily experience, both individually experienced bodily trauma as well as collective cultural trauma, comes to reside in the flesh as forms of memory reactivated and articulated at moments of collective spectatorship.

Despite the prevalence of anti-essentialist, post-identity discourses, I still believe there is a place for a bottom line. The bottom line here is that different groups possess sometimes-subconscious collective memories which are frequently forged and maintained through a storytelling tradition, however difficult that may be to pin down, as well as through individual experience. When a black man can be set on fire amidst racial epithets in the street because he inhabits a black body, as recently occurred in Florida, there must be a place for theorizing black bodily experience within the larger discourse of identity politics.

If any one aphorism can characterize the experience of black people in this country, it might be that the white-authored national narrative deliberately contradicts the histories our bodies know. There have always been narratives to justify the barbaric practices of slavery and lynching. African Americans have always existed in a countercitizen relationship to the law; how else to contend with knowing oneself as a whole human being when the Constitution defined one as three-fifths? The American way with regard to the actual lived experience of African Americans has been to write a counternarrative which erased bodily information as we knew it and substituted a countertext which in many cases has become a version of national memory.

Some sympathetic white colleagues discussing the King beating anxiously exempt themselves from the category of oppressor, even when they have not been placed there, by saying that they too were nauseated and traumatized by watching the beating. This is no doubt true, but it is not my interest here. The far more potent terrain is the one that allows us to explore the ways in which traumatized African American viewers have been taught a sorry lesson of their continual physical vulnerability in the United States that concurrently helps shape how to understand ourselves as a "we," even when that we is differentiated. The King beating, and the anguished court cases and insurrections which followed, reminded us that there is such a thing as *bottom line blackness* with regard to the violence which erases other differentiations and highlights race.

Two other cases help describe the way the Rodney King videotape was experienced as an aftershock, an event in an open series of national events: nineteenth-century slave accounts of witnessed violence and the 1955 lynching of Emmett Till. These cases help us understand how, to use the Biblical phrase James Baldwin has already deployed, "the evidence of things not seen" is crucial to understanding what African American spectators bring to the all-too-visible texts at hand of spectacular slave violence and the story of a brutalized Emmett Till.

A Witness and a Participant

What do the scenes of communally witnessed violence in slave narratives tell us about the way that text is inscribed in African American flesh? Witnessing can be aural as well as ocular. Furthermore, those who receive stories become witnesses once removed, but witnesses nonetheless. Frederick Douglass, in his 1845 narrative, recalls watching a beating at the hands of his first master, Captain Anthony:

> He would at times seem to take great pleasure in whipping a slave. I have often been awakened at the dawn of day by the most heart-rending of shrieks of an own aunt of mine, whom he used to tie up to a joist, and whip upon her naked back till she was literally covered with blood. No words, no tears, no prayers, from his gory victim, seemed to move his iron heart from its bloody purpose. The louder she screamed, the harder he whipped; and where the blood ran fastest, there he whipped longest. He would whip her to make her scream, and whip her to make her hush; and not until overcome by fatigue, would he cease to swing the blood-clotted cowskin. I remember the first time I ever witnessed

> this horrible exhibition. I was quite a child, but I well remember it. I shall never forget it whilst I remember any thing. It was the first of a long series of such outrages, of which I was doomed to be a witness and a participant. It struck me with awful force. It was the blood-stained gate, the entrance to the hell of slavery, through which I was about to pass. It was a most terrible spectacle. I wish I could commit to paper the feelings with which I beheld it.[7]

Douglass's repetition of "he whipped" and its variations replicates the falling of the awful blows. The staccato, structurally unvaried, repetitive sentences toward the end of the passage, in contrast to the liquid syntax of other parts of the book, reveal Douglass increasingly at a loss for words to describe what he has witnessed. More specifically, he can scarcely articulate what it means for that visual narrative to become forever a part of his consciousness. Yet, what linguistically knits this passage together at its close is the phrase, "I remember," repeated three times. Douglass feels "doomed to be both a witness and a participant." The tableau "struck" him with the same "awful force" of the blows. At the passage's close, he experiences a birthing of sorts as he travels through the "blood-stained gate," his body brought into the realization of itself as vulnerable and black.

On the next page, Douglass describes his Aunt Hester being whipped:

> [A]fter rolling up his sleeves, he commenced to lay on the heavy cow-skin, and soon the warm, red blood (amid heart-rending shrieks from her, and horrid oaths from him) came dripping to the floor. I was so terrified and horror-stricken at the sight, that I hid myself in a closet, and dared not venture out till long after the bloody transaction was over. I expected it would be my turn next. It was all new to me. I had never seen anything like it before. (52)

One of course can not *see* that blood runs "warm"; Douglass's synesthetic response is instantly empathetic, and the memory is recorded in a vocabulary of known bodily sensation. He imbibes the experience, which is metaphorically imprinted upon his now traumatized flesh in the shrieks experienced as "heart-rending" and which left him "horror-stricken." The mere sound of the voice of the overseer, who in the previous sentence Douglass has described as "whip[ping] a woman, causing the blood to run a half hour at a time," is "enough to chill the blood and

7. Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* (1845), edited with an introduction by Houston A. Baker, Jr. (New York: Penguin Books, 1982), 51.

stiffen the hair of an ordinary man" (55). Once again, these corporeal images of terror suggest that "experience" can be taken into the body via witnessing and recorded in memory as knowledge. This knowledge is necessary to one who believes "it would be my turn next." The knowledge of that violence and his vulnerability to it is, paradoxically, the armor which can take him out of the closet in which he has hidden but which he must inevitably leave. For if nothing else, the horrors of slavery were no longer "new" to him; from this point in the text forward, he would figure his way out of that institution.

In Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, protagonist Linda Brent's response to witnessed violence contrasts sharply with the response of white spectators.[8] Mrs. Flint, for example, "could sit in her easy chair, and see a woman whipped, till the blood trickled from every stroke of the lash" (12). But when Brent watches a fellow slave tied to a joist and whipped, "I shall never forget that night. Never before, in my life, had I heard hundreds of blows fall, in succession, on a human being. His piteous groans, and his 'O, pray don't massa,' rang in my ear for months afterwards" (13). Hearing, too, is central to witnessing. Sounds here haunt the mind as much as visual images. In this regard, the freeze-framed Simi Valley videotape, stripped of a soundtrack in which falling blows and bystanders' screams are audible, disallows the possibility that the sounds of terror could imprint themselves on the jury's mind. When Brent sees someone sold away from his mother—not physical violence, precisely, but emotional torture—she writes, "could you have seen that mother clinging to her child, when they fastened the irons upon his wrist; could you have heard the heart-rending groans, and seen her bloodshot eyes wander wildly from face to face, vainly pleading for mercy; could you have witnessed that scene as I saw it, you would exclaim, *Slavery is damnable*!" (23) As in Douglass, "heart-rending" and "bloodshot" work both literally and metaphorically to show the ways the body has a language which "speaks" what it has witnessed. Brent speaks here to white women readers, exhorting them to reject Mrs. Flint's perspective and assume instead her own, the perspective of a witness rather than a spectator.

In *The History of Mary Prince*, violence which is witnessed is quickly followed in the narrative by violence to Prince herself.[9] She understands that what happens to another threatens *her*:

8. Harriett A. Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), L. Maria Child, edited with an introduction by Jean Fagan Yellin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987).

9. *The History of Mary Prince, A West Indian Slave. Related by Herself* (1831), edited by Moira Ferguson, with a preface by Ziggi Alexander (London: Pandora, 1987). Further citations will be made parenthetically.

> Both my master and mistress seemed to think that they had a right to ill-use [the slave boys] at their pleasure; and very often accompanied their commands with blows, whether the children were behaving well or ill. I have seen their flesh ragged and raw with licks. Lick-lick—they were never secure one moment from a blow, and their lives were passed in continual fear. My mistress was not content with using the whip, but often pinched their cheeks and arms in the most cruel manner. My pity for these poor boys was soon transferred to myself; for I was licked, and flogged, and pinched by her pitiless fingers in the neck and arms, exactly as they were. To strip me naked—to hang me up by the wrists and lay my flesh open with the cow-skin, was an ordinary punishment for even a slight offence. (56)

To have "pity" for the boys is transferred to Prince herself; she understands her safety is as threatened as theirs. The repetition here of variations on "lick" again recalls the mimetic effect seen in the Douglass passage, but more so, it emphasizes Prince's artifice in constructing the violent spectacle. The narrative time of the event is slowed down, knit together with homophonic words like "ill," "pinched," "pity," "pitiless," "fingers," "strip," and "wrist," and framed. Prince artfully makes a stylized tableau that her readers can more empathically experience.

Prince then watches a pregnant woman, Hetty, whipped over and over again:

> The consequence was that poor Hetty was brought to bed before her time, and was delivered after severe labor of a dead child. She appeared to recover after her confinement, so far that she was repeatedly flogged by both master and mistress afterwards; but her former strength never returned to her. Ere long her body and limbs swelled to a great size; and she lay on a mat in the kitchen, till the water burst out of her and she died. All the slaves said that death was a good thing for poor Hetty; but I cried very much for her death. The manner of it filled me with horror. I could not bear to think about it; yet it was always present to my mind for many a day. (57)

After this litany, you might say, of course these scenes of horror would stay forever with those who saw them, knowing as they did that their fate was bound up in a system of domination and violence to bodies and to memory. But I am building here a case for a collective memory that rests in the present moment, which was activated by watching the King videotape, but which has been constructed as much by storytelling in multiple media as by personal, actual experi-

ence. The conundrum of being unable to "bear to think about" something which is "always present to my mind" is precisely the legacy wrought by state-sanctioned violence against African Americans such as the Rodney King beating. To see is unbearable, both unto itself as well as for what is means about one's own likely fate. But knowledge of this pervasive violence provides necessary information of the very real forces threatening African Americans. In the absence of first-person witnessing, the stories are passed along so that everyone knows the parameters in which their bodies move.

Responses of poor and working-class Angelenos of color to the Rodney King videotape augment this point. Rodney King was beaten by officers of the Los Angeles Police Department who specifically embody the state as experienced in the day-to-day lives of the people who made the following three statements reported in the newspaper, *Revolutionary Worker*:

> You know where I was when I first heard about the verdict? I was laying down in my bed asleep and when I heard the words not guilty on my TV I instantly woke up. It was a pain that went from the top of my head to the tip of my toes. It was an empty, hollow feeling. It was a rage inside of me, burning. I wanted to kill. I wanted to kill.
>
> By the time they was done I needed 28 stitches in my head. When I saw the Rodney King video I thought of myself laying on the ground and getting beat. I felt the same way all our people felt when we blew up.
>
> Somebody brought a video to school—the video of Rodney King—and then somebody put it on the television and then everybody just started to break windows and everything—then some people got so mad they broke the television.[10]

Again, 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. The language employed by the first person is a corporeal one, "heard" and then experienced in his nervous system as "a pain that went from the top of my head to the tip of my toes." The entire body responds. More dramatically, the second speaker abandons simile; he himself "needed 28 stitches" and felt himself "laying on the ground and getting beat." The third speaker makes

10. Michael Slate, *Shockwaves: Report from the L.A. Rebellion* (Chicago: Revolutionary Worker, 1993).

the explicit connection between a sense of collective violation and consequent physical response. The video is seen in school, a community. This community acts without hesitation and, according to this account, in tandem and agreement that a violation has taken place in which the entire community is implicated, and which demands a physical response.

Hortense Spillers writes: "These undecipherable markings on the captive body render a kind of hieroglyphics of the flesh whose severe disjunctures come to be hidden to the cultural seeing by skin color. We might well ask if this phenomenon of marking and branding actually 'transfers' from one generation to another, finding its various *symbolic substitutions* in an efficacy of meanings that repeat the initiating moments?"[11] Haile Gerima's film *Sankofa* asks audiences to regard the connections between an African American present, an African past, and the space of slavery between. A persistent motif of the film's plantation scenes is eyes which watch black comrades being beaten, raped, terrorized, killed. Little is said in these scenes in which the violent legacy is passed along, but Gerima's camera sees eyes everywhere, eyes watching in eloquent, legible witness.

Emmett Till

the avid insistence of detail
pretending insight or information
the length of gash across the dead boy's loins
his grieving mother's lamentation
the severed lips, how many burns
his gouged out eyes
sewed shut upon the screaming covers
louder than life
all over
the veiled warning, the secret relish
of a black child's mutilated body.

AUDRE LORDE[12]

Here is the story in summary: In August 1955, in Money, Mississippi, a fourteen-year old Chicago black boy named Emmett Till, nicknamed Bobo, was visiting

11. Spillers, "Mama's Baby," 67.

12. Audre Lorde, "Afterimages," in *Chosen Poems Old and New* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1982), 104.

relatives and was shot in the head and thrown in the river with a mammoth cotton gin fan tied around his neck, for allegedly whistling at a white woman.[13] In some versions of the story, he was found with his cut-off penis stuffed in his mouth. His body was shipped to Chicago and his mother decided he should have an open casket funeral; the whole world would see what had been done to her son. According to the Chicago-based, black news weekly *Jet*, "more than 600,000, in an unending procession, later viewed the body" at the funeral home.[14] A photograph of Till in the casket—his head mottled and swollen many times its normal size—ran in *Jet*, and largely through that medium, both the picture and Till's story became legendary. The caption of the close-up photograph of Till's face read: "Mutilated face of victim was left unretouched by mortician at the mother's request. She said she wanted 'all the world' to witness the atrocity" (*Jet*, 8).

Emmett Till's story has inspired entire works such as Bebe Moore Campbell's *Your Blues Ain't Like Mine*, Toni Morrison's play, *Dreaming Emmett* and Gwendolyn Brooks's famous pair of poems, "A Bronzeville Mother Loiters in Mississippi. Meanwhile, a Mississippi Mother Burns Bacon" and "The Last Quatrain of the Ballad of Emmett Till" and Audre Lorde's poem, "Afterimages" (quoted above). The lasting impact of the photograph and the story is also illustrated in several autobiographical accounts.[15] In Anne Moody's memoir, *Coming of Age in Mississippi*, she writes:

> Up until his death I had heard of Negroes found floating in a river or dead somewhere with their bodies riddled with bullets. But I didn't know the mystery behind these killings then. I remember once when I was only seven I heard Mama and one of my aunts talking about some Negro who had been beaten to death. "Just like them low-down skunks killed him they will do the same to us."[16]

Charlayne Hunter-Gault remembers the killing in her autobiography, *In My Place*:

13. Accounts of the fan's weight vary between seventy-five and 150 pounds.

14. *Jet*, 8, 19 (1955): 8.

15. James Baldwin astutely places the attention on Till's murder in context: "The *only* reason, after all, that we have heard of Emmett Till is that he happened to come whistling down the road—an obscure country road—at the very moment the road found itself most threatened: at the very beginning of the segration-desegregation—not yet integration—crisis, under the knell of the Supreme Court's *all deliberate speed*, when various "moderate" Southern governors were asking Black people to segregate themselves, *for the good of both races*, and when the President of the United States was, on this subject, so eloquently silent that one *knew* that, in his heart, he did not approve of a mongrelization of the races." *The Evidence of Things Not Seen* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1985), 40–41.

16. Anne Moody, *Coming of Age in Mississippi* (New York: The Dial Press, 1968), 104.

> From time to time, things happened that intruded on our protected reality. The murder of Emmett Till was one such instance. It happened in August, 1955, and maybe because he was more or less our age, it gripped us in a way that perhaps even the lynching of an older Black man might not have. "It was the first time we'd known a young person to die," recalled Wilma, who, like me, was then entering eighth grade. For both of us, pictures of his limp, watersoaked body in the newspapers and in *Jet*, Black America's weekly news bible, were worse than any image we had ever seen outside of a horror movie. . . . None of us could ever forget the haunting gray image of the dead and waterlogged young boy; we just put it on hold."[17]

Shelby Steele writes of the murder in an autobiographical essay:

> The single story that sat atop the pinnacle of racial victimization for us was that of Emmett Till, the Northern black teenager who, on a visit to the South in 1955, was killed and grotesquely mutilated for supposedly looking at or whistling at (we were never sure which, though we argued the point endlessly) a white woman. Oh, how we probed his story, finding in his youth and Northern upbringing the quintessential embodiment of black innocence, brought down by a white evil so portentous and apocalyptical, so gnarled and hideous, that it left us with a feeling not far from awe. By telling his story and others like it, we came to *feel* the immutability of our victimization, its utter indigenousness, as a thing on this earth like dirt or sand or water.[18]

For black writers of a certain age, and perhaps of a certain region, a certain proximity to Southern roots, Emmett Till's story is a touchstone. It was the basis for a rite of passage that indoctrinated these young people into understanding the vulnerability of their own black bodies, coming of age, and the way in which their fate was interchangeable with Till's. It also was a step in the consolidation of their understanding of themselves as black in America. It is in this regard that black women have taken the story to be emblematic, though Till's fate was carried out in the name of stereotypical black male sexuality. These passages show how storytelling works to create collective countermemory of trauma as those stories also terrorize.

17. Charlayne Hunter-Gault, *In My Place* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1992), 116–117.
18. Shelby Steele, "On Being Black and Middle-Class," *Commentary*, January 1988, 43.

In Muhammad Ali's autobiography, *The Greatest*, Till's murder is a formative touchstone of young Cassius Clay's adolescence:

> Emmett Till and I were about the same age. A week after he was murdered in Sunflower County, Mississippi, I stood on the corner with a gang of boys, looking at pictures of him in the black newspapers and magazines. In one he was laughing and happy. In the other, his head was swollen and bashed in, his eyes bulging out of their sockets and his mouth twisted and broken. His mother had done a bold thing. She refused to let him be buried until hundreds and thousands marched past his open casket in Chicago and looked down at his mutilated body. I felt a deep kinship to him when I learned he was born the same year and day that I was. My father and I talked about it at night and dramatized the crime. I couldn't get Emmett out of my mind until one evening I thought of a way to get back at white people for his death. That night I sneaked out of my house and walked down to Ronnie King's and told him my plan. It was late at night when we reached the old railroad station on Louisville's East Side. I remember a poster of a thin white man in striped pants and a top hat who pointed at us above the words Uncle Sam wants you. We stopped and hurled stones at it, and then broke into the shoeshine boy's shed and stole two iron shoe rests and took them to the railroad tracks. We planted them deep on the tracks and waited. When a big blue diesel engine came around the bend, it hit the shoe rests and pushed them nearly thirty feet before one of the wheels locked and sprang from the track. I remember the loud sound of the ties ripping up. I broke out running, Ronnie behind me, and then I looked back. I'll never forget the eyes of the man in the poster, staring at us: Uncle Sam wants you. It took two days to get up enough nerve to go back there. A work crew was still cleaning up the debris. And the man in the poster was still pointing. I always knew that sooner or later he would confront me, and I would confront him.[19]

Seeing the picture of the dead boy's ruined body makes young Cassius feel "a deep kinship." He and his father "dramatize the crime," which, like the young people quoted in the *Revolutionary Worker* who saw the King tape in school and smashed the television, became a catalyst for action. The train symbolizes

19. Muhammad Ali, *The Greatest* (New York: Random House, 1975), 34–35.

commerce and technology, the unrealized dreams of black migration north as well as the reverse migration south which got Till killed. Clay responds not with the legendary pulchritude of his bare, magnificent body, but rather with stone—a tool from nature—and the iron shoe rests. In destroying the shoeshine rests he destroys an enduring symbol of black servitude. The iron shoe rest of the black shoeshine "boy" and all it stands for is both a tool for destruction and is symbolically destroyed. Clay undercuts his physical might, the mythology of Douglass whipping Covey, acknowledging that no black male body alone can triumph over consolidated white male might. The looming Uncle Sam Wants You poster allows Clay to articulate in the incident a relationship between himself and state power.

We remember Till because of all that his story embodies, and because of the horror burned into our nightmares and imaginations with the photograph. Till's body was disfigured but still a body that can be imagined as kin to, but nonetheless distinct, from our own. The focus in American narratives of violence against blacks in the popular imagination is usually male. The whipped male slave, the lynched man, Emmett Till, Rodney King: all of these are familiar and explicit in the popular imagination. Black boys and men present a particular kind of physical threat in the white American imagination, a threat that must be contained. Countless stories of violence are made spectacular in order to let black people know who is in control, such as when Louisiana Ku Klux Klansmen in the 1940s tied bodies of lynched black men to the fronts of their cars and drove them through crowds of black children.[20] Thus, while black men are contained when these images are made public, black viewers are taking in evidence that provides ground for collective identification with trauma. The Emmett Till narratives illustrate how, in order to survive, black people have paradoxically had to witness their own murder and defilement and then pass along the epic tale of violation.

Rodney King

> Outside the door of no return, our arms linked
> from habit, a vendor spies the pain. Don't
> cry, he says. It wasn't you or me. It's just
>
> history. It's all over.
>
> EISA DAVIS[21]

20. This is an anecdote that was told to me by a teacher at Dunbar High School in Chicago in April of 1993, but there are many, many such stories which circulate in black communities and discourse.

21. Eisa Davis, "Maison Des Esclaves, Goree Island, Senegal" (Unpublished poem).

An article in the February 2, 1993 *New York Times* described life for the four Los Angeles police officers as they awaited their second trial, after being acquitted in the Simi Valley trial of violating Rodney King.[22] Sergeant Stacy Koon, who was "in charge" on the night of the beating, says he has just been declared "psychologically disabled" for work and lists the physical disorders he says have plagued him since the incident: trouble sleeping, "stomach problems," "high blood pressure," and teeth grinding. His days are now spent poring over some 17,000 pages of trial testimony and watching, over and over and over again, the tape of the beating on a big-screen television in his living room. He takes the tape on speaking tours, he projects it on different walls at home, he demands that visitors watch it and listen to his narrative:

> There's 82 seconds of use of force on this tape, and there's thirty frames per second. There's like 2,500 frames on this tape and I've looked at every single one of them not once but a buzillion times, and the more I look at the tape the more I see in it. . . . When I started playing this tape, and I started blowing it up to ten inches, like I'd blow it up on the wall right behind you here, fill up the whole wall over the stairwell, and all of a sudden, this thing came to life! You blow it up to full size for people, or even half size, if you see Rodney King four feet tall in that picture as opposed to three inches, boy, you see a whole bunch of stuff. . . . He's like a bobo doll. Ever hit one? Comes back and forth, back and forth. That's exactly what he's doing. Get him down on the ground. Prone is safe. Up is not. That is what we're trying to do is keep him on the ground, because if he gets up it's going to be a deadly force situation. . . . This [new trial] is going to be fun. This is high comedy.

Koon creates a narrative to justify his authority, and the more he sees it, the more he believes it. He watches it over and over, larger and larger, yet he does not see himself physically magnified as he does King. For different reasons, in these moments of collective trauma, to use the words of the visual artist Adrian Piper, white and black spectators "pretend not to know what you know,"[23] both for self-justification and psychic survival. Many narratives were created to de-

22. Seth Mydans, "Their Lives Consumed, Officers Await 2d Trail," *New York Times*, February 2, 1993, A9.

23. Adrian Piper, *Pretend* (New York: John Weber Gallery, 1990).

scribe the same eighty-one seconds of videotape, and vast amounts of energy and cultural memory were expended to preserve these versions of the truth.

The concept of videotaped national memory was crucial to the Rodney King beating and subsequent Los Angeles riot/insurrection. Videotaped footage of the black teenager Latasha Harlins being shot to death by a Korean shopkeeper preceded King; white motorist Reginald Denny being pulled from his truck and beaten by several African American men during the disturbances formed the other video bookend. The videotape of Desiree Washington dancing in her beauty pageant the day after she was raped by Mike Tyson was used to attempt to prove that she could not possibly have been violated. Videotape imprints constructed bodily histories on a jury's consciousness, and, in a national arena amplifies or denies the story an African American body appears to be telling.

The defense in the Simi Valley trial employed familiar language of black bestiality to construct Rodney King as a threat to the officers. The lawyers also slowed down the famous videotape so that it no longer existed in "real time" but rather in a slow dance of stylized movement that could as easily be read as self-defense or as a threat. The slowed-down tape recorded neither the sound of falling blows nor the screams from King and the witnesses. The movement existed frame by frame rather than in real time.[24] The rabidly conservative Rush Limbaugh utilized the same technique on his television show, when he played a snippet of the tape over and over and over again until it *did* look like Rodney King was advancing on the police officers, and there was no context for the movement. There is something compulsive, manipulative and dishonest about Limbaugh and Koon watching over and over and over again the same piece of film and using it to consolidate a self-justifying narrative.

Black artists have invoked Rodney King's beating in different ways. Spike Lee opens *Malcolm X* with the videotape; Portia Cobb's own videotape invokes the beating with repeated tapping noises juxtaposed with young people of color discussing the case and police brutality; Branford Marsalis's saxophone wails as many times as police batons landed on King's body.[25] These artists each responded to King's beating in different ways, but all resisted the documentary form that dehistoricizes both the body and the event. These artistic examples mitigate against

24. Others have discussed the phenomenon. See especially "The Rules of the Game," Patricia J. Williams in *Reading Rodney King*, ed. Robert Gooding-Williams (New York: Routledge, 1993), 51–55 and "Picture Imperfect," Patricia Greenfield and Paul Kibbey, *New York Times*, April 1, 1993, A-15.

25. Portia Cobb, "No Justice, No Peace," 1993.

a history of narratives of dominion which attempt to talk black people out of what their bodies know.

Pat Ward Williams, while not responding to King, nonetheless questions the ways in which documentary photography has inadequately represented black life. She also questions the role of the photographer and his failure to *act* as witness. In "Accused/Blowtorch/Padlock," she reinscribes an African-American narrative onto a photograph of a man being lynched, which she found in *The Best of Life Magazine*.[26] Her handwritten narrative—crammed within and practically spilling over the frame—begins with her sense of trouble, "something is going on here," "I didn't see it right away." It also expresses her sense of wanting not to believe that the picture tells the story it does, not simply the overt story of a lynching but the far more troubling story of the complicity of the photographer, who watches but does not witness, who perpetuates, who is then in effect part of the lynch mob.

Williams invokes collective memory in three ways. She says that "*Life* magazine published this picture," and then, "Who took this picture?" "*Life* answers—Page 141—no credit." *Life* magazine has become life itself, and the irony of a refusal to attribute agency or take responsibility for the crime committed. She says, "could Hitler show pictures of the Holocaust to keep the Jews in line?" And then, with the line, "Can you be BLACK and look at this?" she forces viewers to confront the idea of memory that would indelibly affect the very way that someone sees what is before them. Williams's reframing of the picture, the slowing down of the narrative action and blowing up of individual parts, is the same technique with a remarkably different purpose than the reconstructions by Court TV or Rush Limbaugh of the King video. The close-up of the image emphasizes the chains biting at the flesh, pulling the arms practically out of the socket, pulling against the chains away from the tree. She writes, "he doesn't look lynched yet . . .WHO took this picture? Couldn't he just as easily let the man go? Did he take his camera and then come back with a blowtorch?" Then the narrative breaks into anguished grammatical fragments reminiscent of passages cited above from slave narratives. "Where do you torture someone BURN off an ear? Melt an eye? A screaming mouth How can this photograph exist?"

26. Pat Ward Williams,"Accused/Blowtorch/Padlock," 1986, mixed media, photograph, silk-screen, 60x100," in *The Decade Show: Frameworks of Identity in the 1980s* (New York: Museum of Contemporary Hispanic Art, The New Museum of Contemporary Art, The Studio Museum in Harlem, 1990), plate XC.

Williams's final plea, "Somebody do something," is a call to action. Both Williams and the lawyers for the police officers felt the need, for drastically different reasons, to overlay and articulate their version of the collective narrative on the public text. Williams's work asks the questions: What do people do with their history of horror? What does it mean to bear witness in the act of watching a retelling? What does it mean to carry cultural memory in the flesh? She shows how to work with images that many would rather forget, and she shows why such images need to be remembered.

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