



"You began to read and you were taken back to the moment the video appeared across the Atlantic, transferred by the sturdy boat of the Internet."

—Caleb Azumah Nelson¹

"[B]lackness is integral to the production of space," writes race and gender scholar Katherine McKittrick in *Demonic Grounds*.² Nothing can move without touching Blackness; nothing can move without Blackness as a force, an engine, a technology. Thus, the contemporary circulation in the media of viral material supporting the supremacy of Black social death harks back to the early virality of lynching postcards and the cross-circulation of these images via social media and other digital platforms.

This is demonstrated by such viral acts as "Trayvoning," which came into being in 2012 in response to the murder of Trayvon Martin at the hand of George Zimmerman.³ In this performance, a person poses for a photograph face down on the ground with a bag of skittles and an Arizona iced tea. These images—often featuring young White people—were distributed via platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Tumblr. While the trend appears to have been short lived, it remains a visible hashtag on these sites, serving as a key example of the ways in which "digital blackface" continues to shape-shift and perpetuate, taking on new forms within new modes of media.

The fact that Trayvoning predates the 2013 trial of Zimmerman illustrates the ways in which the public, via this disturbing performance, was invested in the forensics of Martin's Blackness. The speculative replay of Martin's death contests and devalues

the teenager's life, establishing a digital town square wherein Martin's lifeless body remains left untended into perpetuity. Further, it asserts a norm for the Black form as fixed, horizontal and motionless: the deceased body stretched out across the ground is determined as a natural state, running counter to a living body that might exist upright, with the capacity to move through the world with agency. As gender studies scholar Kemi Adeyemi puts it: "Being [B]lack and horizontal [is] a spatio-racial coordinate that is threatening" to the White imagination, "as much as it could lead to one becom[ing] [B]lack and upright, which would jumpstart the cycle of killability once more."⁴

In 2013 artist Devin Kenny staged *Untitled/Clefa* in Mexico City, a one-time reperformance of the Trayvoning meme. Kenny, who is Black and American, lay face down on the floor as an audience looked on. He remained there for the duration of the trap song "Versace" by Black American rap group Migos, running for three minutes and twenty-five seconds. The song was then looped three times, with Kenny remaining on the ground for each cycle. Kenny explains, "I wanted to take an image-creating practice that was circulating online, and a) slow it down and b) charge it differently by having it happen in real time." By placing himself, a Black person, at the center of the meme, Kenny creates and holds space for a reflexive relationship between "mimicry and parody."⁵ His performance prompts the important question: *Can such reenactment aid the reconciliation of trauma?*

As interdisciplinary scholar Imani Perry reminds us, "a feature of trauma is repetition."⁶ The repetitive, viral transmission of Black trauma online today is embodied by Diamond Reynolds's devastating Facebook video showing Minnesota police shooting her partner Philando Castile. When initially posted, it was shared over 32,000 times and generated over a million views.⁷ This reaches back and adds profound scale to the murder of fourteen-year-old Black teenager Emmett Till in August 1955, and *Jet* magazine's coverage of Till and his family

later that same year. As images of Black trauma traverse space and time, the technological advances that occur transhistorically accelerate the density of their circulation. With this comes a new reality: a constant resurrection of Black life made undead via endless scrolls and the incessant narration of auto-play.

The repetition continues. On Saturday, March 3, 1991, a White man named George Holliday, the general manager of a plumbing supply company, stepped out onto the balcony of his Los Angeles apartment with a handheld camcorder, filming four officers of the Los Angeles Police Department as they swarmed construction worker Rodney King's prone body with batons and tasers.⁸ This video tape of King being severely beaten by the LAPD made visible to many for the first time across the country the extremes of police brutality. As with Selma, the broadcast of King's abuse was significant in its consciousness-raising, signaling a continuation of what had come before—the legacy of state violence, the reality of Black social death—reaching across generations.

King, who was thought to be intoxicated after an evening out with friends, had been driving after midnight and was being pursued by the police. Following a high-speed chase along the highway, King was instructed by the officers to exit his car and told to lie on the ground. Fifteen minutes later, King was left with a broken leg, fractured skull, and severe taser burns. In the negligence claim filed with the city, King noted his injuries as follows: "11 skull fractures, permanent brain damage, broken [bones and teeth], kidney damage [and] emotional and physical trauma."⁹

In the report of the Independent Commission on the LAPD released in 1991, Sergeant Stacey Koon—one of the four officers responsible for the crime of King's assault, and who ultimately served a truncated sentence of thirty months in prison for violating King's civil rights—made an arrest report that was entirely inconsistent with what Holliday witnessed. Koon wrote,

"Several facial cuts due to contact with asphalt. Of a minor nature. A split inner lip. Suspect oblivious to pain."¹⁰

With King and the officers illuminated by the lights of the patrol cars and the helicopters circling overhead, Holliday and other witnesses to the incident were able to see the truth more clearly. Holliday's tape refuted Koon's account, capturing the encounter across twelve excruciating minutes of footage, ninety seconds of which would become known as "The Rodney King Tape."

Holliday sold the tape for \$500 (equivalent to \$1,072 in 2023) to local news station KTLA. The video traveled across the country, then around the world, often with little credit to its producer. The message in this is devastating: Black life in precarity, a gross commodity for sale, sells cheap but travels fast. Holliday's lawyer James F. Jordan called the tape "the most-played video in the history of this country." Jordan worked on behalf of Holliday to file copyright-infringement lawsuits against news stations and television networks that aired the video without compensating or crediting Holliday for his camera work.¹¹ In July 2020, at the height of the global resistance in the name of Black lives lost such as Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd, Holliday attempted to auction the original camera that he used to take footage.¹² The price was \$225,000. (It remains unclear, however, if it ever found a buyer; Holliday died in September 2021 of complications due to COVID-19.)

Reverend Al Sharpton, in 2020, described the tape as "the Jackie Robinson of police videos."¹³ The contents of the video have been noted as "among the twentieth century's most recognized images."¹⁴ Holliday went on to market himself as the producer of the "first ever viral video," a bizarre badge of pride in establishing that ninety seconds of tape as the origin point in an era before the internet.¹⁵ This, arguably, paved the way for a future culture of the endlessly exchangeable Black meme as transmitted via YouTube, Facebook Live, Vine, TikTok, and beyond. It was reported that King described to his attorney the

experience of having a sheet put over his head by the LAPD shortly after the assault, prompting King to think he had died. At this moment, King himself, zombified in the eyes of the state, wondered: "If this is what it is being dead, why do I feel this way?"¹⁶ The decision made by the LAPD to place a sheet over King's head underscores Sylvia Wynter's critical analysis of the "No Humans Involved" taxonomy, a dehumanizing action that establishes King in his Black horizontality as no longer a threat, impossible to resurrect upright, and even perhaps signifying that in the eyes of state power he has ceased to exist altogether.

Despite Holliday's footage of King's beating, in April 1992 three of the four police officers involved were acquitted of charges of excessive force, with the fourth case left undecided by the jury. The outcome of the trial launched a citywide uprising across LA as Black and Latinx residents rose in anger at the judgment. The LA uprisings resulted in a surge of arrests, injuries, and deaths, among other losses, setting the stage for what later became known as King's memetic "catchphrase": "Can we all get along?," transmitted widely via TV broadcast in May of that year.

Though King himself was the victim, on March 9, 1993, in the midst of the trial, the *New York Times* made sure to note that King was "No Stranger to Trouble," observing that King had been marked in the trial by the officers' lawyers as "a dangerous, almost superhumanly strong felon, sweating, grunting, violent and impervious to pain."¹⁷ With the trial having commenced a year prior in 1992, Court TV—at that time only eight months old—provided those tuning in "a live, gavel-to-gavel, ringside seat."¹⁸ The burgeoning coverage of the 1990s, inclusive of King's trial, marked a major turning point for Court TV with approximately 8 million subscribers gaining access and ad sales steadily gaining revenue in the multimillions. Founder and CEO of the Courtroom Television Network Steve Brill is quoted in *Variety*, in response to the success of the broadcast of King's trial (into which he edited excerpts of Holliday's video

footage): “Luck is a factor here.”¹⁹ Brill’s note on the boom of attention in response to King’s beating and trial and its generative impact on broadcast revenue emphasizes a disturbing correlation between the hypervisibility of Black social death and the economy it engenders. Executive Vice President of CNN Ed Turner commented of the media moment, “Television used the tape like wallpaper,” underscoring the way King’s beating, in the regularity of its replay and international circulation, became something of a decorative backdrop, an aesthetized anti-Blackness consumed en masse.²⁰

Elizabeth Alexander, in her 1994 essay “‘Can You Be BLACK and Look at This?: Reading the Rodney King Video(s),” reflects on how the technology itself mediated differently the experience of collective viewership, as “freeze-framing distorted and dehistoricized the beating.”²¹ The capacity for the coverage to be recorded, rerecorded, and then replayed external to the site of the initial event itself shaped King’s assault, and the coverage of the trial thereafter, as entertainment to loop back on, an entirely different texture than what was typified within the nightly news prior to the technological advances that made this form of broadcast and replay possible. While the simultaneous cross-station screening of coverage in Selma became a unified and shared experience across channels, the reproductive nature of the documentation of King’s beating triggered a fractured viewership that splintered across a myriad of platforms, varying in scale.

We see Alexander’s “distort[ion]” applied in real time in Holliday’s narration of his first and only face-to-face encounter with King. As with the images of Till, it is the abused and distorted Black body that is rendered historic, fixed and final by Holliday’s recounting; King as healed and whole is thereby a stranger to the White eye, even that of one who profited from his pain. Holliday recalled:

I looked over and I didn’t recognize him because the only pictures I had seen of him were of his face all swollen and beaten up, but now he’d recovered ... he could tell that I didn’t know who he was, and he said, “You don’t know who I am, do you?” I said, “No.”²²

Today, the feature special can be found on YouTube under “Court TV—The ‘Rodney King’ Case”—an opportunity to auto-play, pause, and fast-forward through the trial, a recirculation of an event that makes plain a wound made more painful by its continued hypervisibility and transmission.²³

As we reflect on Holliday’s wish for fame, financial gain, and recognition, we must remember the work of seventeen-year-old Darnella Frazier, whose recording of the murder of George Floyd in 2020 became viral material and a thread connecting Till to King to Floyd, the video in its mass replay launching uprisings of protest across the globe, but created as witness. While, until his death, Holliday continued to voice frustration about not receiving his dues for his part in the creation of the original tape, much to his own surprise, he was included in the Whitney Biennial in 1993.²⁴ The tape ran on loop throughout the exhibition; unlike Schutz’s later portrayal of Till, which prompted public outrage and condemnation, no documented protests from the public were publicized or reported specific to the screening of Holliday’s tape of King’s beating and its inclusion in the Biennial alongside other “art objects” at the time. The media seemed entirely numb. Critic Deborah Solomon, in her February 1993 review of the show, seethed:

The prevailing fashion among younger artists is “martyr art”—art that shrieks about every last inequity ... It’s as if television has replaced art school as the breeding ground for new talent. However removed Rodney King may be from the realm of esthetics, what’s incontestable is that his victim status speaks

directly to the debased spirit of the 90's art world. Martyrdom—be it political or personal—has found the fast track ... art-as-group-therapy.²⁵

The next month, another critic, Roberta Smith, clumsily expanded on Solomon's review, seemingly missing the point herself in her untoward critique of identity politics as a failure of the Biennial's frame and format:

The wall labels and texts are rife with fashionable buzzwords: identity, difference, otherness. Anita Hill, the Persian Gulf war and the violence that followed the Rodney G. King verdict flash before the eye, usually on video. In fact, the exhibition makes a video artist of George Holliday, the man who was using his camcorder for the first time and happened to videotape the Los Angeles police beating Mr. King, spontaneously creating a document, if not an artwork, that once more brought the issue of racism to every American living room. The presence of Mr. Holliday's tape signals one of the show's basic flaws, which is that it is less about the art of our time than about the times themselves.²⁶

The media narration that the inclusion of the video of King was troubled due to it holding a mirror up to “the times themselves” falls short in truly understanding the problems of having such a video shown specifically in the forum of a major American art museum. Speaking to the media, the Whitney's then film curator John G. Hanhardt illustrated the dilemma and colonial privilege of the site itself further, proudly claiming the tape's inclusion in the Biennial: “I knew the videotape was important the first time I saw it ... It was my choice.”²⁷ Hanhardt's desire to personally lay claim to the tape as if it were his individual property is shuddering, aging poorly in retrospect as we reflect on the moment now. That Hanhardt assumes responsibility not only for including the video of King in the Biennial but also

for *playing it on loop* says a great deal about who the museum imagined its audience to be at that moment.

Disturbingly, though Rodney King was still alive at that moment, no mention was made of any contribution made to him as the protagonist of Holliday's video. Holliday, however, received a form of compensation: the *Los Angeles Times* reported that the Whitney “made a contribution to Social Reform, Inc., a nonprofit corporation that Holliday set up after the riots and hopes to fund with proceeds from the settlement of a pending suit against KTLA and other broadcasting companies.” Whiteness, too, has a third place; in 1993, it was an art institution.

In a paradoxical twist, the Biennial took place only one year before Black American curator Thelma Golden's linchpin exhibition *Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary American Art* (1994–1995), also at the Whitney. The exhibition was framed as “controversial” by Charlie Rose in his 1995 dialogue with Golden on his TV show. The twenty-seven-year-old assistant curator, then a rising star at the Whitney—now the renowned director and chief curator of the famed Studio Museum in Harlem—adroitly addressed the intersections of the exhibition, noting acutely, “Film and televised media is so important to our understanding of representation.”²⁸

The following year, Golden looked back at that moment, writing for *Artforum*: “What would happen if I made an exhibition that completely lived in a world of Black—with a big B—art and artists: uncompromised, unapologetic, uninterested in the mainstream art world?”²⁹ Elizabeth Alexander's 1994 essay on King, included as a text for Golden's groundbreaking exhibition and its accompanying publication, was thereby transformative, critically charting a path forward for the relationship between representations of Black masculinity in mainstream visual culture, and the complexities of viewership as an asserted dilemma of power and extraction. It shows

how the entanglement of race, class, and gender is important to underscore when considering the precariousness of Black life and how this is represented within a discussion of Black virality. In 1992 reporter Paul Reid wrote on King for the *Boston Globe*:

You saw the grainy black and white images of boots being buried in King's prostrate body. The jury saw frame after slow-motion frame—complete with stop action and zoomed-in close-ups of King's virtual lynching ... Just as I can't fight back those photographic images of mutilated Emmett Till ... Those and countless other graphic images of the cancer that eats at this nation haunted my boyhood, my teens, and still haunt me today. Now, thanks to a California jury, I have yet another image to file away.³⁰

Taken together, these, too, are important early studies of memetic Blackness.

In 2014, Black American journalist John Elgon penned a *New York Times* article addressing the murder of eighteen-year-old Michael Brown by police in Ferguson, Missouri: "Michael Brown, 18, due to be buried on Monday, was no angel, with public records and interviews with friends and family revealing both problems and promise in his young life."³¹ Elgon's devastating assessment of Brown as "no angel" makes plain the embedded bias of an anti-Black imagination attempting to grapple with a Black individual's right to live.

Professors João Costa Vargas and Joy A. James, in their essay "Refusing Blackness-as-Victimization: Trayvon Martin and the Black Cyborgs," point out the problem of "presumed innocence," noting that for Black people within a supremacist democratic system it "functions as a probation period," thereby positioning Black bodies (Michael Brown Jr.'s, Trayvon Martin's, Philando Castile's, Emmett Till's) as "liv[ing] on borrowed,"

impossible time [wherein] ... as soon as the presumed innocence is over ... time as a sin-free, threat-free person ends."³²

Vargas and James note that the "impossible" nature of time, as mapped to a Black life, is largely "because this time is not linear," observing that this lack of linearity makes the span of a Black life one that is "not chronological" but rather "ontological."³³ A Black life is conditioned by a being and becoming *into* Blackness, a selfhood that bends and accelerates time. Social and cultural reads of Black childhood as Black adulthood (an act of reading that is also deeply gendered in its own right) deem a body in Black adulthood as somehow defying space and time, supernatural in its standing outside of logic—even, ultimately, as unworthy of life at all.

Thus, childhood as a construct, one that typically maps public empathy to a "right to life," is reversed entirely. Black children, alive or dead, are read as Black adults. George Zimmerman, as part of his apology to the parents of Trayvon Martin stated: "I did not know how old he was. I thought he was a little bit younger than I am."³⁴ Zimmerman was thirty years old at the time; Martin was seventeen. A Black individual who has made it to adulthood is read as an inherent threat—exemplified by Rodney King—one that must be stopped, justifying the punishment of physical death. To call on Christina Sharpe, "living in/the wake"—as in, existing in a society that has been shaped, constituted, and conditioned by the legacy of slavery in America—is a constant re/negotiation that "we, Black people, become the *carriers* of terror, terror's embodiment, and not the primary objects of terror's multiple enactments."³⁵ *In this scenario, is the Black male body even human?*

To better understand why, let us return to philosopher Sylvia Wynter's pioneering essay "No Humans Involved," reflecting on the LAPD classification of "No Humans Involved" (NHI), used to mark crimes against historically marginalized populations.³⁶ Her letter begins:

You may have heard a radio news report which aired briefly during the days after the jury's acquittal of the policemen in the Rodney King beating case. The report stated that public officials of the judicial system of Los Angeles routinely used the acronym N.H.I. to refer to any case involving a breach of the rights of young Black males who belong to the jobless category of the inner city ghettos.

She goes on to note: "[These] genocidal effects [prompt] the incarceration and elimination of young Black males by ostensibly normal, and everyday means." Noting that "NHI" serves as a signifier of an invisible caste system, Wynter inquires, "Where did this classification come from?"³⁷

The terrifying reading of a living Black body as inherently supernatural means, conversely, that a dead Black body is established as normative. This renders trends of memetic Blackness, like "Trayvoning," as purely performative play, a replication of a normative ideal that in its echo signifies the mollification of "terror's embodiment" within a White fantasy. In her scholarship, Zakiyyah Iman Jackson terms this the "plasticization of [B]lack(end) people."³⁸ As evidenced in Holliday's "first viral video," the right to a Black life is read as *counterfactual*—quite literally deemed an impossibility. This fiction is advanced through gamifying Black death via memeified material and reading living Black bodies through a cyborgian filter—that is, as othered from the designation of "human." To make play out of pain numbs the reality of physical violence through the physical reenactment.

In its insistence on an assumed Black figure—with Blackness worn as a conceptual skin to achieve the success of the image—prone on the pavement, we see in Trayvoning a continued lineage from King's arrest, where King's relegation to the ground is a preemptive strike against his survival. Holliday's tape thereby becomes almost a form of xeroxing, making copies of a copy, so much so that at a certain point the original image,

saturated in the transmissive act of imitation, is rendered invisible to its carriers, alien in its mutation.

We see this phenomenon played out further in Nana Kwame Adjei-Brenyah's dystopian short story "Zimmer Land," wherein the author imagines an entertainment-park style game, of the same name, that involves cosplay and participatory historical reenactment of the Trayvon Martin shooting. When a patron of the game playing the role of Zimmerman asks, "What is it you're doing here?," suggesting foul play on behalf of Martin in his animated presence, the protagonist, playing the role of Martin, goes sharply off script, responding: "Living."³⁹

A vertical life, for the Black meme, is thereby the ultimate offense.

On June 17, 2012, the *New York Times* ran an obituary for Rodney King, after his death was ruled an accidental drowning in his swimming pool at home. The *Los Angeles Times* later reported that "on the pool tile, he had inscribed the dates of both the beating, 3/3/91, and the start of the riots, 4/29/92. He had mulled over marking the wall with another number, of those who died during the riot."⁴⁰ He was forty-seven years old. The first line of the obituary reads: "Rodney G. King, whose 1991 videotaped beating by the Los Angeles police became a symbol of the nation's continuing racial tensions."⁴¹ Four years later, on the anniversary of King's LAPD assault, the *Los Angeles Times* ran a headline haunted by Sylvia Wynter's condemnation of the "No Humans Involved" classification: "Rodney King's Daughter Remembers a Human Being, Not a Symbol."⁴² Here we are reminded that the transmogrification of *human* into *symbol* as a systemic strategy of dehumanization within the Black meme is one that endures.