ASSOCIATION OF BLACK ANTHROPOLOGISTS

Social Media, Racial Violence and Confronting the Ensemble of Michael Brown

Tiffany C Cain

I should begin by admitting that I had intended to use this space as a place to speak on fieldwork and other such topics when I left for the Yucatan Peninsula in May. I returned only to find—and morbidly unsurprising—that a different conversation would have to take precedence. Exasperation and anguish frame what follows.

As I began to catch up on the news surrounding the Ferguson shooting upon returning from fieldwork, I found myself collecting and compiling the most striking and the most banal of anecdotes, outcries, unfailing news reports and snide casual commentaries. I added it to my ensemble (re:Fred Moten, “Black Molotin”, 2003) of images, cell phone videos, facebook statuses and twitter feeds, cries and silences, unprocessed feelings around violence, racial injustice, and the meaning of freedom in this country. I began to think of how I took the BART from West Oakland station Jan 2, 2009 descending back into the ordinary (Veena Das, Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary, 2007) to return to work from the holiday the day after Oscar Grant was brutally shot at Fruitvale Station the night before—just two miles from my front door. I remembered how I’d gone with my sisters, who were both living in the Bay area at the time of the shooting, to view Fruitvale Station, while visiting our family in Nebraska. There was only one other person in attendance at the theater and he was a white male who left halfway through the showing.

Social media has done a curious thing for the ensemble of such violence and how we face it. Social media has expanded its reach and yet often also works to constrict the representation and interpretation of its content. Privilege, I've discovered, has become even more apparent in the ways in which images, news, videos, stories of racial violence are not digested; whose social media accounts I consistently find such stories do not populate. I'll illustrate with just one of the hundreds of (virtual ethnographic) anecdotes that have crossed my Facebook feed over the past several weeks concerning the Ferguson shooting.

She writes after sharing a few stories on the Michael Brown shooting:

At one point during sophomore year, I was standing in [...] Plaza, and a girl came up to me asking if I would take a survey for her psychology class. I said okay, and she handed me a clipboard with pictures of people and some questions about my initial reactions to the photos. One of them was of a young black man. I asked her what I was supposed to take from the photo. She said, if you see this person, how would you react to him? I looked back at the photo and asked her if she was serious, and she said yes, she was. So I asked her if she knew who the photo was of, she replied no, that she had just gotten the picture off a google image search. But I recognized the photo right away. It was a photo of Sean Bell, the one where he was leaning into his fiancé’s head, so artists filled out the left side of his face to have a picture to accompany the news articles about the way he was slaughtered when cops shot over 50 bullets at him the day before his wedding. This girl had no idea who he was, to the point that she, and the professor who approved her dumbass experiment had no idea that the “random photo” she chose for her project was not a damn stock photo, but one that was part of the public domain for a tragic reason.

THIS is white privilege.

I never met Sean Bell, but I know his name and his face, and I will for the rest of my life. I still know what Amadou Diallo looked like, and I was EIGHT YEARS OLD when he was murdered. The faces of Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner, Jonathan Ferrell, Renisha McBride, Mike Brown, and others are BURNED into the backs of my corneas. That is yet another burden of being black in America. (all emphasis original; Institutional and personal identifiers have been removed, all permissions gained. August 20, 2014. 128 likes, 1 share, 4 comments)

Melissa Harris-Perry’s homage to the black men that have been brutally killed at an average of twice a week between 2006 and 2012 by a white police officer paint a similar picture. But what is striking about this woman’s story is that, like many of the reminders the ensemble forces us to encounter, even when, like the slave Equiano we believe we are in a better, safer place (Fred Moten, “Knowledge of Freedom,” 2004), we are violated simply because it has been decided that we can be. And we face the hard truth that the burden of remembrance differentiates most strongly those who are privileged enough to never have been affected by the violence of such incredible racism. Is it truly an American Tragedy when a psych student studying race can’t recognize the face of someone who

was brutally murdered because of it? Can the pain and suffering carried through the banality of our lives find relief in the gathering around the exceptional forms of violence that actually make it onto the news? What we find is that no exceptional instance of racial violence in this country ever comes without the laundry list of men and women who have agonized at its hands since slavery. Can the archives of social media help us to mediate the telling of such violence in ways that do not do more violence in their reiterating? Is it that the ensemble has never before been so mass(ive)?

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