Bearing Witness While Black

African Americans, Smartphones, and the New Protest #Journalism

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1

Looking as Rebellion

The Concept of Black Witnessing

Before Eric and Alton and Philando, there was Rodney. Four police officers took turns beating him one night in Los Angeles, in 1991. He put his hands up in a position of surrender several times. He writhed on the ground in agony when their blows landed anyway. Someone screamed during the infamous video. At times, it was unclear whether it was Rodney King or a bystander. As the camera capturing the footage went in and out of focus, the ordeal lasted eight minutes and eight seconds on film.[1] I remember watching the video with my parents as it looped on news broadcasts. I was nine years old. My younger brother was turning seven in two days.

"Jesus," I remember my father whispering. Something about the way he said it gave me pause. It was as if my dad was sending a prayer through our television to a man we did not know. I remember asking my father if he was going to be sick. He looked nauseous. He did not answer me. I cannot tell you what my Grenadian dad was thinking at that moment. At nine years old, I knew nothing of post-colonialism, or about the myriad, warring identities that many Afro-Caribbean people feel when they settle in the United States. We had not yet had the conversation I would launch many years later as a college student, when I asked him why he always referred to the West Indies as "back *home*." It was a conversation that highlighted perhaps how my father never felt settled in the United States, even though he had made a family and a life here.

As we watched the assault, my dad said, "Back *home* they don't do these things to people." I do not remember if I responded to him. I do recall thinking that here—in the United States, in our modest house, in Prince George's County, Maryland—this *was* home. This was safety. There was no "back" for me. It would be many years before Ta-Nehisi Coates would write *Between the World and Me*, which put the Prince George's County police department on the map as one of the most brutal, anti-black forces in the nation. My father must have been living with those realities long before Coates' book

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though. That day, as we watched the billy clubs swing upon Rodney King, my father winced, but he never looked away. I can recall clearly a sudden wave of fear gripping me as I watched the news clips. My mind was beginning to do nine-year-old calculus. If this place, the United States, was home; and if, in the United States, the police beat someone who looked like Rodney King so savagely; and if my father was black like Rodney King, then . . . I did not say these words, of course. No one in the family was speaking as we watched. I remember scooting closer to my father on the couch, until I was under his arm. I was under his arm again, a year later, as I watched the city of Los Angeles burning on television. Three of the four police officers were acquitted, my father explained. The jury could not reach a verdict on the last officer. I remember how my father spat out the words. It was a quiet rage, but it was there. I remember asking my dad why everyone was so angry. People who looked like me were yelling at the news cameras. Some were crying. It was my turn to feel queasy.

"Because they had proof, but no one *cared*," my father said flatly.

How could it be that this proof of which my dad spoke—this video evidence—was enough of a smoking gun for black people but not enough to convict the officers involved? Moreover, why did black pockets of Los Angeles go up in flames after its residents saw the video, while the rest of the city (and nation) clucked its tongue, wondering aloud how "those people" could destroy their own neighborhoods? These are the questions I get most often when I lecture about black witnessing. Nearly 30 years after the Rodney King tape, the average onlooker still has a very difficult time understanding how African Americans can go from viewing video evidence of police brutality to feeling compelled to riot. Perhaps even fewer people can fathom why someone would put themselves in an officer's literal crosshairs to record damning footage. As a nation we have, perhaps, become so accustomed to viewing these spectacles as sudden eruptions of violence and mayhem in a black community, rather than as a climactic moment that has been building over decades of abuse at the hands of its police. As a former full-time journalist, I sighed every time I saw cable television news loop images of fire and brimstone in Ferguson in 2014, after police killed Michael Brown, or in Baltimore in 2015, after Freddie Gray's death. I wanted someone on-air to describe instead how black people experience police brutality, and video proof of it, differently from non-black people. How African Americans, like

my father in 1991, see themselves in the bodies of the battered. I wanted the news pundits to say bearing witness while black is a specific kind of media witnessing. It is as networked, collective, and communal as the South African philosophy of Ubuntu, which states, "I am because *we* are." Black witnessing carries moral, legal, and even spiritual weight. I grew tired of yelling all of this at my television. So, I wrote this book. I offer a new way of talking about the "looking" that African Americans do through news media. Bearing witness while black—or black witnessing, as I call it interchangeably—needs its own scholarly categorization. It involves more than simply observing tragic images on TV or online. It is more complicated than picking up a smartphone and pressing "record" at the right time. When most African Americans view fatal police shooting videos, something stirs at a cellular level. They want to *do* something with what they just saw. And they want to link it to similar narratives they may have seen before. In this manner, black witnessing is reflexive, yet reflective. It despairs, but it is enraged too. Black witnessing is not your average gaze. Before now though, we have lumped it in with mere "media witnessing." Here is why this terminology does not work any longer.

What is Media Witnessing?

Paul Frosh and Amit Pinchevski claimed that the term "media witnessing" seems redundant at first glance since every act of witnessing is mediated in some way.[2] At the most basic level, one person offers an account of events to another person who was not there. In journalism, this process is scalable so that one person can tell a story to mass audiences. Frosh and Pinchevski explained that since news production involves three possible processes, this is where simplistic definitions of media witnessing begin to disintegrate. They wrote "[Media witnessing] refers simultaneously to . . . witnesses *in* the media, witnessing *by* the media, and witnessing *through* the media."[3] In the instance of the Philando Castile killing, journalists could interview eyewitnesses to the shooting and quote them in a story; journalists could serve as primary witnesses themselves; or anyone else could use media production tools to bear witness without a professional journalist as an intermediary, like Diamond Reynolds did when she livestreamed the tragedy. Frosh and Pinchevski explained further that two historic events created two distinct categories of witnesses: the authoritative, Holocaust-style witness who saw atrocities firsthand and lived to tell about it, and the distant television

viewer witnesses of September 11, 2001, who were not in New York when terrorists flew planes into the World Trade Center but remember seeing the events recounted *through* the media. The September 11 witnesses are just as authoritative as Holocaust witnesses, Frosh and Pinchevski insisted, since they contribute to the collective memory of that day.

Not all scholars agree that distant witnessing is just as effective as firsthand viewing, though. John Durham Peters has argued that being present matters. He wrote: "The copy, like hearsay, is indefinitely repeatable; the event is singular, and its witnesses are forever irreplaceable in their privileged relation to it."[4] Peters proposed that we define witnessing on a continuum, in four different ways: being there, live transmission, historicity, and recording. Being there is the strongest kind of witnessing, since it means that one was a part of an assembled audience, such as a concert, game, or theater. Live transmission is the next strongest form of witnessing, since it describes an audience that was part of a simultaneous broadcast. Historicity refers to witnesses who visit a museum or a shrine, where events happened long ago in the same spot, but not necessarily during the lifetime of the witness. Lastly, a recording, presented as a book, CD or video, is the weakest form of witnessing, Peters said, since the viewer does not have to occupy the same space and time as the original event.

Both definitions of media witnessing—as either a tripartite bundle of accounts *by, of*, or *through* the media or a quadripartite matrix divided along planes of space and time—have provided valuable frameworks for media scholars to explain the works of citizen journalists who have reported the tsunami that rocked South East Asia in 2004;[5] the Virginia Tech massacre of 2007;[6] or the shooting of Iranian activist Neda Agha-Soltan in 2009.[7] These frames reach their epistemological limits when studying the Black Lives Matter Movement, though. The Frosh-Pinchevski model does not help us understand why black people are more likely to engage in either frontline or distant witnessing of police brutality than other ethnic groups. Surely, police kill unarmed white people. Why does this imagery fail to proliferate the media landscape as much as the videos of brutality against people of color do? Likewise, Peters' argument—that recording is the weakest form of witnessing—seems to fall apart when one considers the thousands of international Black Lives Matter protesters who were not present to view Michael Brown's death firsthand, but still feel as if they did see it—so powerfully that they took up picket signs in the slain teen's defense. We need a new definition, then, for the kinds of looking that African Americans do—especially during times of crisis.

The Three Elements of Black Witnessing

After many months of observing African Americans' responses to the highly publicized killings of unarmed black men, women, and children in 2014, I began to see some patterns. African Americans wanted—and, perhaps, even needed—to see a firsthand account of what happened in each fresh case study of untimely death. On Facebook timelines and in YouTube comments sections, I noticed that African Americans were dismissive of official police or media reports. They wanted video evidence that came directly from the community itself. I noticed also that African Americans on my social media timelines used various platforms to direct audiences to original videos or blog posts about uprisings in Ferguson, Baltimore, and beyond. Twitter was most popular. It became a news wire service of sorts. Lastly, I saw subgroups of African Americans finding each other on Twitter. I observed cliques of black journalists who worked for legacy media outlets talking to each other. I saw black activists working across different allied organizations collaborating. I saw black people who did not support the movement arguing with those who did.

From all of my lurking, I noted three recurring observations. Black witnessing: (1) assumes an investigative editorial stance to advocate for African American civil rights; (2) co-opts racialized online spaces to serve as its ad-hoc news distribution service; and (3) relies on interlocking black public spheres, which are endowed with varying levels of political agency, to engage diverse audiences. Modern black witnesses can be on the frontline like Feidin Santana was in 2015. Santana filmed Michael Slager (a white police officer) shoot Walter Scott (an unarmed black man) in the back, in North Charleston, South Carolina. Modern black witnesses can be distant witnesses too, who are galvanized to action after viewing video from the frontlines. Distant witnesses are the thousands of people who blocked the Brooklyn Bridge in New York after the cellphone footage of Eric Garner's fatal encounter with the city's police department went viral in late 2014.[8] Three established communication theories support my suggested characteristics of black witnessing. First, I offer a summary of media witnessing during and after the Jewish Holocaust, to illustrate why we should view black witnessing through a similar, ethnocentric frame. Then, I explain how the rise of so-called Black Twitter gave black witnesses an ideal news distribution outlet. Lastly, I explain how three types of black public spheres circulate the news that black witnesses create. By braiding these three established

media studies concepts, I offer a new way of thinking about contemporary black looking. This will provide our theoretical framework through the rest of the book, helping us to situate the activists as conscious agents of protest journalism.

The "Crisis of Witnessing" and its Ethnocentrisms

The notion of "bearing witness" has become so intertwined with evidence of Jewish persecution that the Anti-Defamation League trademarked the phrase in 1996 for a national educational campaign about the Holocaust.[9] Historically, bearing witness to the Holocaust meant becoming a martyr, for only the people who died from the atrocities wrought upon them witnessed the entire narrative arc of the tragedy—from the initial encounter with the oppressor on to death. Within this paradigm it is perhaps easy to understand then, why the Greek word for "witness" is *mártys*. While martyrs are to be revered, their deaths still leave us with incomplete narratives. Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub called this extermination of voices the "crisis of witnessing."[10] Since none but those who died in the Holocaust can serve as the complete witnesses—documenting their capture and their death—we are left with the testimonies of the survivors. In the Jewish tradition of witnessing, survivors speak to commemorate the slain and to verify that atrocities transpired. In doing so, Jewish witnesses create a long, thematic thread of narrative that links similar human rights violations to one another throughout history, rather than regarding each new violation as an isolated incident. The story of atrocities committed against black people could benefit from similar framing. Consider, for example, the October 27, 2018, mass shooting at a Pennsylvania synagogue. The gunman, Robert Bowers, posted anti-Semitic statements on many online sites before killing 11 worshippers during the Saturday morning Shabbat service. According to the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), Bowers, 46, wrote: "They're committing genocide to my people. I just want to kill Jews." Leaders in the Jewish community channeled the crisis of witnessing in their responses to the tragedy. Israeli Diaspora Affairs Minister Naftali Bennett told CNN, for example: "Nearly 80 years since Kristallnacht, when the Jews of Europe perished in the flames of their houses of worship, one thing is clear: Anti-Semitism, Jew-hating, is not a distant memory. It's not a thing of the past, nor a chapter in the history books. It is a very real threat." The same CNN story situated Bennett's comments

alongside a frightening statistic: In 2017, anti-Semitic incidents in the United States surged nearly 60 percent, according to the Anti-Defamation League.[11]

By presenting the legacy of anti-Semitism as a clear and present danger to Jews living in the United States today, the community has done an excellent job of never letting the country forget how past horrors can be revived. How hate speech can escalate to hate crimes, and even genocide, if left unchecked. African Americans are no strangers to these realities, yet their legacy of subjugation has not been framed historically as a Holocaust. Even though the bones of millions of unnamed Africans line the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean—creating a hidden trail of slave ship trade routes. Even though southern trees bore "strange fruit"—lynching the freed descendants of those who survived the slave ships, cotton fields, and sugar cane plantations. Even though the lynching and the segregation morphed too—twisting into mass incarceration for those on the inside and police brutality for those left on the outside. This spirit of ongoing domestic terror against black people mutated, you see, as the United States grew older. And so we must frame the violence that has occurred—and continues to occur—against black bodies just as Jewish communities do: as long and storied legacies of persecution. For it is only then that we can observe what the long arc of anti-black racism looks like; how it shape-shifts and becomes more impervious to its own eradication, like a virus that has become resistant to a bevy of powerful antibiotics. This is the work I saw black witnesses do in 2014.

When protestors in Ferguson took to the streets to protest the killing of Michael Brown, for example, they used mobile devices and social media to circulate familiar visual tropes that were associated commonly with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. They were calling on the long dead to help frame the circumstances surrounding the newly departed. In one popular photo an African-American man held a poster that read, "I <u>am</u> a man."[12] This slogan has deep historic roots in the black community.[13] On February 1, 1968, two black sanitation workers in Memphis were crushed to death by a malfunctioning garbage truck. Despite public appeals from colleagues to address the unsafe working conditions for blacks in the industry, the city's white leadership remained silent. Twelve days later, 1,300 black men from the Memphis Department of Public Works went on strike. They dressed in their Sunday best and wielded posters that read: "I <u>am</u> a man." This declaration of black masculinity attracted the attention of Dr. King and other local leaders of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), who joined the strike.[14] King traveled to Memphis to support the

effort in February 1968 and settled in for what he believed would be a long fight. About two months into the campaign, on April 3, 1968, he told the weary group of men: "Like anybody, I would like to live a long life—longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now . . . I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land."[15] The next day, as King was leaving the Lorraine Motel for dinner, he was shot on the balcony. When modern protestors in Ferguson carry the "I am a man" posters, they invoke the crisis of King bearing witness, for he is no more able to recount his own death than Michael Brown. Additionally, an Afrocentric crisis of witnessing frame helps explain why the distant black witness in Ferguson, who may not have seen officer Darren Wilson shoot Michael Brown, feels compelled still to behave much like a Holocaust survivor, bearing witness to speak for the slain.

In another contemporary example, African American Ferguson protestors regularly held up their fists in the traditional symbolic gesture of the Black Power Movement of decades past. Many African Americans remember it as the official salute of the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense.[16] In the same year that King was assassinated, Tommie Smith and John Carlos raised their fists at the 1968 Mexico Olympic Games as they accepted their medals. They later told journalists that they were protesting racism.[17] According to an October 17, 1968, BBC report, Smith said: "We are black and we are proud of being black. Black America will understand what we did tonight." Smith and Carlos were blacklisted for their protest for the rest of their lives. Still, they were right: Black America *did* understand what they did. And so the symbol, of the raised fist, has endured.

Another example of how black witnessing very closely resembles Jewish witnessing, by linking narrative threads of atrocity throughout history, is through the invocation of Emmett Till. Till, a black teenager from Chicago, was murdered in 1955 for allegedly flirting with a white woman in a Mississippi convenience store. Till was visiting family from the North at the time, and is said to have not known the extent of Southern-style racism. Till's killers, Roy Bryant and his half-brother J.W. Milam, both were white. Bryant and Milam beat Till, shot him, and then tied barbed wire and a 75 pound fan around his neck. The men cast his body into Mississippi's Tallahatchie River, likely watching it sink to the bottom. The *New York Times* reported: "A jury of twelve white neighbors of the defendants reached the verdict after one hour and five minutes of deliberations." A juror told the *Times* "If we hadn't stopped to drink pop it wouldn't have took that long."[18] Bryant and

Milam later granted *Look* magazine exclusive interviews about how they killed the boy.[19]

Elizabeth Alexander has written extensively about black witnesses' collective memory of viewing Till's corpse, in an effort to explain why today's black tales of injustice tend to begin with him.[20] She cited lines from the late boxer Muhammad Ali's autobiography, in which he recounted seeing the pictures of a maimed Till for the first time. He recalled: "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."[21] Similarly, Charlyne Hunter-Gault, a celebrated black journalist, explained: "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. . . . Pictures of his limp, water soaked 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."[22]

Fifty years after Till's murder, Devin Allen invoked his spirit still in a political fashion choice. Allen's amateur photographs of Baltimore's Freddie Gray uprisings in 2015 made the cover of *TIME* magazine that April.[23] In a posed picture, the celebrated black witness is wearing a T-shirt that lists slain black men who died at the hands of white supremacist vigilantes or law enforcement officers. The list begins with Till and ends with an ellipsis, suggesting that more names are to follow.[24] Former U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder had a similar message in November 2014, after St. Louis officials announced they would not indict Officer Darren Wilson on any charges for killing Michael Brown. Holder said at a tree planting ceremony in Washington, DC: "The struggle goes on. . . . There is an enduring legacy that Emmett Till has left with us that we still have to confront as a nation."[25] By invoking Till, Holder recognized the black witnessing tradition of beginning the narrative thread of deadly, anti-black racism with the Chicago teenager and reminded us that this problem is not new.

In all of these examples—from the resurrected Civil Rights Movement protest posters, to the raised fists of the Black Power era, to the invocation of Emmett Till—black witnessing makes a concerted effort to weave a historic thread between various eras of black trauma and activism. Just as the Jewish Holocaust ended, yet anti-Semitism endures, so too did slavery and Jim Crow end, yet anti-black racism endures. Just as new tragedies against Jewish bodies trigger the community to reflect on its history of persecution,

the recurring disregard for black life at the hands of police compels black witnesses to stand in the gap too; especially for those who are no longer here to speak for themselves. This crisis of witnessing—with its urgency and its memorial—is the same.

The "Weighty Baggage"

Black witnesses often put their bodies and their future safety at risk to film police brutality. This martyr mindset stems from what John Durham Peters calls, "weighty baggage." He wrote "the baggage has three main interrelated sources: law, theology, and atrocity."[26] In law, the witness is a privileged source of information upon which a judgment will be based. When one takes the stand to testify, one swears an oath to God to be truthful or else risk punishment. In Christianity, early witnesses became martyrs when they revealed their faith. Additionally, witnessing in the Christian tradition brought with it sacred responsibility as one of the Ten Commandments requires "Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor."[27] In terms of atrocity, witnessing is a form of connective tissue among black people that transcends place. Although contemporary scholars of media witnessing often argue that cellphone videography places too much distance between the viewer and the victim, African Americans of any socioeconomic class tend to see themselves in the battered body of another black person in these kinds of footage. The line blurs between viewer and victim.[28] It is what I felt and knew at nine years old while watching the Rodney King video: that my African American dad and brother were just as vulnerable to police brutality as King—even in our relative affluence. And I knew this, years before the Boston police racially profiled Harvard University professor Henry Louis Gates Jr., who is black, at his own home in 2009.[29]

When whites see the videos of Eric Garner, Walter Scott, or Freddie Gray being brutalized, however, they may be able to maintain a safe amount of narrative space. They do not carry the weighty baggage of blackness, so they may not understand why seeing such videos makes some black people want to riot. Elizabeth Alexander found evidence of weighty baggage in her analysis of black peoples' reactions to the 1992 acquittals of the four officers who beat Rodney King. One black distant witness said, "When I saw the Rodney King video I thought of myself laying on the ground and getting beat." Another black distant witness said, "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."[30]

This weightiness and anguish extends to other persons of color too. This is how allies of black people have become black witnesses too—even if they are not ethnically classified as such.

Consider that George Holliday, who filmed the Rodney King beating in 1991, is Latino. Ramsey Orta, who filmed his friend Eric Garner being choked to death by police in 2014, is Latino. Abdullah Muflahi, who filmed one of the five existing videos of Alton Sterling's last moments in Baton Rouge in 2016, is Yemeni. In all of these situations, the proximity to the victim's blackness conferred a state of being "socially blackened," a term coined by sociologist Patricia Hill Collins:

> Blackening typically means being pushed down a social scale of some kind. . . . People who are Latino, or Middle-Eastern, or women, or dressed poorly, or who either are out of their whitening context or do not explicitly whiten themselves are routinely ignored by people in positions of power and authority and can even be rendered invisible.[31]

This social blackening causes some non-black witnesses to behave just like black witnesses. They understand very quickly that they, too, are vulnerable to police brutality. Moreover, they understand that they need to bear witness to provide proof. They intercede for the victims, therefore, with weighty baggage. Muflahi said of his filming of the Alton Sterling shooting, for example: "As soon as I finished the video, I put my phone in my pocket. I knew they [police] would take it from me, if they knew I had it. . . . So I kept this video for myself. Otherwise, what proof do I have?"[32]

Proof. It is what my father told me the jurors in Los Angeles had in the 1992 King case, yet ignored. Still, black people and their allies have continued to record—even if they could not be sure that it would bring justice. Just as survivors of the Jewish Holocaust have been compelled to bear witness to atrocity—even though it would not bring back loved ones and even though doing so would not hold all those responsible for the Holocaust accountable for their crimes—black people are using cellphones to keep a record too. Unlike Holocaust survivors, who fled persecution and found asylum in foreign lands, however, groups of repressed blacks in the 21st-century United States have nowhere else to go. There is no *back home* for them. This

is home. Black witnessing happens, then, in real-time on U.S. soil. As with all witnessing, a medium must carry the message.

The Leverage of Black Twitter as a News Outlet

I JUST SAW SOMEONE DIE OMFG

With these six words, Twitter user @TheePharaoh, also known as Emanuel Freeman, became a frontline black witness. Just after 12 PM on Saturday, August 9, 2014, he tweeted live:

Im about to hyperventilate
@allovevie the police just shot someone dead in front of my crib yo[33]

His next tweet was a photo of Michael Brown lying in the street. An officer who appeared to be Darren Wilson, who was identified later as Brown's killer, stood over his body. Freeman kept tweeting. He described the wails of Brown's mother. He posted another picture of an unidentified officer carrying a rifle. By Sunday, Freeman thanked his Twitter followers for their concern for his safety. By the following Wednesday, he wrote, "I AM DONE TWEETING ABOUT THE SITUATION."[34] Freeman never granted an official interview to legacy media outlets to recount what he witnessed. He did not have to; he had Black Twitter. In Ferguson, Baltimore, and beyond, African Americans have adopted Twitter as their social networking platform of choice for conveying breaking news. Oftentimes, they use the platform to bypass legacy media outlets altogether, as Freeman did, to break news. In other examples, they share what they know about a developing police brutality case in the face of incorrect mainstream reports. None of this, I imagine, is what Twitter's creators had in mind for the social network.

Twitter launched in March 2006, after all, with the simple question: "What are you doing?" In 140 characters or less, everyday people shared what they observed about the world around them and how they perceived themselves in it. Users alternated often between information sources and information seekers in a dynamic system of both strong and loose ties—that is, a network of people they knew well in real life and people they did not know at all.[35] The platform grew rapidly after its inception. The so-called Twitterverse increased 1,382 percent in one year, from 475,000 unique visitors in February

2008 to 7 million in February 2009, making it one of the fastest growing websites of its time. By June 2010, that number had climbed to 28 million unique visitors.[36] While Twitter use exploded, cellphone ownership proliferated alongside it. When Twitter launched in 2006 neither Apple's iPhone nor Samsung's Galaxy series of smartphones had debuted, but 66 percent of all Americans owned a basic cellphone of some kind. When Twitter announced its surge in users in 2010, 85 percent of Americans owned a cellphone. As of 2018, the market is nearly saturated, with 99 percent cellphone ownership among all Americans.[37]

One of the reasons Twitter grew so fast among communities of color, however, was because it could be used easily on mobile devices, and because mobile devices were the primary way that working class African American and Latinx communities accessed the Internet. In 2013—the year the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag was born—the Pew Research Center reported that 16 percent of Latinx youth and 10 percent of black youth used smartphones to access the Internet every day, while only 6 percent of white youth did so.[38] Smartphones and social media lowered the barrier of entry for news production through Twitter, so that any person of color with a mobile device and a WIFI connection could create and disseminate stories throughout a vast network. For African Americans, that network was dubbed, eventually, Black Twitter. Blogger Choire Sicha coined this term in his 2009 post, "What Were Black People Talking About on Twitter Last Night." Sicha wrote, "At the risk of getting randomly harshed on by the Internet, I cannot keep quiet about my obsession with Late Night Black People Twitter, an obsession I know some of you other white people share, because it is awesome."[39]

Not everyone agreed, however, that black participation was welcome on Twitter. A technology blogger, Nick Douglas, recalled that a white colleague lamented to him: "These people don't have real Twitter friends. So they all respond to trending topics. And that's the game, that's how they use Twitter."[40] Journalist Farhad Manjoo delved deeper when he penned the controversial *Slate* piece in 2010, "How Black People Use Twitter," which featured an illustration of Twitter's logo bird with brown feathers instead of its customary blue plumage, donning a hip-hop-style athletic cap. Manjoo posed this litany of questions about Black Twitter:

> Are black people participating in these types of conversations more often than nonblacks? Are other identifiable groups starting similar kinds of

> hashtags, but it's only those initiated by African-Americans that are hitting the trending topics list? If that's true, what is it about the way black people use Twitter that makes their conversations so popular?[41]

In October 2015, I interviewed Dr. Meredith D. Clark, who has helped pioneer Black Twitter studies in academic spaces. At the time of our chat, Clark was one of only a handful of scholars in the United States writing about the platform's lively subgroup. She had completed her doctoral dissertation on the phenomenon in 2014 and entitled it cleverly: "To tweet our own cause." I recognized the title immediately as a play on the slogan of the first-ever black newspaper: "We wish to plead our own cause." What heritage did the Black Twitter of today share with *Freedom's Journal*, which was founded in 1827 though? Clark explained that members of Black Twitter were tired of seeing mainstream journalists get it wrong. Like black witnesses before them, the Black Twitter community did not want an "as told to" version of their lives portrayed in the news, she said. They wanted to participate in the storytelling process.

Clark found that Black Twitter users commonly eased into the platform's sub-network in six steps. First, black users self-selected, or made a conscious decision to participate in Black Twitter conversations. Second, users identified themselves publicly on the platform as black. Most users did this by posting a picture of themselves as avatars, instead of photos of an inanimate object, cartoon, or some other vague image. Third, black users "performed" their race by using certain bona fides, such as language choices and popular culture references, to signal their belonging to the group. Fourth, black users deployed black hashtags or "blacktags," as scholar Sanjay Sharma has called them.[42] This signaled further to the group that the black user added to nascent discourse on a culturally relevant topic. Fifth, the user reaffirmed other members by using culturally resonant language. This is the digital version of call and response, or the online equivalent of a black congregation telling its pastor to "Preach!" Lastly, black users solidified their membership in the Black Twitter subgroup when their narratives affected social change. Creators of trending blacktags often noted in their Twitter biographies that they were the originator of it, to avoid cultural erasure and to establish digital credibility. Overall, Clark said, Black Twitter is a "multi-level community and network building process."[43] It should be noted that Black Twitter is not monolithic though. Not all black users comprise Black Twitter. Similarly, not all Black Twitter in-group members share the same ideologies. However,

many prominent black witnesses who have garnered national recognition for their coverage of the Black Lives Matter Movement are part of Black Twitter. As such, they create an ad hoc news outlet that breaks news and supplies updates in real time, rivaling some of the most time-honored legacy media. They achieve this by harnessing the power of interlocking layers of the black public sphere.

The Black Public Sphere

I want to add one more caveat to our current conceptualization of bearing witness while black. Already, I have explained how weighty baggage and the desire to intercede for the dead creates an investigative and advocacy-based editorial stance for many black witnesses. Moreover, I have explained why numerous African American activists chose Twitter to be their news distribution tool during the Black Lives Matter movement—especially among subgroups of black people who relied on their cellphone most to access the Internet. What I have not mentioned yet, however, is who the target audiences for all of this Black Twitter news production might be. Truly, black people are using smartphones to create video evidence for each other—especially in the instances of documenting excessive police force. Yet African Americans are making these videos for external audiences too. They want to set the record straight in many cases. Feidin Santana, for example, did not release his exclusive footage of Walter Scott's last moments until he heard a local news outlet report the official lie from the North Charleston police: that Officer Michael Slager shot Scott because he went for his Taser.[44] Similarly, in the case of the Alton Sterling killing in Baton Rouge, cellphone video showed two white police officers wrestling the handcuffed black man to the ground before shooting him in the back several times. Arthur Reed, the black witness who released the fatal exchange to the press, told the *New York Times* that he decided to do so after hearing official news reports in which the police said Sterling reached for a gun. Reed said: "We don't have to beg the media to come and report on the stories. We can put it out on social media now, and the story gets told."[45] Told to whom, though, exactly? Is there one public sphere, or many?

Jürgen Habermas, a philosopher and sociologist, imagined the public sphere as a physical place where men met to discuss matters of political significance. In salons and coffeehouses across late 17th-century Great Britain

and 18th-century France, Habermas proposed that dialogue between ordinary people, away from the prying eyes of the state, had the power to shape democracies. Habermas fancied these dignified exchanges as essential to an engaged, civil society.[46] Numerous scholars have challenged Habermas's theory on the basis that it is Eurocentric,[47,48,49] and excludes women,[50,51] people of color,[52,53] and members of the working class. Nancy Fraser wrote perhaps the most famous refutation to Habermas, asserting "[T]he bourgeois conception of the public sphere, as described by Habermas, is not adequate for the critique of the limits of actually existing democracy in late capitalist societies."[54] Instead, she suggests that scholars consider a "multiplicity of publics."[55] African-American scholars built on this idea by proposing a new ethnocentric theory in 1995, when they penned the anthology, *The Black Public Sphere*. In the introduction to the text, its 16 authors asserted:

> The black public sphere—as a critical social imaginary—does not centrally rely on the world of magazines and coffee shops, salons and highbrow tracts. It draws energy from the vernacular practices of street talk and new musics, radio shows and church voices, entrepreneurship and circulation.[56]

By this definition we can consider today's black public sphere as a place where its members connect in virtual and physical spaces around the world. In this manner, Black Twitter is as much a part of the black public sphere as black "barbershops, bibles and BET [Black Entertainment Television]."[57] As straightforward as both definitions may seem, there are several theoretical conditions to consider when we are analyzing black witnessing from within this frame. First, we should note that not all black public spheres are readily visible. Second, not all former loci of black debate continue to serve as effective means of communication. Lastly, to complicate matters further, the black public sphere does not comprise all black people. There are subgroups even within this subgroup, which subjects some black witnesses (such as black members of the LGBTQ community, for example) to be marginalized further still.

Catherine Squires addressed these problems by considering three types of subaltern black spheres: the enclave, the counterpublic, and the satellite. She argued that we should not think of multiple, coexisting spheres merely as counterpublics that are based on a shared marginal identity, such as "people of color, women, homosexuals, religious minorities, and immigrant groups" that have coalesced as a response to exclusionary politics.[58] Instead she wrote

we should classify a black subgroup by the political climate in which it originated, its members' willingness to engage in dialogues with the dominant public, and its members' agency to create media resources. For these reasons, I use Squires' definitions of black subaltern public spheres to frame the black witnesses' approaches to communication.

The enclave. Let us start with the idea that not all black counterpublics are readily visible. Melissa Harris-Perry has explained:

> At the turn of the century [W.E.B.] Du Bois described black life as an existence that occurred behind a veil. He understood that when white Americans forcibly separated themselves from blacks, they lowered a dark shroud between the races that allowed a certain covert reality for African Americans to operate beyond the reach of whites.[59]

Du Bois builds upon this idea of the veil in *The Souls of Black Folk*. He wrote:

> It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.[60]

This psychological battle that black people face, even today, forced much of the black public sphere, during America's infancy, to exist within an enclave. The enclave is a safe space that is hidden from the view of the oppressor. Its members often possess "few material, political, legal, or media resources," yet desire to "preserve culture, foster resistance [and] create strategies of the future," Squires wrote.[61] An example of such a black public sphere would be African Americans who lived through slavery. Since slaves lived under the watchful eyes of their overseers and plantation owners, they either had to code their discourse about fleeing to freedom in song or meet privately. Free blacks in the North formed enclaves too, battling slavery by forming abolitionist groups.[62] Squires has explained that even as blacks gained more political clout in the United States, enclaves remained essential because they provided "independent spaces to retreat to in times of need or during negotiations with outsiders."[63] This explains why the enclaved black public sphere structure can be found today still, within the walls of the Historically Black

College or University (HBCU),[64] the "Divine Nine" black fraternities or sororities,[65] or within black professional organizations, such as the National Association of Black Journalists.[66]

The counterpublic. Whereas the enclave model of the black public sphere seeks to shelter its participants from the volatile outside world, the counterpublic deliberately ventures "outside of safe, enclave spaces to argue against dominant conceptions of the group and to describe group interests," Squires has explained.[67] While intense oppression gave birth to the enclave, counterpublics emerged because some measure of subjugation subsided, and the oppressed group gained more resources. This emboldened black public sphere then created protest rhetoric and facilitated increased communication between the marginalized and the powerful. The goals of this form of black public sphere are to foster resistance, create coalitions with other marginalized groups, test arguments and strategies for reform in wider publics, and persuade outsiders to change their viewpoints. Members of a black counterpublic often retreat to enclaves, such as the black church, during times of negotiation or strategizing. During the 2014 uprisings in Ferguson, for example, Black Lives Matter activists protested in front of military tanks, yet regrouped inside St. John's United Church of Christ in North St. Louis.[68]

In addition to the protestors, the counterpublic includes frontline cellphone witnesses when they share their footage. They are carrying reports from enclaves to the mainstream to advance change, oftentimes. We see this clearly in the instance of Feidin Santana, who literally shared his footage of Walter Scott with a friend in a black barbershop before he made the decision to turn it over to Scott's family. The black barbershop, which is affectionately called "the black man's country club," was where Santana worked.[69] It was also where he had formed many of his friendships. As an immigrant from the Dominican Republic, he did not have any family in North Charleston. The barbers were his family. Santana's brief departure from that safe space signaled that the promise of justice outweighed the danger he was exposing himself to by leaving the enclave. The counterpublic model of the black public sphere demands that someone must be brave enough to do this. It is what galvanizes distant witnesses and starts a conversation with the mainstream.

The satellite. Squires' final black public sphere type is the satellite, which makes limited attempts to engage with the dominant public sphere. The satellite is often defiant, separatist, and, in some cases, extremist. Squires offers as an example the Nation of Islam. Since its establishment in 1930, the organization has urged blacks to form an independent, self-sustaining state,

where reliance upon the government is unnecessary.[70] The Nation of Islam publishes an independent newspaper, the *Final Call*. On the rare occasion that the Nation of Islam ventures into the counterpublic model to challenge the dominant public, it does so with grand displays of racial solidarity, such as the Million Man March in 1995, or with controversial rhetoric through one central voice, such as Louis Farrakhan.[71]

The paradigm of the satellite is intriguing in that it does not place its members in a position of imagined inferiority. In the counterpublic model, Squires argued, "Even when African Americans use the speech norms and institutions of the dominant white public, white perceptions of racial difference may derail black attempts at negotiation." Black spokespersons may be "considered exceptional and not representative of the skills and character of the masses."[72] For this reason, the counterpublic model bears a paradox in that it simultaneously reinforces and challenges myths of black inferiority. Whereas the black counterpublic comes with its proverbial hat (or bullhorn) in its hand, asking the dominant public sphere to make a compromise, the black satellite does not enable the dominant public sphere to exert this form of symbolic leverage over its head: to negotiate is to recognize that the dominant public sphere is more powerful. On the other hand, the satellite misses the opportunity to expose its message to more potential supporters by not engaging publicly. The prolonged satellite model also can be ineffective because it breeds internal bullying and groupthink. If a black witness within the satellite model participates in Black Twitter, for example, does he have to adhere to all of the beliefs of the satellite while engaging publicly, lest the satellite's credibility be threatened? This is an important question, considering the Nation of Islam once silenced Malcolm X from speaking to the press for 90 days after he claimed that the assassination of President John F. Kennedy was a karmic response to centuries of white-on-black violence.[73]

Triangulating Theories

In the 1990s, theories of media witnessing involved either a tripartite bundle of accounts by, of and through the media, or a quadripartite matrix that was divided along planes of space and time, where "being there" mattered more than viewing a reproduced copy of the event. Our current political climate requires an Afrocentric theory of media witnessing though. I claimed, therefore, that black witnessing has three characteristics: (1) it assumes an

investigative editorial stance to advocate for African American civil rights; (2) it co-opts racialized online spaces to serve as its ad-hoc news wire; and (3) it relies on interlocking black public spheres, which are endowed with varying levels of political agency, to engage diverse audiences. When we talk about black witnessing with these three characteristics in mind, in the context of recording police brutality especially, it is important to consider that we do so at the risk of engaging in technological determinism. My journalism students often ask me, for example, if smartphones alone explain why fatal police shootings of unarmed African Americans now make headline news. I explain that bearing witness while black actually has deeper roots. I tell them that before Feidin Santana filmed Walter Scott, before Arthur Reed released the Alton Sterling video, and before Diamond Reynolds livestreamed the killing of Philando Castile, historic black figures like Ida B. Wells and Frederick Douglass looked too. And what they saw was monstrous.

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Chapter 2

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