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Mobilizing Images of Black Pain and Death through Digital Media: Visual Claims to Collective Identity After “I Can’t Breathe”

Aryn Kelly

University of South Florida, arynmk1411@gmail.com

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Mobilizing Images of Black Pain and Death through Digital Media: Visual Claims to Collective
Identity After “I Can’t Breathe”

by

Aryn Kelly

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University of South Florida

Major Professor: Maria Cizmic, Ph.D.
Todd Jurgess, Ph.D.
Amy Rust, Ph.D.
Aisha Durham, Ph.D.

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Table of Contents

Abstract.....	ii
Mobilizing Images of Black Pain and Death through Digital Media: Visual Claims to Collective Identity After “I Can’t Breathe”	1
Background.....	4
This Shit is Crazy: Deprivileging the Viewer.....	8
Over-Identification and the Possibility of Other-Oriented Perspective Taking.....	12
Opened Bodies: Recognizing and Reclaiming Narratives of Black Bodies.....	17
Remediation as Claim Making.....	22
Moving Forward: Ethical Questions and Belief.....	27
References.....	34
Appendix A: Images.....	37

Abstract

In the wake of Eric Garner's 2014 public execution at the hands of NYPD officers, online spaces such as Twitter saw an influx of remediating imagery referencing Ramsey Orta's bystander cell phone video of Garner's death. These images often explicitly reference the chokehold that killed Garner and/or they reappropriate Garner's last words: "I can't breathe." To what formal dimensions in Orta's video are these remediating images responding? What broader cultural work is the creation of these images doing?

In this project, I regard Orta's video as the point of entry for considering the cultural work of remediating images from it, as understanding its formal dimensions are necessary to recognizing the ways in which the remediating images attend to Garner's body. I read this video using Scott Richmond's revision of Christian Metz's theory of cinematic identification to identify the concerning and compelling tension between over and under-identifying with onscreen subjects in Orta's video, ultimately asserting that aligning with any body onscreen is ultimately a choice. Further, the remediating images attending to Garner's body signal viewer's chosen alignment with him or Orta, and claim Garner's death as a socially constructed cultural trauma. These claims not only signal collective identification around the trauma on behalf of those who did not initially witness it, but also express belief in Garner's experience despite a public discourse that continually emphasized his (and other black men's) perceived violent potential.

In early December of 2014 the New York based tabloid newspaper, the *Daily News*, published a cartoon—by Bill Bramhall—depicting a fallen Lady Justice choking out the words “I can’t breathe.” This cartoon, also shared widely across Twitter, was responding to the grand jury decision not to indict the officer responsible for the by then infamous death of Eric Garner—the unarmed Black man killed on the afternoon of July 17, 2014 on a Staten Island street for little more than being Black in public. Garner’s death, which was captured through bystander cell phone video by Ramsey Orta and widely distributed via social media and the same newspaper, inspired widespread public outrage that was reignited by the grand jury decision on December 3. The cartoon appropriates Garner’s last words, “I can’t breathe,” and attributes them to the asphyxiating Lady Justice. In doing so, Bramhall reframes the stakes of Garner’s death and the judicial (un)response by asserting it is an affront to the very idea of justice. Connecting Garner’s murder to such a closely held national value expands the scope of who can or will identify with the trauma of his death by claiming that it is not just Black people in New York or large cities, or African-Americans more broadly who are in danger: it’s also America writ large. Justice is, after all, a value so essential to American national identity it is included alongside “liberty” in our pledge of allegiance. By using Lady Justice in his cartoon, Bramhall tells us Eric Garner’s execution, and the resulting judicial inaction is both a threat to justice and a threat to American identity itself.

This project approaches Ramsey Orta’s cell phone video of Eric Garner’s death as an entry point to considering the activist potential of remediated images from the video circulated through social media. I do this by assessing both the *Daily News*’ edited version of Orta’s footage and a sample of remediated images referencing Garner’s body to demonstrate how alignment with Garner can be performed in order to situate Garner’s death as a cultural trauma

around with others can collectively identify. I build on existing scholarship on public responses to Garner's death by integrating a close reading of Orta's video in order to motivate an analysis of these images. I position Orta's video of Garner's death as a work of citizens' media with documentary impulses that includes formal elements with the potential to drive alignment with Garner. This alignment is not guaranteed, of course, and I unpack both formal and contextual factors that contribute to this ambiguity of affinity with Garner. From there I consider ways in which alignment can be leveraged to make claims about Garner's death being a cultural trauma around which Americans can identify. All told, I argue these claims attend to Garner's body when the police who killed him did not; they signal belief in his experience despite judicial inaction and police sympathizing counter-rhetoric.

Despite the widespread attention the Garner case received in the news media, the reactions to the lack of indictment were by no means universally those of indignation. For example, another New York tabloid newspaper, *New York Post*, appeared to affirm the grand jury decision when it printed the text "it was not a crime" superimposed over stills from the Orta video on its front page on the same day as the aforementioned *Daily News* cartoon was published. This, combined with the *Post's* generally conservative and inflammatory rhetoric signals its alignment with the NYPD (and those who believe they did not use excessive force). However, it is clear through online responses to Garner's death that widespread alignment with him is possible. To be sure, the cover of the very newspaper that published the aforementioned Bramhall cartoon featured a still from the Garner video alongside large, bold letters proclaiming "we can't breathe" on the same day. Such proclamations indicate a collective sense of outrage and alignment with the trauma of this miscarriage of justice. Indeed, specific alignment is far from guaranteed, but it is essential in the formation of claims to collective identity. Such claims

to national collective identity around the trauma of Garner's death in digital spaces such as Twitter were common in the wake of Garner's execution and again after the grand jury failed to indict the officers responsible. These claims offer compelling responses to enduring questions of what one does with images of the pain of others by transforming images from the video of Garner's death into claims and invitations to participate in performing their identification with the cultural trauma that is his murder: these often explicitly reference the chokehold that killed Garner and/or reappropriate his last words: "I can't breathe." These images demonstrate the myriad ways in which audiences can connect with Garner's pain. Some reveal alignment with Garner himself, and some suggest identification with African-Americans more broadly. Some convey solidarity articulated to a sense of collective national identity, as is the case with the aforementioned *Daily News* cartoon.

How, then, does alignment with onscreen subjects occur, and in what ways is it unstable? How does this instability become mobilized to claim his death as a cultural trauma around which a broader audience can identify? Eric Garner's slaying was one of a series of extrajudicial killings of Black men cited by the Black Lives Matter movement as an example of unchecked police power, but the visual evidence of police wrongdoing the footage of it provided a marked shift in public understandings of racist violence against Black people in the United States for those willing to see it as such. Audiences no longer simply needed to believe the claims of people such as the families of Trayvon Martin or Jordan Davis; they could assess the incidents with their own eyes. Further, the popularity of social media platforms—especially Twitter—allowed for the rapid dissemination of the video of Garner's death (and subsequent videos of its ilk) and provided a forum for the public to process it in realtime.

Of course, Orta's video is far from the first of its kind. George Holliday's highly-sensationalized amateur video of Los Angeles police officers attacking Rodney King was already 23 years old by the time Orta captured his video. This footage, too, was taken by a bystander and later used as evidence in court, and King's attackers were also not found guilty of any crime. Further, photographs of brutalized bodies lynched by people who never faced legal consequences in the (mostly) American south long predate both Holliday and Orta's videos, once again reminding viewers that what Orta committed to moving image is not a new revelation, but yet another instance in a long history of state-sanctioned violence against Black bodies. However, unlike other images which depict dead, Black bodies—such as the lynching photographs or Emmett Till's open casket—Orta's video captures Garner's death as it happens. Moving bystander images like Orta's video force viewers to confront the bodily realities of Garner's death, rather than interpolate the events based on an image taken after the fact. Further, Orta's video requires viewers to acknowledge their complicity in the social institutions that allowed Garner's slaying; regardless of where and with whom one identifies in the video, they are still turning their attention to be present in a captured moment of state-sanctioned violence against a civilian. Within the existing context of the Black Lives Matter movement, Orta's video reignited national conversation about racism and police brutality at a time when many white Americans believed the Obama presidency signaled a post-racial America.

Background

There is a wealth of extant cultural studies literature on Garner's slaying and Orta's accompanying video, much of which emphasizes the formation of racist discourses about the video in the news media, and how online conversation through social media platforms such as

Twitter can reclaim that conversation. This scholarship considers the formation of groups with which audiences can align in media regarding police brutality, particularly as it positions victims of this brutality as criminals. These often interrogate narratives used to justify the NYPD's use of excessive force against Garner, particularly those positioning Black people as threatening. For example, Holly Fulton-Babick analyzes the formation of insider and outsider statuses in news media narratives about Garner's execution in her article, "'I Can't Breathe': Eric Garner and In/Out-Group Rhetorics," arguing that news media "prime" audiences to see Black victims as criminals and therefore "placing the victims in opposition to both agents of the law and readers" (Fulton-Babick 437). One way in which Fulton-Babick describes how audiences are primed to see Garner in opposition to readers (and therefore the in-group) is through descriptions of his body. Many of the articles Fulton-Babick analyzes pay extensive attention to Garner's large size and the threat it presumably poses. She summarizes these assertions, stating, "Garner's size indicated that he presented a threat to the policemen, which legitimized the officers' use of aggressive tactics" (Fulton-Babick 440). She then identifies a gap in discourse of Garner's dangerousness, noting the prevalence of descriptions of his body as dangerous rather than those emphasizing his poor physical health. However, as Fulton-Babick notes, what these news media often fail to acknowledge is how Garner's race is seen as threatening regardless of his size or health (Fulton-Babick 440).

Much of this literature points to the ills of colorblind discourses of police brutality. Colorblind descriptions—or those that do not explicitly address race—of Garner's death present complications in how audiences make sense of it, and ultimately affirm a white supremacist narrative of Black criminality and justified police force. Fulton-Babick engages with Eduardo Bonilla-Silva's theory of colorblind racism by asserting that the news media "perpetuates racist

tropes by refusing to grapple with them explicitly” and refusing to make the connections between Garner’s race and the brutality he experienced (Fulton-Babick 438). In other words, by failing to include Garner’s race in discussions of his killing, the news media reinforces the racist systems that allowed an innocent, unarmed man to be publicly executed without cause or a trial. Marcelo Diversi, too, tackles the role of colorblindness in the Garner case in his article, “The Ever-Shifting Excuses for Demonizing Black People in America.” Like Fulton-Babick, Diversi argues colorblindness protects the white establishment by failing to acknowledge the Black demonization at work both when Garner is targeted and killed, and later in the public discourse about his death; he calls this the “logic of politically correct lynching” (Diversi 248).

Diversi also historicizes racial colorblindness, attributing it in part to a cultural desire not to grapple with the pain of past Black traumas caused by white supremacy (Diversi 251). However, on Twitter and elsewhere, citizens explicitly confronted Garner’s death as an act of state-sanctioned racist violence. Diversi points to both online and direct action expressions of solidarity with Garner, though he appears less interested in the specific acts and more interested in the mere existence of these counterhegemonic narratives. Such expressions were integral in the emerging presence of Black Lives Matter (BLM) in American culture, and Garner’s death marked a pivotal moment in this national consciousness raising. The phrase “Black lives matter,” which originated in a Facebook post by activist Alicia Garza following the acquittal of George Zimmerman after he pursued and shot the unarmed Trayvon Martin, first emerged on the popular social media platform, Facebook, in a plea for the existential value of Black life. It has since been appropriated to signify any number of anti-racist movements, and is often associated with assorted variations of the hashtag “#BlackLivesMatter” on Twitter.

Much has been written about the role of Twitter in online BLM mobilization, both generally and with regard to Garner. Marc Lamont Hill, for example, asserts the revolutionary potential of Black Twitter in “‘Thank You, Black Twitter’: State Violence, Digital Counterpublics, and Pedagogies of Resistance,” situating it within a broader history of “subaltern counterpublics” where marginalized groups can gather “to publicly discuss ideas, resolve problems, and check State power” (Hill 288). In the wake of Garner’s death, Twitter provided a place for the creation of “new social realities,” something which Roni Jackson details in “If They Gunned Me Down and Criming While White: An Examination of Twitter Campaigns Through the Lens of Citizens’ Media” (Jackson 315). In this article, Jackson explores how two popular hashtags responding to two separate extrajudicial executions of unarmed Black men challenged the news media’s racial rhetoric and ultimately influenced the public discourse. Jackson argues that these hashtags constitute what has been referred to elsewhere as “citizens’ media,” or media where individuals “enact . . . their political identity through community engagement,” thus becoming citizens (Jackson 315).

Images taken from the Orta video, including allusions to Garner’s last words, have been widely circulated across Twitter and beyond in response to both the initial slaying and the resulting judicial inaction. This referential citizens’ media, and Orta’s video itself, constitutes what Roopali Mukherjee calls “cultural work” in her article, “Bio-Work in the Blacking Factory: Police Videos and the Ethics of Seeing and Being Seen.” Notably, Mukherjee acknowledges the “documentary impulse” within Orta’s video that contributes to its situation within “media economies long invested in pleasurable spectacles of black life as well as death” (Mukherjee 134). To be sure, this video received particularly lasting attention when other such videos did not, in part because it was remediated so extensively. I argue this impulse provides an opening to

consider this video formally as a moving image work. This consideration is not to position the video as an aesthetic text, but as one that possesses certain formal dimensions that are familiar to audiences accustomed to seeing violence on screen. As such, it is essential to assess what is at work within the video itself to better understand the ways in which images from it are later remixed through cyber activism and direct action.

This Shit is Crazy: Deprivileging the Viewer

The cultural work of creating and sharing citizens' media online to communicate new social realities that claim collective identity around the trauma of Garner's death often includes explicit attention to Garner's body (through references to Garner's last words or the experience of being choked). These references to his body can be made—in part—because clear, affectively intense imagery from the scene of his slaying was made widely available in the days following. This clarity and intensity are necessary components to viewers both understanding what is happening in the video, and connecting with it affectively. Formal dimensions in the Garner video have the potential to foster identification with onscreen subjects at various points throughout the video, and they can also create ambiguity regarding where or if to identify. This problem of under or over-identification with Garner, Orta, or any other onscreen body is one which the remediation examples discussed later appear to allay. First, though, it is necessary to consider the opportunities for and limits to identification in Orta's video. In the following section, I consider Orta's video in terms the viewer displacement it advances.

While it is not the focus of this project, viewers' own subject positioning will inform how they make sense of Orta's video and when/where/if they identify with onscreen bodies. While my own interpretation of the video attempts to imagine a variety of potential perspectives, it is

still my interpretation, which is—of course—informed by my subject position as a white person, but also as someone with specific, professional commitments to victim advocacy from my time working at a domestic and sexual violence center. During my first time watching the *Daily News* article, I attended exclusively to Garner’s experience because that was what I had been primed to do at my job. Therefore, while this analysis is based on extensive consideration of formal and contextual dimensions at work within Orta’s video, it has the same sort of limitations I argue are endemic to such moving images.

Orta took numerous consecutive cell phone videos of NYPD officer harrasing, and ultimately killing Garner. These videos were then acquired by the *Daily News* and edited together one after the other to watch like one continuous video that was published on the newspaper’s website. For the purposes of this project, I consider the *Daily News*’ edited version both because it was the version I orginally encountered and because it was so widely distributed in the days following Garner’s death. Orta’s videos are taken at close range from different angles, and begin *in media res* with Garner engaged in a heated disagreement with an NYPD officer outside a storefront. The first video pans between Garner and an officer, and begins with a clearly agitated Garner repeatedly rejecting whatever the officer has charged him with doing (allegedly selling loosies on the Bay Street sidewalk). Garner grows progressively more frustrated, asking incredulously “are you serious?” Orta can be heard from behind the camera defending Garner to the officers: “Don’t worry. He was just sitting here. I just came here; he was just sitting here.” The video then cuts to another shot, taken from behind the officer in the first video, now revealing a second officer (we later learn this is Daniel Pantaleo) standing behind Garner. We now hear Garner more specifically reject the officers’ allegations, emphatically stating “I didn’t sell anything. I did nothing. I was sitting here the whole time minding my

business.” The video cuts again¹ and Orta provides context, explaining the officers were harassing Garner for “breaking up a fight.” Garner, too, offers context as he addresses officers and alleges “everytime you see me, you wanna harass me.”

The video cuts again to both of the officers converging on Garner, seemingly attempting to handcuff him, while Garner appeals to the officers and puts his hands up saying “don’t touch me, please.” Pantaleo attempts to restrain him, ultimately wrapping his arm around Garner’s neck in an apparent chokehold. As Garner continues to struggle, two previously offscreen officers join the fray; the four of them knock him to the ground while a crowd of onlookers express disbelief. Garner reaches in front of him and then says “I can’t breathe” repeatedly as another officer joins and Pantaleo pushes the now face-down Garner further into the ground, all the while maintaining the chokehold. Orta provides commentary, situating this interaction within the neighborhood’s history of harassment by police, and an officer tells him to back up. The video cuts again (because yet another officer on the scene told Orta to move). Now back at his original vantage point, Orta expresses disbelief shared by the rest of the onlookers: “this shit is crazy.” Orta and his camera continue to be bounced around by the growing crowd, and then an official sternly tells him to move because this is a crime scene. It becomes easy to lose track of the now unresponsive Garner in the chaos of both Orta’s camera movement and the jostling of the crowd. The video cuts one more time to Garner’s body, now turned on its side and surrounded by officers, before cutting to black. The whole video is under three minutes, including the *Daily News* logos at the beginning and end.

This apparent chaos, which is both a product of the shaky camerawork, rapid cutting between shots, and Orta’s own positioning among the other bodies onscreen, can be disorienting

¹ This appears to be an editing choice by the *Daily News* because the tabloid claims Orta only took three videos of the incident (all from different angles) and this one is from the same vantage point as the previous scene.

to the viewer. At times, I found this to deprivilege Garner as an onscreen subject, as it made it difficult to track his body. Viewers must make the choice to attend to Garner, even as the camerawork risks pulling their attention elsewhere. Film theorist Christian Metz considers identification as a process unconcerned with bodies on screen, in favor of identification with the camera itself (Metz 47, 49). Affinity with the apparatus itself, rather than onscreen subjects, means the viewer exists above what is occurring onscreen rather than within it. While Metz discusses the occurrence of “touchdowns” in which viewers identify with someone onscreen, these moments of groundedness are sporadic. This kind of affinity with Orta’s camera appears to invite viewers to identify with the man holding it at times, but other moments formally seem to invite one to identify with Garner (such as when he desperately repeats “I can’t breathe”).

Despite Metz’s own disinterest in bodies, identification itself is also an embodied experience, fostering a sense of displacement that serves as the point from which meaning can be made. Scott Richmond makes this assertion in his revisiting of Metz’s theory of identification by emphasizing that identifying with the camera is still felt by the body. Richmond describes the “vertiginous” feeling that can come from the camera’s movement or the cutting between angles, and this feeling is distinct from the perception of the factual events transpiring onscreen. The *Daily News* video is comprised of multiple shots alternating between two main camera angles. While this appears to be more the result of Orta being told to move by officers on the scene, the frequent cutting between shots and angles also creates a sense of disorientation as the audience loses hold of where Orta and the camera are in space or time.

This disorientation puts the viewer in the position of identifying with the only consistent subject available to them: Orta’s camera. Truly, the audience has no way of knowing how much time has passed between shots, and this deprivileging of spatiotemporal certainty is the place

from which Richmond argues cinematic identification develops. The sudden cuts, combined with Orta's shaky camerawork, disorients the audience and makes it unclear where they should turn their attention next². This feeling of disorientation is the place where eventual sense making metaphorically hinges, as the body is no longer privileged with proprioception—or one's awareness of their body in space (Richmond 123). The spectator body has the experience of seeming displaced physically, and—in the case of a moving image conveying a familiar narrative of Black victimization—socially. Still, the participatory nature of Orta's video means he and his camera are moved around as the crowd around Garner grows and as officers tell Orta to relocate. Unlike the fictional character of Spiderman, around whom Richmond centers his argument, there is no clear visual anchor as Orta's camera's proximity to Garner continues to shift as the video progresses. Therefore, the viewer must choose to attend to Garner's body in spite of all the additional movement.

Over-Identification and the Possibility of Other-Oriented Perspective Taking

Of course, the very ambiguity that Metz and Richmond discuss proves challenging when making a case for the ways formal elements drive identification with onscreen bodies—when audiences identify first with the camera—there is no guarantee of which onscreen subject they will then identify with. Identification is not fixed, and identification with Garner or Orta—or any other onscreen subject—requires the viewer to consciously choose to do so. This intentionality presents a challenge when considering citizens' media like Orta's for its formal dimensions because, as a spur-of-the-moment text created in the spirit of countersurveillance, it lacks components of fiction film that might more clearly direct the viewer's attention and therefore

² Jennifer Malkowski, too, addresses shaky camerawork, claiming this stylistic choice is so prevalent in mainstream fiction that it no longer evokes documentary film.

where they identify. Still, the ramifications of spatiotemporally deprivileging the viewer do not render such citizen media's activist potential inert. This camera movement, either through shaky camerawork or rapid cutting between shots, creates a narrative intensity reminiscent of mainstream fiction. This resemblance to mainstream fiction, while familiar to viewers, has its own inherent risks when considering a video where the stakes are literally belief in both Garner's and Orta's claims to trauma. This familiarity introduces the possibility of identification and even over-identification with onscreen or offscreen subjects (like Orta).

This video is shot in what documentary theorist Bill Nichols refers to as the "participatory mode," as Orta moves within the scene of Garner's arrest, interacts with the officers, and even attempts to impact the outcome by defending Garner to the police (Nichols 151). This gives the audience the feeling of being imbedded within the action, rather than being passive bystanders. Such imbedding allows for the possibility of viewers anchoring their attention to Orta and his camera. This reinforces the idea that identification is—in part—a result of formal dimensions within a moving image. However, this imbedding also provides the viewer more access to the onscreen events as they transpire.

Being able to see the details of onscreen events is important to a death video that is to have social impact. Of course, this is due in part to the However, this onscreen clarity is also essential because it resembles mainstream fiction cinema death. Vivian Sobchack develops this assertion in her 2004 book, *Carnal Thoughts*, by claiming violent death is considered more "normal" within contemporary western mores due to the privatization of what she calls a "process and event of death as the gradual outcome of disease, old age, and bodily decay" (Sobchack 149). Jennifer Malkowski further develops this assertion claiming "Hollywood has been [Americans'] primary guide to what death looks like for much of the past century"

(Malkowski 180). Indeed, if violent, cinematic death is normal and more easily understood by American audiences, then proximity to the scene of death would be essential to aiding audience's connection with the video because viewers are accustomed to seeing onscreen death up close. So too is the necessity of embodied spectator emotions, such as emotional contagion brought on by mirroring an onscreen subject, in allowing the audience to connect with both Garner and the events in the video. For example, when Garner reaches out to some unseen entity, pleading that he cannot breathe, the audience can witness the pain on his face and hear it in his voice. The camera's proximity to Garner allows for greater narrative understanding of what is happening in the video and for greater potential emotional connection with him.

As Hollywood film aesthetics more closely resemble how American audiences understand death, elements such as immersive audio, presence for the moment of death, and multiple camera angles are—according to Malkowski—essential to how (or whether) a death becomes politicized (Malkowski 180). The immersive audio throughout Orta's video is also reminiscent of mainstream fiction cinema. Orta's integration into the crime scene means the audio is loud, and at times chaotic. The iconic "I can't breathe" moment contains significant dialogue from the police and the nearby crowd, the specifics of which are impossible to make out on cell phone speakers (presumably how most viewers would have first experienced the video). The impossibility of making out what the subjects are saying, and therefore of ever fully knowing what is happening, can exacerbate the viewer's feeling of being unable to help Garner.

Malkowski cautions that too much familiarity with the formal elements in cell phone death videos risks over-identification with onscreen subjects in said videos. Malkowski appears to be concerned with the problem of identifying with a subject simply because of the way they are presented onscreen. Such over-identification risks viewer affinity becoming fixed, which is

especially dangerous when the result is identifying with police officers who harrassed and killed an unarmed civilian in broad daylight. This is then where the work of alignment as a willfull, other-oriented act of perspective taking becomes so important. Rather than being the result of the interaction between formal dimensions and contextual factors such as white supremacy, alignment requires viewers to elect to take on the perspective of onscreen subjects.

This question of choice when regarding another's body in pain is a throughline across this entire argument, and provides continuity between many scholars engaging with accounts of pain and trauma. Courtney Baker names the act of concious, active looking "humane insight" in her 2015 book of the same name. In this book, Baker claims that "images of dead and dying bodies . . . charge the spectator with the work of making sense" (Baker 8). In other words, these images do not tell the viewer how to make sense of them; they compel the viewers to do it themselves. Close reading of such images reveal formal qualities that make it more challenging to make meaning of images of death and dying. Further, it coveys formal properties that more effectively "charge" viewers with making sense of such images.

Alignment can be performed to claim Garner's murder as a cultural trauma. As such, it is important to define what is meant by "alignment." For the purposes of this thesis, I refer to any act of other-oriented perspective taking, be it conscious or unconscious, as alignment. Put a different way, I use this language of alignment to describe any sort of spectator emotion that positions the audience cognitively or affectively alongside Garner. Of course, there is more specific terminology I could mobilize, such as empathy or identification, but these terms are also mired in their own disciplinary ambiguities. Amy Coplan provides what is perhaps the best definition of empathy, stating it is "a complex, imaginative process in which an observer simulates another person's situated psychological states while maintaining clear self-other

differentiation” (Coplan 5). In other words, empathy must be conscious, it requires knowledge of the object of empathy’s experience, and it must distinguish between self and other. This definition rejects baser spectator emotions, including “emotional contagion”—or the catching of another’s feelings through unconscious physiological processes such as mirror their facial expressions—because they lack clear self-other differentiation (Coplan 8).

Alignment is a useful term because it can extend beyond affective or emotional affinity with an onscreen subject to include political or social alignment with an individual, group, or cause—an extension that is essential as alignment with Garner is communicated to a broader audience. This expression of alignment with the onscreen Garner later serves as a way to claim his pain as a means to position his death as a cultural trauma. Use of this term also leaves room for consideration of cinematic identification without confusing it with notions of group identification in trauma studies (more on this later). Sara Ahmed also employs the word “alignment” helpfully, though her use emphasizes the importance of collective identity and aligning with those like the subject and against those unlike it.

Perhaps the hope in sharing videos depicting police brutality disproportionately affecting people of color is that the videos will render debates about the existence of institutional racism obsolete in favor of dialogues over what to do about it. Instead, these videos seem to complicate viewers’ relationship with reality. Identification with Orta’s camera, in particular, presents a significant obstacle to sense making, and audience attention cannot be as explicitly guided as an intentionally produced moving image. However, this problem of alignment does not mean such citizens’ media are not useful in public anti-racist discourses. Rather this ambiguity reveals these media alone are not sufficient to drive the conversation forward; this lack of clarity calls for such

images to be remediated to address both the internal ambiguities and the external structures contributing to how viewers make meaning of the images.

Opened Bodies: Recognizing and Reclaiming Narratives of Black Bodies

Of course, when considering the Orta video (or any moving image of police brutality), elements outside of the text are often just as essential as those within it. In addition to the formal attributes of the video itself, understanding the video's social context, implicit (or explicit) racial biases, prior experience with the police, and even where one gets their news will all influence how viewers make sense of the video and where they align. This is why remediation is such a crucial part of positioning Garner's death as a cultural trauma; the examples of remediation I will consider here respond to both formal ambiguities in the video and external framing by attending to Garner's body in a way that claims his death as unambiguously traumatic. As such, it is first necessary to recognize how narrative and news media framing elements prime the viewer for white-centered and supremacist understandings of Garner's death.

Images of the brutalized Black male body—both fictional and documentary—were far from unfamiliar in 2014 America. According to media scholar Linda Williams, melodrama beginning with the work of Harriet Beecher Stowe has long provided a framework for understanding white on Black violence in America: “the beating or mutilation of the black male body has been the generative icon of black and white racial melodrama” (Williams 253). Williams refers to displays “of black suffering and white force” as the “‘Tom’ beating vision,” referencing the titular character of Stowe's sentimental anti-slavery novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (Williams 252). Williams argues the “Tom” lens melodramatizes white domination and Black oppression by providing a familiar framework for understanding white on Black violence. Williams describes how George Holliday's amateur video of the Rodney King beating initially

seemed an obvious manifestation of the “Tom” beating vision. However, King was not a perfect replica of the virtuous “Tom” audiences were primed to expect, which allowed for the emergence of an anti-“Tom” narrative that stripped King of his status as sympathetic protagonist. King’s experience, and Garner’s as well, exemplify the power of persistent narrative tropes that make new stories feel familiar. Further, they reveal the problem of stories that fail to fit exactly the structure of pre-existing the trope. As soon as the discourse cast doubt on whether King fit the familiar role as a victim of white on Black violence, it also deemed King inelegible as a victim (Williams 254).

King’s story is a powerful analogue to Garner’s, though King himself survived the brutality. Initial reactions to Orta’s video appeared to universally decry the actions of the NYPD officers, yet the grand jury failed to indict any involved only five months later. In the space between the slaying itself, new anti-“Tom” narratives including Garner’s criminal history and alleged criminal activity the day of his killing transformed Garner into what Williams calls a “Black beast,” or a white-threatening anti-“Tom” (Williams 256). The audience can even hear both of these narratives beginning to form in the *Daily News* video, as Garner’s and Orta’s accounts of Garner’s innocence conflict with the clear physical danger the white officers believed they were in (suggested by how many converged on Garner at the slightest sign of a struggle, and later affirmed by Pantaleo’s explicit statement of fear when addressing the grand jury). Garner’s body, which is ironically later discredited as weak and sickly (it was not the chokehold that killed him but the complications brought on by poor health, or so say the police defenders), is read by the police and those aligned with them as large and threatening, and it needs to be brought under control. While many narratives about Garner’s body emerge within the discourse, they are primarily employed normatively; whether it is weak or strong, incapable

or dangerous, Garner's body is described in the mainstream discourse as being in some way unacceptable.

Such normative tropes contribute to the formation of what Holly Fulton-Babick calls in/out-group rhetorics. Just as familiar melodramatic conventions can prime viewers to understand Garner's death differently, so too can the news media prime audiences to see themselves in opposition to Black victims. The news media's penchant for portraying Black victims as criminals, therefore opposing them to law enforcement, pits them in opposition to their readers (Fulton-Babick 437). In answer to the presence of conflicting narratives surrounding Garner's body mentioned above, she asserts most accounts still emphasize Garner's size and therefore "violent potential" (Fulton-Babick 439). She is also careful to note that, regardless of Garner's size, his race is the primary operative in the formation of insider and outsider rhetorics, and the news media's unwillingness to explicitly engage with race only perpetuates the descriptions of his body and size as dangerous (Fulton-Babick 438, 441).

The precarity of the victim/violent potential narrative identified within Garner's story by Fulton-Babick is reminiscent of what Sara Ahmed calls "the reversal of the victim/criminal relationship" in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Ahmed 48). Ahmed describes a 2000 case in the United Kingdom in which a man (Tony Martin) was sentenced to life in prison for the murder of a teenage boy attempting to burglarize his home. A candidate for local elected office (William Hague) decried the verdict in a campaign speech in Alcester, Warwickshire: "[the law is] more interested in the rights of criminals than the rights of people who are burgled." This speech went on to be widely covered in British news, at least suggesting that its sentiment resonated with UK residents. Ahmed asserts Hague's argument implies victimhood for those

who kill not in self-defense but in defense of their property, which she claims is bolstered by the coverage of the destruction of Martin's farm during his time in prison (Ahmed 48).

Granting victimhood to those who kill unarmed individuals is reminiscent of counternarratives that emerged in the wake of Garner's death. While Ahmed connects this inversion of the victim/criminal narrative to national conversations about border security, rather than domestic law enforcement, her anecdote and subsequent analysis are still relevant to certain narratives that emerged after Garner's murder. Such coverage of the ruinous state of Tony Martin's property as a result of his (by some accounts unjustifiable) prison sentence is reminiscent of media taking pity on Pantaleo for being assigned desk duty and facing continued online attacks. From a less individualized perspective, this narrative inversion bears comparison to the emergence of Blue Lives Matter counter-rhetoric in response to the Black Lives Matter movement. Such framing positions law enforcement as victims of criminal actions, rather than as potential perpetrators of violence against those they are charged to protect.

Malkowski notes when discussing the formal limitations of the moving images of Oscar Grant's execution, Oakland still saw large scale local mobilization in response to Grant's slaying, even though the formal elements Malkowski deems most impactful in death videos were not present. This is because residents of the San Francisco Bay Area, already familiar with the area's history of racist policing practices, were primed to align with Grant and respond to his death with outrage (Malkowski 174). Therefore, it would be wrong to assert these aforementioned formal elements *will* drive alignment with Garner and his pain. That said, they *can*, and that alignment, if accomplished, is essential to making the claims I argue are so crucial to constructing Garner's death as a cultural trauma. For the rest of this paper, then, I have chosen

examples of remediation that appear to self-consciously align with Garner, emphasizing how specific images from the video are ideal for remixing that invites others to align with him, too.

The incredible symbolic significance of Garner's last words in the wake of the Orta video's release can be seen in the way "I can't breathe" became a common refrain within anti-racist demonstrations; the prevalence of #icantbreathe in tweets about anti-Black racism to this day; and *Yahoo News*' proclamation that it was the most notable quote of 2014. NBA, WNBA, and NCAA basketball players publicly sported t-shirts with the quote, and hip hop artist KXNG Crooked released a single entitled "I Can't Breathe" in which he freestyles about police brutality over Tupac Shakur's "Pain." How, then, does Garner's exposition of his dire physical state have such impact? Elaine Scarry also discusses the problem of communicating pain to others, arguing "its resistance [to language] is not simply one of its incidental or accidental attributes but is essential to what it is" (Scarry 5). However, she also introduces the essentialness of "presentness," claiming expressions of pain, either by the one who experienced the pain or someone on their behalf, must possess a sense of immediacy to inspire an active response (Scarry 9). This "presentness" is the key to "I can't breathe"'s impact; Garner expresses in those words the immediacy and urgency of his situation as the officer continues to choke him.

Furthermore, one way of understanding the significance of "I can't breathe" is not to consider it symbolic at all. While Garner is giving language to his asthma attack (which was set off by the chokehold), "I can't breathe" also reads like a verbal expression of suffering and desperation that is firmly anchored to Garner's body, as opposed to a symbolic articulation of his bodily experience. If "I can't breathe" is an expression of extreme pain, and pain resists language, perhaps a more helpful way of understanding it is to think of it as an example of what Julia Kristeva calls the *chora*: a pre-symbolic articulation. Therefore, this expression of direct

physical experience, even under the premise of narrative contextualization, is likely to sit with the audience long after the details of the video are forgotten.

With the affective resonance of references to Garner's body established, it follows that one next consider the specific social applications of said references. After all, despite having bystander video, the details of Garner's death are still contested within public discourse; remediation that specifically attends to Garner's body responds to public contestation to more fully situate Garner's death as a cultural trauma. The remainder of this paper, then, tracks the cultural work of remediating images from Orta's video to claim Garner's death as a cultural trauma around which others can identify.

Remediation as Claim Making

Trauma has been the project of much aesthetic inquiry long predating my subject matter. Roger Luckhurst cites public recognition of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as a primary place around which the study of aesthetic representation of trauma emerged in his 2008 monograph, *The Trauma Question*. He then follows the various cultural forms commonly used to represent trauma including narrative fiction, memoir, photography, and film³. The aesthetic projects undertaken by many of the theorists Luckhurst describes often emphasize the role of narrative construction in the chosen texts, as they often reveal how trauma complicates memory and conventional understandings of time. While one could certainly consider Orta's video and its formal properties in light of this, this project is more concerned with how a trauma becomes socially constructed through a series of public claims.

³ One such scholar he references continually through the second part of his book is Cathy Caruth, who—in her own writing on trauma and representation—identifies trauma in the aesthetic realm as grappling with crises of truth brought on by the gap between the living within a trauma and the later witnessing or sense making (Caruth 6-7). Narratively, the impact of the trauma lies in its latency. Regarding film aesthetics, specifically, Luckhurst traces the genealogy of the narrative device, the flashback, and its role in representations of trauma. Specifically, he considers its role in conveying the narrative inaccessibility of the inciting traumatic moment (Luckhurst 178).

That the nature of Garner's death was, and continues to be, so vehemently contested within public discourse supports the idea that trauma is socially mediated. It has been established that "I can't breathe" holds particular significance as an expression of Garner's immediate pain, and also the pain of those who closely align with him. What role, then, do images referencing that utterance serve in the public conversation surrounding his death? Can remediated images referencing Garner's death serve not only to recontextualize his bodily experience, but to claim his death as a cultural trauma? In what follows, I consider how various references to Garner's body found on Twitter serve to situate Garner's death as a cultural trauma. Moreover, I ponder how they invite viewers not only to acknowledge Garner's death as a cultural trauma but also to collectively identify with that trauma even if they did not themselves witness it.

While this section is more interested in the cultural work of remediated images referencing Orta's video, it is first important to note that his video also serves as a claim to cultural trauma. After all, Orta's video is a work of citizens' media that was employed to countersurveillance the NYPD in what Garner himself refers to as harassment. Just as the video could be considered within trauma studies for its formal properties, it could also be considered through the lens of social constructivist understandings of cultural trauma. However, formal analysis described earlier has already revealed that meaning of the video is contested for myriad reasons. Therefore, for the purposes of this project, questions of claim making will center on the remediation of images from the video rather than the video itself. These images help create "new social realities" that challenge mainstream, white supremacist media narratives that attempt to justify Garner's death.

The process of creating, contesting, and identifying with a trauma narrative has primarily been the undertaking of social scientists, rather than cultural and literary critics, and is essential

to any consideration of public discourse surrounding a cultural trauma. Sociologists Jeffrey Alexander and Ron Eyerman both discuss trauma as being socially constructed and mediated. Alexander explains how the trauma comes to be seen as a threat to collective identity; how this threat is understood and represented, however, contributes to what Alexander calls “identity revision,” or a new collective identity (Alexander 22). Eyerman emphasizes the role of the collective memory of a trauma in the formation of identity. Alexander himself defines cultural trauma as “the result of this acute discomfort entering into the core of the collectivity’s sense of its own identity” (Alexander 7). In other words, cultural trauma is seen as a threat to the identity of a collectivity, and that collectivity must communicate that threat to those beyond individuals immediately affected; this communication also revises the collective identity to one that incorporates the memory of the trauma⁴.

One can clearly see the process of identity revision, by which new collective identities form around a cultural trauma, at work in remediations of imagery of Garner’s death circulated on Twitter. Widespread references to the chokehold that Pantaleo used reveal a prime cite for collective identification around the trauma of his death. For example, an image of scores of protesters of different races simulating choking at a die-in at Grand Central Terminal in Manhattan following the grand jury decision provides a compelling example of protesters claiming and participating in the trauma of Garner’s death (see Appendix A, 1). In this image, protesters attend to Garner’s body as it is represented in Orta’s video by unambiguously positioning his death as the result of the chokehold. These performative claims that Garner’s death is culturally traumatic also provide a space for those who did not witness it to still

⁴ Such understanding of collective identity around a cultural pain is reminiscent of Tommie Shelby’s description of “common oppression theory,” in which those subjected to anti-Black racism collectively align to resist that oppression (Shelby 232). While Shelby is more interested in solidarity among Black folks around the experience of racist oppression writ large, both Alexander and Eyerman are more concerned with *specific* traumatic moments around which to collectively identify.

participate in the trauma—an important point that Alexander makes. By appropriating the image of the chokehold, these protesters signal their alignment with both Garner and each other—even though, for many of them, their participation comes with the caveat that they themselves are unlikely to be targeted by police under the same circumstances as Garner because they read as white.

The cover of KXNG Crooked’s aforementioned single, “I Can’t Breathe,” offers another example of remediation attending to Garner’s body. The cover contains a still from Orta’s video of Pantaleo choking Garner with text overlaid (see Appendix A, 2). This image, which was shared widely across Twitter, appropriates imagery from Orta’s video by removing it from its original context and freezing it indefinitely in time to once again center Garner’s bodily experience, as well as draw attention to the prohibited chokehold. Interestingly, the music video for the single itself also contains references to Garner’s body via the chokehold, as KXNG Crooked places his hands on his neck on multiple occasions, seemingly miming. By incorporating his own body into references to Garner’s, KXNG Crooked appears to be signalling his own alignment with Garner and his pain.

An essential component of Alexander’s description of cultural trauma as a process is that of continuous claims to the trauma made by members of the traumatized group, or in Alexander’s words, “collective actors ‘decide’ to represent social pain as a fundamental threat to their sense of who they are, where they came from, and where they want to go” (Alexander 7). These claims are continuous because, as I mentioned earlier, the cite of the trauma is continually contested. Collective actors make claims to the “audience-public” (or broader audience beyond the traumatized group) to shape what Alexander calls a “new master narrative” that convinces a wider audience of the trauma. Orta’s video provides the original claim that Garner’s death is a

cultural trauma, but, as with the examples I have already discussed, remediation of imagery from the video offers additional claims made by those who were later brought into the collectivity.

Diverse appropriations of Garner's last words provide a rich site for exploring claims that Garner's death is culturally traumatic. Moving from "I can't breathe" to "we can't breathe" in remediation reveals an important transition in expanding the scope of who can identify with this trauma. "We can't breathe" claims the pain for the collective, thus broadening who can in turn participate in the trauma. Of course, the "I" in "I can't breathe" can already refer to a collective, as Afrocentric rhetorical traditions do not make the same distinctions between speaker and audience (Asante 78). That said, the use of "we" rather than a social "I" still can indicate identity revision including and beyond African Americans. The previously mentioned *Daily News* cover from December 4, 2014, appropriating an image from Orta's video accompanied by the caption "we can't breathe" recontextualizes Garner's last words by claiming them on behalf of a collectivity (see Appendix A, 4). No longer do the words express only Garner's intense pain, they use a variant of his last words to include the broader trauma of police brutality. The *Daily News*, claiming on its front page to be "New York's hometown newspaper," asserts that the judicial response to Garner's murder is harmful to the entirety of the city. This increases who is included in this trauma, and invites all New Yorkers to collectively identify with it.

The example discussed at the beginning of this paper—Bill Bramhall's political cartoon—offers yet another example of that expanded scope, not by asking readers to connect with "I can't breathe" as an expression of a person or group's pain, but instead by assigning those words to the avatar of justice itself (see Appendix A, 3). Rather than being articulated to a particular person, the phrase takes on a symbolic quality representing the death of an American value. By illustrating physical harm to such a central (albeit aspirational) American value,

Bramhall positions the judicial response to Garner's murder as an acute threat to the core of American national identity. These examples are only a few of the panoply of digital appropriations of imagery from the Orta video, but they represent the variety of ways in which they can bolster claims to collective identity around a cultural trauma. Further, they invite those who did not necessarily witness the trauma firsthand to participate as well.

Moving Forward: Ethical Questions and Belief

In the years since Orta shared his video with the *Daily News*, distributing images of police brutality on social media has become commonplace to the point that it inspired numerous think pieces addressing self-care after viewing such images. To be sure, this economy of sharing images of the suffering of others inspires critical questions regarding what one does with these images. In digital spaces, in particular, one can be bombarded with images of violence and suffering without even seeking them out. Social media feeds become flooded with such images in the aftermath of high-profile pain (foreign or domestic), and existing online comes with the condition that these images will—from time to time—appear, often accompanying essential and decentralized claims to hurt. Instead, the question what one does with these images concerns the collapsing of boundaries between self and other; who can communicate or align with another's pain becomes the site of contestation.

When considering questions of who gets to participate in a trauma by remediating images of it, it is necessary to untangle the types of claims being made regarding the nature of the pain in the images. Throughout this paper, I have considered a sliver of claims to Garner's pain that situate his death as a cultural trauma. These claims are bound by time, and are divided into those responding to the Orta video itself, and those responding to the grand jury decision not to indict

any of the officers responsible for Garner's death. Those responding directly to Orta's video communicate Garner's pain on his behalf, while those reacting to the trauma of his death after the grand jury decision take it on as their own. Moreover, the post-grand jury claims are further divided, as some are more interested in engaging with the public or judicial response to Garner's death, rather than with the death itself. Even so, all claims attend to Garner's body and center the physical realities of his death.

The first kind of claim, made in the immediate aftermath of Garner's death, points to Garner's pain itself in an attempt to position his death as wrongful and resulting from racist policing. Users across social media platforms submitted Orta's video as proof positive that violent racism within law enforcement does exist and that the stakes of that presence are dire. This other-oriented claim, evocative of the perspective taking Amy Coplan deems necessary to empathy, often fixates on Garner's expressions of pain, as well as NYPD policy on the use of chokeholds by its officers. They may emphasize "I can't breathe," but they do so in order to reiterate Garner's words, which are almost always attributed to him. Unlike later allusions to the chokehold in images referencing Garner's death, mention of the chokehold in this first wave of claims focus almost exclusively on identifying that it happened, and on circulating excerpts of an NYPD patrol guide explicitly prohibiting chokeholds: "members of the New York City Police Department will NOT use chokeholds."

Of course, these claims do not exclusively center Garner's experience, as users often signal their own shock, outrage, or sadness in posts sharing Orta's video, but they do not conflate Garner's experience to their own. They appear to operate on an epistemology of proof, whereby communicating Garner's pain matter-of-factly will aid its believability within shared, social discourse. As Scarry notes in *The Body in Pain*, however, the problem of belief is central to any

utterance of pain because of the impossibility of knowing another's pain (Scarry 13). Those sharing Orta's video cannot truly know Garner's pain, and there is inherent risk that something will be lost as they try to communicate it. Perhaps this problem is why many sharing the video simply allowed the mediated Garner to speak for himself. However, even with the straightforward claims, we know there were still breakdowns of belief at every turn of the Garner case, including Pantaleo's response to Garner himself, the inaction of the medical responders at the scene of the slaying, the lack of indictment for the officers involved (despite video "evidence"), and the absence of unambiguous public outrage on behalf of Garner.

Later claims regarding the Orta video explicitly react to the judicial response to Garner's death, though they differ in the pain that is being articulated. Instead of making a claim on Garner's behalf, these claims point to the experience of the spectator. The second type of claim, which I earlier argue requires alignment with Garner, involves the audience taking on Garner's pain as their own. This is seen in the protest images in which a mixed-race group of protesters simulate choking while chanting "I can't breathe," and in the images of basketball players warming up in T-shirts with Garner's last words.

Further, as is the case with the "we can't breathe" *Daily News* cover, these claims can (though do not always) signal a collective hurt resulting from the injustice of both Garner's death and the grand jury decision. Such claims signaling the pain of the spectator present an interesting response to Scarry's problem of tone, in which those expressing the pain of another must navigate the space between the pain's presentness and the inherent intimacy with another's body it reveals: "tact and immediacy ordinarily work against one another; thus the difficulty of sustaining either tone is compounded by the necessity of sustaining both simultaneously" (Scarry 9). Rather than negotiate the amount of tact required to communicate Garner's pain without

becoming exploitative, viewers signal their *own* pain as those aligned with Garner. For example, protesters who covered their mouths with text of Garner's last words often appeared to use Garner's words to signal their own pain. Frequent use of "#icantbreathe" to accompany tweets expressing outrage or sadness either at Garner's death or at the grand jury decision support this claim that some employed Garner's expression of pain to point to their own. This allows those who did not experience the trauma of Garner's death first-hand (as witnesses) to participate in it.

Other claims responding to the grand jury decision not to indict Pantaleo move away from communicating individual pain entirely, choosing instead to articulate a threat to collective national identity. The final variety of claim is explicitly a reaction to the judicial response to Garner's death, rather than the trauma of the death itself. The Lady Justice cartoon mentioned above (and other Lady Justice cartoons of the same ilk) is an excellent example of this because, rather than framing the pain in terms of individuals, Bramhall uses an avatar for the national value being threatened. It is structurally similar to other explicit appeals to collective identity (such as the *Daily News* cover of the issue containing Bramhall's cartoon). This claim still attends to Garner's body and last words, as the harm befalling Lady Justice is that she is suffocating, but it moves the place of alignment from an individual person or event to the collective.

Such a shift to centering the experience of the spectator in remediating images of Garner's death presents a number of ethical questions applicable far beyond this specific case, such as who can claim the pain of others? At first blush, it appears obviously problematic for witnesses to make claims to Garner's pain. After all, regardless of how much one connects with the threat of the racist violence Garner faced, Garner's experience is not theirs; they are, unlike Garner, still alive to make these claims. Perhaps, however, it is this very fact of aliveness that makes

these claims so essential. Referring to Rodney King's moral authority resulting from his highly publicized suffering at the hands of police, Linda Williams posits "only the beaten Black man—not the city's Black mayor . . . had the kind of moral authority to make this plea [for an end to rioting] effective" (Williams 253). If King's moral authority was conferred by his suffering, so too would Garner's. However, unlike King, Garner himself cannot be an authority because he died. Perhaps, then, it is Garner's words themselves that take on the moral authority. Therefore, those claiming his final words and suffering appear to be taking on his authoritative role within social discourse regarding police violence. The images of his suffering lend credibility to claims being made on his behalf.

Even so, how those claims are made (and by whom they are made) matters. Garner's moral authority cannot transfer to just anyone. Individuals without the same risk of police brutality cannot make legitimate claims to the pain or fear expressed by those closely aligned with Garner because they do not understand the context of his pain. However, this does not make all responses to Garner's death by cultural surrogates illegitimate or in poor taste. The white people at the die-in at Grand Central can perform allusions to Garner's physical pain in an act of group solidarity, but the white woman standing alone with "I can't breathe" duct taped to her mouth seems (to me) to have moved into the realm of the inappropriate because she is performatively aligning her body with Garner's pain even though her body is not villainized, marginalized, or minoritized the way Garner's was (see Appendix A, 5). Responses to the grand jury decision—like Bramhall's—allow those without the same claims to police violence to participate in the trauma of the failed judiciary and see it as a threat to the national collectivity. Such claims to the threatened national identity reveal the potential scope of remediated claims to trauma.

Parsing through the kinds of claims to collective identity being made about Garner's death allows one to see the variety of cultural work being done to position it as a cultural trauma. While it is certainly important to be critical of the ways claims are being made, becoming too mired in questions of who is permitted to identify with Garner pulls attention away from more pressing questions about videos like Orta's. After all, the remediations discussed in this paper are often a direct response to the problem of belief—a question to which Orta's video sits in uneasy relationship. As I have stated elsewhere, lack of belief exists at the heart of the Garner case. The NYPD officers who targeted Garner did not believe him when he said he had done nothing wrong; they then did not believe him when he said he could not breathe 11 times; the audience-public was not unanimously convinced of state wrong doing despite the presence of Orta's bystander video; and the grand jury did not believe Daniel Pantaleo committed a crime, despite being shown footage of him pinning and choking an unarmed civilian on a city street.

Many (myself included) naively assumed that Orta's video would serve as sufficient evidence of Pantaleo's excessive force in both the court of law and public opinion. However, as Safiya Umoja Noble reminds us in her call for critical surveillance literacy, evidence must be "legitimized by the state" (Noble 149). Bystander videos cannot themselves be evidence without state approval, and—even in cases like Garner's where the bystander video became evidence—there is no guarantee the court will see the evidence as sufficient.

Perhaps, then, the most important work of remediation is not how it attends to Garner's body when those charged with protecting him did not; or in how it allows claims to be made that position his death as a cultural trauma. The cultural work of remediation articulates the belief that Garner's experience—and the experiences of countless other Black folks—was real and traumatic. Just as alignment is a choice, so too is belief. These remediated images, while in some

cases flawed, are public displays of belief in Garner, and in Black folks who have been making claims to state-sanctioned violence for as long as this country has existed. And at a time where publicly declaring the inherent existential worth of Black life is contested terrain, this is work worth doing.

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Appendix A:

Images

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