

BLACK DEATH: A NEW FORM OF PORN

Do we show these videos, or not?

words by Camryn Simon

This article is dedicated to all the Black lives lost that weren't recorded.

When I was 14-years-old, my father forced my entire family to watch *12 Years A Slave*. My mom chuckled that she needed a tequila shot to manage. Who would've known I needed one too? I had never seen Black death portrayed as gruesomely on a television screen — nevertheless at the hands of a white person. The effects of that movie really made me hate white people for a little while — and I mean HATE.

Fast forward seven years, and I'm continuously seeing Black brutality and death on my television screen. And Instagram stories. And Twitter feed. A lot has changed within that time frame: I've grown to not hate white people for their ancestors' choices, although this is still a work in progress, and I've drunk enough tequila to make up for the shot I missed out on seven years prior. But why do I keep seeing Black people being murdered by white people on my television screen? These days, it's not a movie imitating history; it's real life. The problem with videos portraying Black brutality is rooted in the history of Black death as a means for entertainment.

Black death and suffering have been a spectacle ever since colonizers decided it was a good idea to use us as free labor. The footage of brutalized Black bodies swinging from trees surrounded by celebratory white gatherers (including children) was endless and prevalent in a variety of states during the post-Civil War era, until the 1950s. Nowadays, the obsession with videos of Black death is just as frequent, especially in the consumption patterns of white people. However, the question remains: **do we show and share videos of Black bodies being murdered or do we not?**

NO, WE SHOULDN'T.

There is trauma in being Black and seeing my people killed by the institutions that are supposed to keep us safe. The rampant sharing desensitizes and dehumanizes the lives of the Black people in the videos, creating a frenzy of trauma porn. As one of the two Black television, radio, and film professors at the S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications at Syracuse University, Professor J. Christopher Hamilton understands the role videos like those of Ahmaud Arbery and George Floyd's murders can play in dehumanizing victims.

"I'm certain it does [dehumanize victims], but there are a lot of things that qualify [dehumanization]; it's the frequency at which the videos or these kinds of images are shared and the context in which they're shared," Hamilton said.

The frequent nature of these videos is cause for concern. From media outlets to social media posts, the packaging and framing surrounding these videos disregard the humanity of the victims. When people televise, post, or share these videos without context, viewers see a one-dimensional portrayal of Black life and Black death.

For months after the death of Ahmaud Arbery, there was no media circulation contextualizing his life. It was simply the video of him being killed coupled with a headshot of him in a suit and tie. This type of reporting is not only sloppy, but blatantly disregards Arbery's life, reducing his 25 years on Earth to a single video.

The victims of police brutality had lives, families, and loved ones just like everybody else. Those stories deserve the same air time, if not more than the recordings of their last breath.

"This [was] a person, not just a piece of meat," Hamilton said.

YES, WE SHOULD.

I understand that if these videos aren't shared, no one will believe that Black people are being shot, in the back with their hands up, by police. This is the crux of the argument for sharing these forms of content. These videos reinforce the long-winded narrative Blacks in this country have been screaming: this keeps happening to us. When you see George Floyd with a knee in his neck for eight minutes, there is no margin for alternative story endings or hypotheses. That is what the fuck happened.

"No one can claim, 'Oh maybe his hands were free.' No one can say, 'The officer felt threatened.' No one can say, 'Oh maybe he didn't realize how long he had his foot on his neck.' It was a perfect example of what happens to us at the hands of police that it galvanized people across the nation, and then on top of that, it helped to support the movements that were already ongoing," Hamilton said.

George Floyd's death forced America to take a hard look in the mirror and recognize our hideousness. Lynne Adrine, the Director of the D.C. Graduate Program for Broadcast & Digital Journalism at the S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications, argued Floyd's death provided a platform for this summer to unfold the way it did.

"We as a community have extensively said this is what happens to us and the effects are severe. Without the video [George Floyd's] there would not have been what we saw this past summer," Adrine said. The Black Lives Matter movement has been able to rally around the acts of police brutality this summer. Not only has the movement been able to reach larger audiences, but we've also been able to create more action-oriented steps at the grassroots level. The gruesome videos from this summer have even spurred actions from those at the top, with Democratic senators kneeling for eight minutes and 46 seconds in an act that can only be described as performative bullshit. Nevertheless, I doubt we would've seen these progressions (and transgressions) without the videos being recorded and shared.

I had the opportunity last spring to take

a class specifically about this topic and it was profound for me. Every once in a while, Dr. Biko Gray, Assistant Professor of Religion at Syracuse University, teaches Black Lives Matter and Religion. As part of the class mechanics, Gray plays all the videos of black people being killed in one class, only once.

"I've tried different ways. Initially, my response is 'All the black students, you can leave if you want to because this shit's about to get real, don't stay if you can't take this shit, get up and roll. But all the non-Black students have to stay and watch this,'" Gray said.

Even for Gray, an educator who has spent his entire life researching the connections between race, culture, and religion, this is a hard decision to make. On the one hand, you'd expect everyone who's taking a class such as Black Lives Matter and Religion to have already seen the videos, but on the other hand, professors teaching classes of this topic struggle with the reactions they might get from non-Black students. "I've been thinking about this for some time now, most non-Black students, particularly white students are in the class because they 'want to be better.' What does it mean to show this to those kinds of students, when what could possibly happen is that my white students/non-Black students begin to think they're better or they're good because they feel badly about watching these videos?" Gray said.

Gray brings up a valid point about white guilt. Not only is it a nuisance, but if left untreated, it can cause white people to fall in love with Black suffering. I know this is going to hit home for some of y'all, but just because you feel bad about watching Black people die doesn't make you a better white person. It only enforces the dynamic of making white people feel comfortable about Black death. Newsflash, there's nothing comfortable about Black death.

Truthfully, there is no right or wrong answer to the exhausting question of whether or not we should be showing and sharing videos of Black bodies being murdered. Yet one thing's for certain, it's depressing that there are enough videos for me to write this entire article.

"It will always be too much because we never should've fucking died in the first place," said Gray.