

THE SPECTACLE OF HISTORICAL TRAUMA ON BLACK BODIES IN AMERICA: SUBJECTIVITY, ABJECTION, AND COMMODIFICATION OF THE WHITE/BLACK GAZE



Forum for Contemporary Issues
in Language and Literature
No. IV/2023

ISSN: 2391-9426
doi.org/10.34739/fci.2023.04.07

Rosemary Briseño

ORCID: 0009-0008-1316-4780

Sul Ross State University

Abstract

In 1994 Elizabeth Alexander's "Can you be Black and Look at This?": Reading the Rodney King Video(s)" was published in *The New Yorker* magazine. Alexander focuses on the ways in which Black bodies have been the focal point of public pain, torture, and humiliation for centuries. These public lynchings, whippings, and other forms of physical abuse leading to maiming and death have been elements central to the entertainment for the racial status quo. Alexander's essay also focuses on the ways in which there has always been a "Black gaze" bearing witness to the decimation of other Black bodies – the legacy of which leads to a continued cycle of both psychological and historic trauma that is (re)visited over and over again. Of course, with the prevalence of technology now a norm, such incidents of recorded violence are part of life in America. As the United States' greatest cancer, racism, continues to be a root cause of this violence, neither the killing of Blacks nor survivors' consciousness will be healed; and worse, the spectacle of racial violence will continue to perpetuate victims on various levels: 1) as victims directly tied to such violence and 2) as witnesses to said violence. My proposed essay focuses on the tragedy of Black bodies as spectacles of public pain--whether they are viewed as victims, as specimens of morbid curiosity, or as receptacles of displaced hate and disgust; and even as supposed rightly displays of justices incurred, simply because the body in question is Black ("They got what they deserved. They should have just pulled over"). I will focus on various, very public historical and modern-day lynchings, from Emmett Till to George Floyd, and explore the cause and effects against Blacks in America. Ultimately, the essay poses the following questions: who is the monster, who are the victims? And at what cost will this continuum perpetuate the legacy of trauma of the American Black population?

Key words

black/white gaze, racism, abjection, objectification, psychic trauma

Introduction

Lynching is defined as extrajudicial punishment without due process, and although there are variations on the process, it has followed a basic pattern in the United States. First, the person to be lynched is almost always a minoritized person who

represents the inherent propensity of Othered identities for lawlessness, which is attributed to the *entire* Black, Latino, Asian, or Othered race. Second, the lynched person represents what happens whenever the racial social order is transgressed; and third, they represent the purging of toxicity from the purity of racial whiteness. To white America, especially to whites living in the southern US, lynching has been considered a good thing. This is why lynch mobs are memorialized in photos as joyous, and lynchings have been considered family-oriented affairs.

Although this gruesome form of justice was horrific and macabre, the prevailing mood at lynchings themselves was not solemnity or horror because lynching solidified white racial hierarchy as lawful, even God-given. Lynching functions as a sociopolitical control mechanism operating on the premise of terror and fear, ensuring the perpetuation of the white, superior social order. Lynchings therefore do not just constitute extrajudicial punishment for crimes committed. Real or not, these public executions transcend the supposed crime, and they function as a form of racist and perverted symbolic justice meant to safeguard and ensure the greater good of white society; that is, to ensure that the racial status quo elevated whiteness.

As heinous as this crime is, America has never atoned for its sins against members of its own. Never.

In 1963, one year before the Civil Rights Act was passed, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. compared the Declaration of Independence to a bounced check marked “insufficient funds,” because although there were waves of positive federal policy changes, many non-white Americans could not participate in the protection these laws offered. The US should have begun to overhaul its principles and practices, wholly negating the twisted interpretation of the 14th Amendment as allowing “separate but equal” public facilities and sanctioning states that continued to misinterpret this Reconstruction-era amendment as one supposedly reflecting a truly egalitarian society. Instead, lynchings continued as a form of extrajudicial punishment without due process. In fact, lynchings in the United States have never really stopped.

Trees, lamp posts, nooses, and newspaper stories have been replaced by police chases, bullets in backs, and the slick treatment of Black death in popular culture. If racism, Jim Crow, and lynching are so horrific, if the psychopathology of Black America is historically and fragile depending on such variants as the capability of handling life-course trauma burdens, why then is the spectacle of the torture of Black bodies still projected in various public venues including social media, the news, and film, reaching an audience of not thousands, but millions worldwide?

Perhaps the answer lies in the causal connection inherent in the abjection of Blackness, which is firmly rooted in systemic racism and color-blind racial ideology, both of which directly contribute to the inability of understanding Otherness; that is, minority consciousness. This problem simultaneously ascribes a lower hierarchy to

those existing in the racial and cultural periphery of the racial status quo. Whether the lack of empathy is intentional or not, the result is the same: Black pain and psychic trauma are either misunderstood or wholly negated and nonchalantly dismissed. This phenomenological removal allows for the abjection of Blackness; as Fanon argues in *Black Skin, Black Masks*, “to be black is to have been blackened” (qtd. in Scott 2010, 38). In other words, it is easier to destroy something you don’t understand, than something you understand completely.

1. Objectification and the White/Black Gaze

In 1995, philosopher Martha Nussbaum published an article quite simply titled “Objectification”. The basic meaning of the word is not at issue; she defines it as “the seeing and/or treating of someone as an object” (Nussbaum 1995, 256). Rather, Nussbaum expands upon its denotative definition, exploring seven distinctions within this basic concept:

- Denial of autonomy – treating the person as lacking in autonomy or self-determination;
- Inertness – treating the person as lacking in agency or ability to act;
- Fungibility – treating the person as interchangeable with (other) objects;
- Violability – treating the person as lacking in boundary integrity and thus violable, “as something that it is permissible to break up, smash, break into”;
- Ownership – treating the person as though they can be owned, bought, or sold (as in slavery);
- Denial of subjectivity – treating the person as though there is no need to be concerned about their experiences or feelings.

Nussbaum further problematizes “objectivity” by applying the notions of both circumstance and context, which, she argues, complicates the intrinsic value of the word as a negative connotation but also, depending on context, as a positive one—though regardless of its contextual interpretation, the term “objectification” is nevertheless still “morally problematic” (Nussbaum 1995, 251). It is at this juncture where I will explore just how “morally problematic” the act of objectification is when contexts and circumstances reflect the torture, murder, and infotainment value of the public, psychic, and physical torture of Black bodies today.

Registering one’s place in the social and cultural milieu, that is, comparing and contrasting yourself to others around you, is a common method of understanding the self. Here, we have the notion of the object and subject, where “subject” infers agency and autonomy and “object” infers the opposite; one might even call it disenfranchisement, since that is the absence, or a weakened or threatened state, of agency or autonomy. In feminist studies, when women’s bodies are sexualized, when the *mise en scène* is tailored for men’s consumption, the phenomenon is referred to as the male gaze (Mulvey 1975). This is especially so when mutual exclusivity

normalizes the paradigm, such as when women's breasts cannot be regarded as both utilitarian and sexually desirable at the same time because objectifying women's bodies as sexual objects is normative.

The mechanics of the male gaze assert women as the passive-object and men as the active-possessor of this gaze. In short, as Laura Mulvey has stated: men *watch* women. Autonomy and thus power and agency rests with the watcher, not with the entity being watched. The corresponding process of racial objectification takes place via the white gaze, where Black trauma is innocently characterized as reportable news (the latest murder of Black male youth), or justified actions by law enforcement (he shouldn't have run), or simply as entertainment (*12 Years a Slave*). Racial objectification is then decoded by the Black gaze as a continuation of racist protocols. As with the male gaze, where disenfranchisement is accorded to who or what is being objectified or *watched*, in a country built on the backs of racialized Others, the white gaze asserts power and control over the Black gaze, and the resulting narrative is at best skewed and misunderstood. In its worst form, it is traumatic, racist, and oppressive.

2. The Spectacle of Black Trauma

The conversation regarding the spectacle of Black trauma is not new. Elizabeth Alexander's "Can you be Black and Look at This?": Reading the Rodney King Video(s)", published in 1994 in *New Yorker* magazine, shows how Black bodies have been a focal point of public pain, torture, and humiliation for centuries. Public lynchings, whippings, and other forms of physical abuse and the degradation of Black America have been central to White-centered public entertainment since the early 19th and 20th centuries. But the fact that there has always been a Black gaze bearing witness to the decimation of other Black bodies, means that there is a continued cycle of both psychological and historic trauma that is (re)visited over and over again. This confounding legacy for Black Americans is especially troubling with the prevalence and instantaneous nature of today's technology. Such incidents of recorded and repeated violence are part of popular culture in America. The Black gaze continues to function as a site of Black trauma—as object, not subject, the effect of which can widen the already present racial divide.

In one regard it could be argued that news outlets are just doing their job—reporting the news—but when the focus is the epidemic of the killing of Black Americans by police, no remedies are offered to address the problem, and the narrative never changes, the resulting trauma to audiences most intimately able to connect to the story, that is, other Black Americans, is never-ending.

3. Mamie Till–Mobley

But what about instances where the depiction of Black trauma the Black gaze controls the story, where the Black consciousness is primary and not secondary? This is what happened when Mamie Till-Mobley’s young son, Emmett Till, was lynched in 1955 in Mississippi by two white men for supposedly whistling at Carolyn Bryant, a white woman.

Till-Mobley held an open casket funeral to “show the world what they had done to [her] son”. She actively chose to make an example of her son’s murder, to show the inhumanity of lynching. Her actions highlight the subjectivity of the Black gaze; that is, the narrative is controlled by the persecuted, not the prosecution. The distinction lies in how contextual meaning is dictated, to whom, and why. Till-Mobley invited thousands of people to bear witness to how her young son suffered horribly and unjustly, and she succeeded in educating others about the effects of racial disparities in America.

In contrast, many years later, in 1994, Till-Mobley, with Christopher Benson, wrote *Death of Innocence: The Story of the Hate Crime that Changed America*. The book recounts how Benson was invited to listen in while Roy Bryant, one of the white men charged and tried for Emmett Till’s murder, was interviewed on *Soundprint*, one of America’s longest running documentary series on National Public Radio. In stark contrast to the exegesis of Till-Mobley’s narrative, Bryant, the husband of Carolyn Bryant, makes himself a victim, blaming Emmett Till for the grief he suffered since his acquittal in September, 1955. Bryant actually claimed Emmett Till ruined *his* life. He said, “Emmett Till is dead. I don’t know why he can’t just stay dead. Let that goddamn stuff die.” When pushed further, Bryant said that if he had the chance to do it all over again, he would (Till-Mobley, 1994, 261). Bryant’s rhetoric affirms the machinations of the white gaze once it is threatened – the propensity to engage in white victimhood, express the desire to stop living in the past, and blame those living in the cultural periphery for every misfortune in their lives.

When the subjectivity of the Black experience is objectified Black people are denied self-determination and perceived as lacking in agency, treating the person as interchangeable and expendable, and rendering them inert and inhuman. This necessitates a more careful critical analysis of how the Black gaze is interpreted, by whom and why, such as when another lynching took place in America: this time, that of 18-year-old Michael Brown, who was fatally shot in 2014 by Darren Wilson, a white police officer in Ferguson, Missouri.

The “Hands up. Don’t shoot” trope quickly gained momentum, as witnesses claimed Brown indeed had his hands up but was nonetheless shot a total of six times. News channels around the world carried the story. In many of these accounts, Brown’s body, lying on the pavement, blood trailing from underneath him, was shown. It was easy to get photographs or video footage of the crime scene since

Michael Brown's body was left on Canfield Drive in Ferguson for over four hours. The incident brought on political unrest pointing to the questionable use of deadly force and police insensitivity. Further furor was ignited when Wilson was found not guilty by a Missouri grand jury.

When George Floyd was slowly murdered in 2020 by Derek Chauvin, a white officer on the Minneapolis police force, audiences worldwide heard the fear and panic in Floyd's voice as he lay dying in the street. We heard him cry out, "I can't breathe" multiple times, and then as his death grew near, we heard him call out "Mama", as he was slowly asphyxiated by Chauvin, who very calmly, very firmly kept a knee on Floyd's neck and back for over nine minutes until he died. These public lynchings are not just news stories; they are ongoing recapitulations of America's race problem.

4. And Now for *Them*

If one seeks respite from the bombardment of visuals regarding the objectification, abjection, and commodification of the Black gaze by looking at streaming, online entertainment, it will not be found in Amazon Prime's horror series, *Them*.

The series premiered in April 2021 and was highly anticipated by critics and audiences, but it received mixed reviews. It focuses on a Black family, the Emorys, who are part of the Great Migration that took place in the US between 1910 and 1970, when approximately 6 million African-Americans left the Jim Crow South in hopes of better lives elsewhere. The Emorys relocate to Compton, California, which was at the time a very white, upper-middle-class neighborhood of Los Angeles. As the family drives past neat, pastel-colored houses, all variations of the ranch-style architectural plan popular at mid-century, the white gaze is immediately upon them. The Emorys are being watched with great suspicion—surveilled, in fact.

The white gaze culminates in the eyes of their across-the-street neighbor, Betty Wendell. She watches with incredulity and in disgust as the Emorys exit their vehicle to admire their new home before her attention is drawn to a small tear in the perfectly clean, neat wallpaper lining her living room. As she fingers the torn fabric, the metaphor is clear; the fabric of Betty's pristinely white, neat, tidy neighborhood is ripping at the seams. And at once we are made to understand that the Emorys are to blame for the decline of utopian white suburbia.

In another scene, the patriarch of the Emory family, Henry, is repeatedly infantilized and degraded by his white boss, Mr. Berks. Henry knows he must keep quiet and be respectful even as his boss spews a toxic mix of compliments and insults. But the relationship is not a conventional boss-employee relationship because the issue of race uniquely complicates their tenuous hierarchy. Henry must withstand the abuse his boss hurls at him, and although he mostly succeeds in holding his

tongue and thus, his job, his repeated near-altercations with Mr. Berks begin to weaken Henry's fortitude and positive attitude toward work.

During one tongue-lashing, we see Henry ball his hands into fists so tightly that his fingernails cut into his palms, making him bleed. Henry then retreats to the restroom and removes disposable paper towels from the dispenser on a wall, many more than he needs to dry his hands. He enters an empty stall and screams loud and long, almost wailing into the large wad of paper napkins. It is a visceral release of the frustration, anger, and humiliation he has suffered. Crippled by self-doubt, he begins questioning his place as the only Black engineer in the firm, as well as his role as husband, father, and protector of a Black family living in a white neighborhood in 1953.

Each of the characters, Black or white, become versions of their worst selves. Henry, for example, is intelligent, an excellent family fiduciary, and loving husband and father; but a supernatural presence, known only as Tap Dance Man, ghoulishly fashioned after Jim Crow, taunts Henry, making him doubt his life choices, and encourages him to fight back against his white boss, lest Henry's inaction transforms Henry *into* Jim Crow. It is here where the commodification and objectification of the Black gaze manifests as a result of this racist imagery. After Reconstruction in the 1870s, when legislature was no longer occupied by carpetbaggers, Jim Crow replaced slavery as an "overarching racial caste system of legalized discrimination" (Carter et al., 2018). Jim Crow was not only "legalized discrimination", it was also a living metaphor, a way of life for Blacks. Jim Crow, the caricature, existed in many forms: the Brute, the Tom, the Savage, the Coon, and the Picaninny to name a few, but all existed as a manifestation of anti-Black racism. Therefore, to suggest that Henry might manifest into a modern-day embodiment of one of the versions of Jim Crow, is to painfully manipulate and twist the Black gaze.

Two episodes, titled "Covenant I" and "Covenant II" focus on the origins of the subject/object paradigm and thus the establishment of the hierarchical racial divide. "Covenant I" (incidentally, the only episode directed by a woman and woman of color, Janzica Bravo) illustrates the cruel precariousness of life for Blacks in America in the 50s. It begins by establishing the white gaze as the entity in control, and the Black gaze at its mercy: three white individuals come across the Emory's homestead when Henry Emory and their two children are not home, leaving Lucky Emory (Henry's wife) and Chester, their infant son home alone.

These three strangers invade the Emory home in broad daylight – a metaphor representing how Black bodies are violable, lacking in boundary integrity. The episode is infamous for an extremely disturbing scene involving Lucky being raped while the other intruders play "Cat in the Bag", a take on the children's game Hot Potato, with Chester, the Emorys' infant son as the "cat" or "potato". Lucky watches, helplessly, as her baby is violently tossed from one white intruder to the next until the baby dies.

“Covenant II” asserts that a misinterpretation of the Bible is the genesis of racism. The episode is gory and violent, with disturbing imagery of lynching and immolation, imagery reminiscent of actual historical events. In these scenes, African-American victims are subjected to inhumane, viciously cruel barbarism, seemingly without reason other than to visually (re)perform Black degradation for the sake of entertaining white audiences.

The series *Them*, like the never-ending news stories on social media about the public lynching of Black America by police officers, relies on the white gaze while subverting Black consciousness and trapping it in the historic trauma of racism. They showcase this trauma for profit only. They each rely on an audience that appreciates horror and sensationalism, an audience able to separate itself from the characters that should be receiving their empathy. Black consciousness suffers insult after injury repeatedly without deep, complex, or politically relevant commentary.

Conclusion

Focusing on crimes committed against Black consciousness sans resolution or failing to demonstrate the causal connections between violence and the mechanics of racism make racism normative and therefore invisible. The invisibility of this audiovisual formula for garnering viewers and ratings makes it especially troubling. Although racist incidents are fleeting on celluloid, the Black gaze is mired in a history of trauma and series like *Them* perpetuate that trauma.

Struggling to survive under the white gaze without either access to recourse or the ability to flip the historic narrative, the Black gaze remains precarious, and the racial status quo retains its footing. *Them*, like news stories sensationalizing modern-day lynchings of Black Americans, offers no new narrative, no positive (even if fantastical) revisionist history. Perhaps the series received mixed reviews because audiences found its commodification of the Black gaze problematic. And like the Amazon series, news stories about the modern-day lynching of Black America without meaningful commentary, leaves the insightful, more conscientious part of the American public asking, “What the hell is the point?”

References

- Carter, I., Gonzalez, B., & Hayes, C. (2018). "The Jim Crow Effect on Federal Policy and Practice: Social Engineering and the Making of Metropolis in Black and White". In *Broken Promises, Black Deaths, & Blue Ribbons*. Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004378735_001.
- Marvin, L. (Writer), & Orlando, D. (Director). 2021. Covenant I. (Season 1, episode 5) [TV series episode]. In Waithe, L. (Executive Producer), *Them*. Amazon.
- Mulvey, Laura. 1975. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", *Screen*, Volume 16, Issue 3, Autumn 1975, Pages 6–18, <https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/16.3.6>.

Nussbaum, Martha C. 1995. "Objectification". *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 24: 249–291.

Orlando, D. (Writer) & Marvin, L. (Director). 2021. *Covenant II: Welcome to Eidelon*. (Season I, episode 9) [TV series]. In Waithe, L., 2021. *Amazon*.

Scott, Darieck. 2010. *Extravagant Abjection: Blackness, Power, and Sexuality in the African American Literary Imagination*. New York: NYU Press.

Tillet, Salamishah. 2020. "Endless Grief: The Spectacle of 'Black Bodies in Pain'". *New York Times*, 19 Jun. 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/19/arts/elizabeth-alexander-george-floyd-video-protests.html>.

Till-Mobley, Mamie. 2003. *Death of Innocence: The Story of the Hate Crime That Changed America*. New York: Random House, EBSCOhost, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=edshlc&AN=edshlc.009225137.4&site=eds-live.
