Anti-Trans Optics: Recognition, Opacity, and the Image of Force

If the state is ready to kill to defend itself from the black, sexual, trans body brought before it, do we want to be somebody before the state, or no-body against it?

—Denise Ferreira da Silva, “Refuse Powers’ Grasp”

With the height of trans visibility has also been the height of trans violence and trans murders.

—CeCe McDonald

“H e-she, come here!”

Defiantly looking away with her arms and legs crossed, Duanna Johnson refuses the hail of Bridges McRae, an officer with the Memphis Police Department.

“Faggot, I’m talking to you!” McRae’s demand grows with angered force against Johnson’s resistance.

Johnson, a black transgender woman, had been arrested earlier that evening under the suspicion of prostitution, a charge often levied against trans women of color who dare to exist in public. On that February night in 2008, in the Shelby County jail’s intake area, she remained seated in silent protest, refusing to become the subject, which is to say the object, of the anti-trans, anti-queer, and anti-black utterances of Officer McRae.¹

Framed within the frame, a closed-circuit television (CCTV) captured the event. The high-angle wide shot opens with Johnson sitting in a chair a few feet behind McRae. The silent image shows McRae standing with his
uniformed back toward Johnson as he fills out paperwork at the booking window. The low resolution pixelates the unfolding image as the continuous long shot mediates the frame. More impressionistic than high definition, the image surveils as it conceals. Two other uniformed officers casually talk in the background, while a third waits in line behind them. The camera captures through its still gaze a tableau vivant: the everydayness of administrative violence.

Enraged by Johnson’s audacity, McRae turns away from the window and walks a few steps over to where she remains seated. He reaches to snatch her face or possibly her neck, sending her into a fast lean backward in an attempt to escape his grasp. The commotion breaks the still of the room, and the person sitting behind Johnson gets out of their seat; it also catches the attention of the other officers. McRae retreats a few inches and readies himself for the real attack. He slips handcuffs around his leather-gloved right hand, cocks his arm back, using physics and the force of history to ensure the most brutal swing possible. A crowd of officers move in closer to guarantee an unobstructed view. James Swain, a fellow officer, enters the frame and circles around behind Johnson. He then pins her shoulders to the chair so she cannot use them to shield herself from McRae’s blows.

After a few more strikes, Johnson’s skin gives way and a stream of blood runs down her face. Fearing her suspended death is about to materialize, Johnson springs to her feet and starts swinging her arms like a windmill in self-defense. Seconds later, she returns to her seat as McRae again punches her. Tired from the attack, or perhaps bored, McRae reaches for the pepper spray holstered to his belt and sprays Johnson’s eyes, nose, and mouth. The pain causes her body to collapse as McRae forces his weighted knee into her spine, grinding her further into the tile floor as he cuffs her hands behind her back, marking his victory.

Brutalized, bleeding from head wounds, and pepper sprayed, Johnson’s tortured and bound body flails in contempt. In a gust of adrenal agony, Johnson works her way back into a chair, unable to escape the toxicity of her own flesh. She again stands and paces pack and forth with her hands cuffed behind her back, still unable to clear the chemicals and blood from her eyes, nose, and mouth.

The tape ends as an officer with medical supplies examines McRae in the foreground of the frame while a nurse enters and walks past Johnson to also attend to him. Four officers and the nurse casually talk with McRae, possibly replaying the drama in celebration. Johnson, now in the background, again sits in the row of chairs, just a few seats over from where the beating
began. Rhythmically rocking back and forth, she remains shackled, soaked in weaponized chemicals, with no medical attention, inhabiting the slow death of carceral life.²

After the initial beating, Johnson appeared on local news stations to publicize the abuse she was subjected to and disseminate the CCTV recording. While Johnson’s stated wish for the public to witness her beating might seem to remedy the ethical impasse of viewing the tape, we remain sutured to the impure practice of looking. In other words, both seeing and not seeing the video bind us through presence and absence in the scene of raw violence. How, then, might we account for, that is to say, how might we be indebted to Johnson as we consume her image? Left unseen, the Johnson video might help us not know our own complicity in the violence she was forced to endure. Yet I choose to narrate it because staying in the space of the visceral is perhaps the only place one can inhabit with the disavowal of the ethical itself.

The image, of course, does not begin or end with the tape. Taking the stand in his own defense, Officer McRae claimed the beating was in self-defense and necessary to restrain Johnson because she was “completely out of control” and that her movements made him “startled, scared, and afraid” (Buser 2010). The self-defense strategy McRae’s attorney constructed was built on Johnson’s inappropriate physicality as a tall, black trans woman. During the trial, both McRae and his defense attorney Frank Trapp exclusively referred to Johnson as “he” and by her legal name, which was not Duanna Johnson. When asked about this by the federal prosecutor, McRae responded, “It’s not important. I was just referring to him as he” (Buser 2010).

Even with the incriminating testimony of a fellow officer and the surveillance tape, on the last day of the trial, the jury reported that it could not reach a verdict. US District Court Judge Anderson then gave the jurors an Allen charge, ordering them back into deliberation over the weekend. When the jury appeared the following Monday, they reported that they were still deadlocked. Thus, the judge officially called a mistrial.

Wanting to avoid another trial, McRae eventually pleaded guilty in August 2010. His plea deal was for the charges stemming from the beating of Johnson and for tax evasion. On his tax form on file with the Memphis Police Department, he had claimed ninety-nine dependents, which meant that he never paid income tax while he was employed as a police officer. The sentence for both the beating and the tax evasion was two years in a minimum-security federal work camp, two years of probation, and a fine of $200.
Testimony from Johnson herself might have helped stall the frames that pictured her as a force against which McRae needed to defend himself. Or perhaps the sentimentality produced by a victim’s words would have, at least momentarily, suspended the anti-blackness of the visual and the gender normativity of its syntax. Yet tragically, Johnson was shot dead on November 9, 2008, just five months after the beating. Not far from the shores of the Mississippi, in North Memphis, her body was found on the otherwise deserted Hollywood Avenue. According to initial reports she was shot “execution style” in the head at close range and was left to bleed out on the cold pavement (Mogul, Ritchie, and Whitlock 2011: 142).

Images of Time

Johnson is gone, but the tape remains. How might we read, or radically misread, the visual grammar of the tape to understand both the kinds of force it represents and to work against its seeming inevitability? The horrific murder of Johnson might also be understood as the tape’s extradiegetic final scene, the unfolding of a narrative structure that is not simply racist and transphobic, which are terms too adjacent to name the structuring work these forms of violence index.

Tracing the history of the cinematic, as many have argued, is also a way of charting the instantiation of globalized white supremacy. To be clear, while we must attend to the racist or otherwise phobic depictions that have compromised public visual culture from lynching photography and D. W. Griffith’s 1915 The Birth of the Nation to contemporary times, if we end there we remain in a discursive loop where we continue to struggle within a regime that will never offer relief. After all, racist content would have little power if its form were not structured similarly. Here, then, reading with the tape of Johnson’s beating, we can see the ways optics, as that which both includes and exceeds narrative, produces Johnson as the “no-body” da Silva asked us to think.3

Franz Fanon’s often-cited passage from 1952 on his experience of watching a film in a Paris theater sketches the multiple spaces of seeing and being seen that constitute the visual as a racialized practice. Fanon states (1967: 140) “I cannot go to a film without seeing myself. I wait for me. In the interval, just before the film starts, I wait for me. The people in the theater are watching me, examining me, waiting for me.” Fanon suggests that the anticipation of blackness in the viewing apparatus of the cinema, which I would extend to viewing beyond the theater as well, is imbued with a form of
anti-blackness that is not only seen but also otherwise sensed. Perhaps the most generative aspect of this analysis is that even before the film begins, the racialized gaze is there, anticipating him, while he also awaits its arrival. Fanon's scheme both expands the “time” of the film, meaning it does not begin or end with the rolling of images, and moves us away from assuming that the most insipid forms of colonial racism, here anti-blackness, appear through image alone (Keeling 2003; Marriott 2007).

Expanding the time of the image and the image of time allows us to read the murder of Duanna Johnson as the narrative conclusion of the beating tape. Further, while Fanon was writing specifically about the cinematic, his scheme allows us to build a similar analysis of our psychic bonds with and through surveillance as genre in the contemporary moment. The CCTV footage of Johnson functions much like what Gilles Deleuze (1989: 101), after Henri Bergson, called a “time-image.” For Deleuze, a time-image is the collapsing of past, present, and future that “makes time frightening and inexplicable” (101). While Deleuze was talking about simultaneity in narrative cinema, the time-image here might help us understand the specific genre of the tape where past and future are remade through the present. Or, in other words, the time-image of the tape reminds us that, perhaps for Johnson, there is no moment other than the time of violence.

Here, Fanon’s insistence that the time of the image does not align with the opening scene of the film and Deleuze’s time-image illustrate the brutal semiotics of violence that await, in the interval, both the structure of the visual and the structure of life outside the theater for trans women of color. Given that representation produces and does not simply echo what is assumed to reside in the real, what, then, might representation and recognition offer for a trans politics that resides on the side of flourishing?

**Clocking**

By way of obscuring the question of reparation and redistribution, representation has been produced as the primary site of struggle over “diversity” for mainstream politics (including mainstream LGBT politics) in the United States. The last decade has witnessed a vast proliferation of trans representations that are offered as remedy to the relentless economic, psychic, affective, and physical violence many trans people, and in particular trans women of color, endure. These expanding representations are also used to buttress an argument supporting the unfolding progress of dominant culture. Yet, if we return to CeCe McDonald’s words that open this essay, we know that with this
increased representation comes heightened, or at least sustained, instances of violence. While 2014 was named the “Trans Tipping Point” by Time magazine, this year, 2016, has counted the highest number of trans women of color being violently murdered in the United States. Yet, following the Johnson tape, if we are to understand the visual itself as technologies of anti-black and anti-trans optics, then how might we continue the important project of representation in a visual regime hostile to black trans life?

Rather than an opening toward recognition, a position where one can make a claim instead of being exclusively claimed, representation for Johnson is the prefiguration of her undoing. Her being “clocked” as trans led to her initial arrest, subsequent beating, and, even perhaps, her murder. Being clocked, or being seen as trans, enacts the double bind of recognition: being seen by the other brings you into the world, but more often than not it is also that which might bring you out of it. Through representation—both the CCTV video and descriptions of Johnson in court—the defense was able to produce what Judith Butler (1993) and others have called a reversal of defense, where the party harmed is, through the magic of the law, transformed into the assumed aggressor. Johnson, and not the state, is made to hold the burden of proof.

Tracing a genealogy of the racial and gendered parameters of recognition from G. W. F. Hegel and Fanon to da Silva and McDonald and beyond, how might we imagine the project of recognition as both nondialectical and nondevelopmental? The brutal scene of Johnson’s beating, replayed as the composed testimony of the quiet court, reminds us that recognition is not a smooth space of inevitability, even in struggle. Johnson’s trans identity forces us against a substitutive logic, to once again face the ways race and gender, as lines of recognition, symbols, and embodied parameters, ask for more.

While Fanon rightly turns our attention to the limits of recognition in the colonial scene, he also maintains the teleology of subjectivity by holding on to the dialectics of structure, even for those deemed nonsubjects. Or, if for him revolutionary violence offers a way through the violence of anti-black coloniality, how might we push further on Fanon for those who must remain, as da Silva might suggest, “no-bodies against the state”?

**From Optics to Opacity**

Johnson’s attack and its cinematic afterlife capture the structures of recognition and misrecognition, representation and disappearance that constitute the work of gender and race in and as the fields of the visual. While writing
from a place of gender self-determination that works toward gender as an opening, what is left of our various analytics of recognition? Or, how might we return to the beating tape: not simply to offer yet another way to imagine what we already know—that race, gender, and violence are tightly bound—but to ask how this bind might be undone?4

Furthermore, what tactics of production and sabotage might bring about visual cultures that detonate the never-ending list of anti-trans violence? This question specifically addresses those trapped in the interval of seeing and being seen. We must pose it without a fantasy of closure. To put it another way, at the center of the problem of recognition lies this: how can we be seen without being known and how can we be known without being hunted?5

Indeed, being a “no-body against the state,” a position some are already forced to live, stands against the sovereign promise of positive representation. Read not as absolute abjection but as a tactic of interdiction and direct action, being a “no-body” might force the visual order of things to the point of collapse. On the issue of recognition and radical singularity, Édouard Glissant (1997: 190) has stated, “from the perspective of Western thought, we discover that its basis is this requirement for transparency. In order to understand and thus accept you, I have to measure your solidity with the ideal scale providing me with grounds to make comparisons and, perhaps, judgments. I have to reduce.” This reduction, which Fanon might call being overdetermined, is, as we know, unequally distributed and mandated. Glissant offers a totality of relation in opacity, the radical work of nontransparency that allows for non-dialectic difference—the collectivization of radical singularity.

Glissant continues, “Agree not merely to the right of difference but, carrying this further, agree also to the right of opacity that is not enclosure within an impenetrable autarchy but subsistence within an irreducible singularity” (190). We might read the current order of popular trans representation to be a variation of agreeing to the “right of difference,” as transparency is the precondition of visibility politics.

Opacity is here useful not necessarily as a practice of “going stealth,” residing below or beside the regimes of being seen but not known, although it might be. For Glissant (1997: 193), it is a form of solidarity without being grasped. Here, I am suggesting that it might be one form a radical trans politics might take. Opacity with representation: an irreconcilable tension that opens to something other than the pragmatism of the transparent and its visual economies of violence.6

There is no return and no triumphant narrative to be gleaned here, either from the brutal attack on Johnson or her subsequent death. There are,
of course, countless instances of trans/queer people organizing, thriving, and resisting, even in the midst of ruthless encounters. Furthermore, anti-trans and anti-black optics of the visual must be confronted, by expanding and dangerous practices that open the frame while also doing away with its necessity. And yet there is the inescapable fact that the archive of harm, dismemberment, state-sanctioned torture, and death is still unfolding. This unfolding, which we might call modernity, continues to claim those who exist against it, banishing the possibility of another history, but perhaps not banishing the image of something yet to come.

Notes

This piece is dedicated to Duanna Johnson, and all those who struggle against police violence. I would also like to thank Angela Davis, Donna Haraway, Toshio Meronek, and C. Riley Snorton for conversations that helped form this piece. Any mistakes are my own.

1 The video is viewable on YouTube at youtube.com/watch?v=-lAPlTk69XPo.

2 Further commentary on the beating of Johnson can be found in Richardson 2013: 163–66.

3 With the proliferation of personal technologies (camcorders, camera phones) a genre of the visual has emerged that both references the tropes of cinema and creates new viewing sensibilities. Perhaps inaugurated by the release and reproduction of the 1992 beating video of Rodney King, now every few days a new video surfaces visualizing the multiple forms of harm the police, or their ambassadors, perform against black people. See Gooding-Williams 1993 (especially Ruth Wilson Gilmore’s chapter “Terror Austerity Race Gender Excess Theater”) and Sharpe 2012. On the history of surveillance and black life, see Browne 2015 and Fleetwood 2011.

4 I am here thinking about the relationship between image, language, and meaning in Stuart Hall’s work, particularly Representation (1997).

5 For some examples see the trailer for Reina Gossett and Sasha Wortzel’s forthcoming film, Happy Birthday, Marsha! at www.happybirthdaymarsha.com/. Also see Chris Vargas’s (2016) project in MOTHAs (Museum of Transgender History and Art) www.sfmoha.org/. Both projects, in different ways, ask what forms a trans aesthetic might take.

6 While I am compelled by Zach Blas’s (2013) theorization of “queer opacity” I am here thinking of opacity as prefigurative practice.

References


