

Tonia Sutherland\*

# Making a Killing: On Race, Ritual, and (Re) Membering in Digital Culture

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**Abstract:** This paper investigates cultural, social, and technological issues created by the increasingly widespread circulation of digital records documenting the deaths of black Americans in the United States. This research takes as its foundation questions about ritual, embodiment, memorialization, and oblivion in digital spaces. Further, it examines the interplay between the permanence of the digital sphere and the international human rights concept of the “right to be forgotten,” paying particular attention to black and brown bodies as records and as evidence. Methodologically, the work engages critical race theory, performance studies, archival studies, and digital culture studies, asking how existing technologies reflect the wider social world offline, how they create new cultural interactions, and how those new interactions reshape the real (non-virtual) world.

**Keywords:** digital culture, digital records and social justice, international human rights, African Americans, racism, the right to be forgotten

*Dear Pythagoras,  
equal to the sum of what the matter is  
what's the matter?  
some politicians' pockets growing fatter  
the Robert Moses of the useless chatter  
ignores the data  
ignores the data  
but he keeps building the wall  
between the poor and the rich  
building headquarters for the police worth a billion  
they make a killing!*

Saul Williams, *Ashes*

## Introduction

In the nearly five years since the brutal February 2012 shooting of teenager Trayvon Martin in Sanford, Florida,

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\*Corresponding author: Tonia Sutherland, Assistant Professor, School of Library and Information Studies, University of Alabama, Box 870252, Tuscaloosa, AL 35487. E-Mail: tnsutherland@ua.edu

astonishing numbers of men, women, and children of color have been killed at the hands of police officers and armed citizens who have evaded justice on the basis of a socially constructed and culturally enacted “right to be afraid of blackness” (Noble, “Teaching Trayvon,” p. 12). As with so many horrific and senseless scenes depicting violent loss of life, the shooting deaths of Alton Sterling in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, and Philando Castile in St. Anthony, Minnesota, on consecutive days in July 2016 were recorded by bystanders on cell phones. These digital records were subsequently shared on social media and other digital platforms—and then shared again, and again—taking on a digital life that has come to be known as “going viral.”

As feminist writer and scholar Roxanne Gay has expressed, these viral encounters with violent death on the Internet have begun to occupy a familiar place in American culture. Similar to sentiments expressed by those who witnessed lynched men and women in the post-Reconstruction United States South, records that represent black death in social and other media create a communal sense of emotional distress characterized by feelings of hopelessness, resignation, and complicity that has only begun to be examined by scholars engaged in critical studies of information and digital media cultures. Gay’s public mourning elucidates how 48 seconds of cellphone video—and other similar digital records—have caused a tremendous shift in social consciousness that the mere ability to feel horror and shed tears has become a collective measure of a community’s emotional well-being:

I watched the cellphone video, shot by a bystander and widely available online, of the final moments of a black man’s life. I watched Alton Sterling’s killing, despite my better judgment. I watched even though it was voyeuristic, and in doing so I made myself complicit in the spectacle of black death. The video is a mere 48 seconds long, and it is interminable. To watch another human being shot to death is grotesque. It is horrifying, and even though I feel so resigned, so hopeless, so out of words in the face of such brutal injustice, I take some small comfort in still being able to be horrified and brought to tears. (Gay)

The proliferation of digital records depicting the deaths of people of color in the United States—black Americans in particular—has created cultural and social tensions, and technological issues that remain unresolved in American culture. Paying particular attention to black bodies as re-

cords and as evidence, I view these issues through the sociocultural lenses of ritual, embodiment, memorialization, and oblivion in digital spaces, exploring the interplay between the permanence of the digital sphere and the international human rights concept of the “right to be forgotten.” I believe that while communities of color have long engaged in ritual practices of (re)membering and bearing witness to violent acts as modes of resistance and mourning; in digital spaces these practices have been appropriated to reinforce systems of white supremacist power and racial inequality, re-inscribing structural and systemic racism. To grapple with the problem of the dead “black body” as an embodied record and as a symbol of black fear and white supremacy, I draw on critical race theory, performance studies, archival studies, and digital culture studies. I reject the tendency to “associat[e] [virtual] experiences, social conceptions, and technologies with an escape from the body (White).” In so doing, I would like to invoke performance studies scholar Harvey Young, who asserts in his book *Embodying Black Experience: Stillness, Critical Memory, and the Black Body* that societal ideas of the “black body,” an imagined—and inescapable—myth of blackness, are too frequently projected across the actual bodies of black people, often rendering them targets of abuse.

Critical Race Theory (CRT) is a broad theoretical framework that stems from a synthesis of scholarly work challenging dominant contemporary understandings of race and the law. CRT allows for an understanding of the role of race and racism in creating the conditional possibilities for people of color to be killed at the hands of police officers and armed citizens without also creating the space for restorative justice. To situate the discussions of mourning as ritual, I engage Victor Turner’s and Judith Butler’s scholarship in performance studies. While Turner developed a theory of “social drama” to understand ritual processes in resolving crises and conflicts (Turner, 33), Butler connected Turner’s concept of ritual performance with J.L. Austin’s concept of performative speech acts. Butler’s work theorizes performative resistance and normativity, suggesting that performativity entails the incessant turning of normativity into subversion, and vice versa. Performance Studies also advances an understanding of embodiment as it relates to being-in-the-world and as it is mediated by new technologies. Bryoni Trezise suggests, for example, that trauma is subject to cultural embodiment and that memories of traumatic events are transmitted across time, embedding cultural identities in the minds of future generations.

To frame a discussion of black bodies as records and as evidence, I employ archival studies. *Evidence* is a term

that has different meanings in different contexts whether legal, scientific, or historical. In archival studies, understandings of evidence have been influenced by diplomacy, history, law, textual criticism, management theory, and library science (Gilliland-Swetland 7). Evidence is often used as the basis for constructing legal arguments and testing scientific theories. Traditionally, “evidence” in the archival sense has been defined as “the passive ability of documents and objects and their associated contexts to provide insight into the processes, activities, and events that led to their creation for legal, historical, archaeological, and other purposes” (Gilliland-Swetland 10). The concept of evidence in archival discourse appears as early as Hilary Jenkinson’s description of the archivist as one committed to the “sanctity of evidence” (Jenkinson in Cook 177).<sup>1</sup> Digital culture studies asks how new technologies reflect the wider social world offline, how they create new cultural interactions, and how those new interactions reshape the real (non-virtual) world, demonstrating that there really is no distinction between life online and life offline—or virtual and real life.

## Ritual and Public Mourning

On April 4, 1968, civil rights leader Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated at the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, Tennessee. Americans, black and white alike, mourned publically for King, a public figure upon whom had been placed the burdens and possibilities of collective hope. Days later, on April 8, King’s widow, Coretta Scott King, together with the couple’s four small children, led a crowd estimated at 40,000 in a silent march through the streets of Memphis to honor and mourn for King, their fallen leader. So affective was King’s death that President Lyndon B. Johnson declared April 7 a national day of mourning for him. By April 9, a crowd of nearly 300,000 had gathered to attend King’s funeral, and makeshift memorials appeared for King throughout the United States. Public responses to King’s death—particularly among black Americans—were the very exemplar of American public mourning rituals: spontaneous gatherings motivated by shared grief, makeshift memorials, and visible strength in the face of anguish on the part of the bereaved.

Fifty years later, in 2014, Americans again mourned the death of a young, black man. The shooting death of a

<sup>1</sup> For more on the Jenkinsonian notion of evidence, see Terry Cook, “What Is Past Is Prologue: A History of Archival Ideas Since 1898, and the Future Paradigm Shift,” *Archivaria* 43 (Spring 1997): 17–53.

man famous only inside the circles of family and community in Ferguson, Missouri, would spark a national movement: #BlackLivesMatter. The death of Michael Brown, 18, at the hands of a Ferguson law enforcement officer became an emotionally charged historical event in which public mourning rituals shifted, and in which digital visibility played an influential role. Digital visibility often mediates social frictions between the living and the dead. In the case of Michael Brown, however, digital visibility instead *created* cultural frictions of race and racism, through the positioning of Brown as victim and the law enforcement officer as violent killer. By challenging dominant cultural narratives about police benevolence and black male criminality, visual depictions of Brown elicited outrage from communities of color across the nation. Brown, who was in surrender-position, was near his home when he was fatally shot six times in the streets of Ferguson. For four hours, Brown's corpse remained on display in the middle of the street in the summer heat, where he was repeatedly photographed and video recorded. These captured visual records were quickly posted online and just as quickly went viral. The public display of Brown's body shocked the community of Ferguson and ignited a protest movement. At the same time, however, the hypervisual circumstances of Brown's death and the ensuing documentary practices usurped community mourning rituals that would typically preserve and extend community bonds.

Black Americans have specific rituals around grieving, mourning, and death, and for many, death is not seen as an ending but as an important transitional ritual. Because for black Americans grief frequently occurs in the context of a substantially shorter life expectancy than for white Americans, that grief is often experienced alongside entanglements of anger, resentment, and feelings of injustice (Rosenblatt, p. 5). Similarly, mourning rituals tend to reflect the importance of community in a world in which racism is a mainstay of daily life. Funerary practices are part of ritual practices. The homegoing funeral ritual, with its roots in Ancient Egypt, is an elaborate funeral practice that reflects a rich culture of preparing for a funeral and preserving the deceased for their "afterlife." These funerary traditions originated during a time of slavery and resulted from a fusion of North and West African burial traditions and Protestant Christianity. First practiced in the United States during the slavery era, homegoing rituals specifically resisted a culture wherein slaves were required to stage elaborate funerals for deceased slave-owners and their families—while slaves themselves were buried, without ceremony, in unmarked graves in non-crop-producing ground. Homegoing, or "going home,"

rituals are equated with heavenly glory, and these rituals remain strongly resonant in black American funeral traditions today. For black Americans, ritual funerary practices support and preserve the bonds of community. While the Brown family may have wanted a traditional homegoing ritual, Michael Brown instead became part of a nationwide ritual of public mourning, with his funeral recorded and broadcast on YouTube where it still remains for the public to see (YouTube).

Public mourning rituals also have a long history in the United States. From the assassination of presidents Abraham Lincoln and John F. Kennedy to the attacks on September 11, 2001, and the 2016 Orlando nightclub shootings, Americans have collectively mourned the loss of public figures and victims of mass violence in public spaces. In these instances, Victor Turner's theory of "social drama" allows us to understand these ritual processes as aspects of resolving crisis and conflict. These sites of mourning have geographic loci; they are typically centered at "ground zero," where the loss of life occurred. So, too, with Michael Brown, whose public death (and the subsequent documentation of his dead body) is reminiscent of the history of American lynching. Though photographs, postcards, trains, and the telegraph—the technologies of the time—made it easy to circulate images of murdered black men, women, and children during the era of American lynching, there were no social media to replay or autoplay this death, no surprise encounters or repetition of moving images to re-install trauma. Digital culture, however, has created an epistemic shift: the death of Michael Brown—and so many others—has shifted the landscape of public mourning rituals to digital platforms, where death and trauma are continuously re-inscribed, visually and, perhaps, eternally.

As part of growing digital culture trends of documentary- and content-creation, for-profit photography, Instagram, and citizen journalism, photographs snapped of Michael Brown's corpse were quickly made available online. In the years since Brown's death, Google Images has created several classes of filters for photographs of Brown such as "dead," "4 hours," and "the street." That Brown has been reduced from vibrant teenager to a corpse, and that his dead black body lying in the street recalls images of lynching, is not accidental. Noble discusses the political economy of black death, asserting that media corporations and their sponsors benefit financially from the repetitious viewing of these records as a result of increased viewership (Noble, "Media Coverage"). In addition to the various political economies at play, there are social and cultural economies involved in the violent, state-sponsored deaths of people of color. While socio-economics is concerned with how economic activity af-

fects and is shaped by social processes, the study of cultural economics, with intellectual precursors in political economy, sociology, and postmodernism, offers a framework for contextualizing the value of information and the value of networks. For the media, and for those in positions of power, there are political, social, and economic gains to be made by reinscribing images of black death; these visual records are a means of power and control, a powerful reminder that one must be ever-vigilant and ever in fear for one's life. In communities of color, on the other hand, there may be tremendous social capital involved in the widespread distribution of these records; most often created by community members for a common good, they are part of a socially networked system of bearing witness and producing evidence. For communities under the siege of what looks like state-sponsored violence and otherwise in crisis, controlling postmortem narratives and images of the deceased is one way to re(member) the dead.

## (Re)Membering

From the end of the Civil War until the early 1930s, the ritual, extrajudicial practice of lynching became commonplace in the United States. From 1880–1930 an estimated 4000 black Americans were forcefully paraded in the streets and executed for the entertainment of mass mobs and picnicking spectators (Equal Justice Institute). The lynching of black Americans was a widely supported phenomenon used to enforce racial subordination and segregation. Lynching in the United States was also a photographic sport. Before the passage of the Comstock Act, people sent loved ones picture postcards of lynchings they had witnessed and photographs of themselves posed with hanging corpses—widely disseminating images of disfigured—and often dismembered—black bodies hanging from picturesque tress. Also common to lynching practices was the horrific custom of removing body parts—bits of flesh, fingers, toes, internal organs, genitalia—from lynched men, women, and children to be sold as souvenirs. These souvenirs “[recall and remember] the performance of which [they were] a part. [They] not only [gesture] toward the beliefs that motivated [their] theft, but also [render] visible the body from which [they were] taken” (Young, p. 641). This act of remembering, of reconstituting—or (re)membering—is a powerful aspect of bearing witness, of rendering visible what has been made indiscernible or unrecognizable. The lynching souvenir is, in effect, a tangible and material remain of a performed spectacle; it, like other records, saves the past and represents it in the present.

This practice of (re)membering has a digital counterpart in the records documenting black death online: these records, digital representations of violent loss of life—souvenirs of a witnessed event—have been appropriated by the American public for political, social, economic, and cultural gain. For black Americans, the ability to witness the same spectacle over and over again is a marked change from what could be done in the lynching era. In digital culture, the temporality of bearing witness has transformed; indeed, the inescapable repetition of witnessing the violent event can be described as the very structure of trauma. However, as the souvenir exists at the moment of its removal, it is at this point that the body part literally disassociates itself from the body. (Re)membering, then, in digital culture, also includes aspects of embodiment. There is a societal idea of the “black body” upon which narratives are projected and around which mythologies are formed. This separation of the “black body” imaginary from the lived experiences of black people is dangerous in that it makes possible an ideological severing of idea and corpus. This separation is even more pronounced in digital spaces, particularly when pain and other embodied experiences fail to connect the virtual image and the physical flesh as this notion of the “black body” as souvenir extends into the digital.

To situate embodiment as part of ritual mourning and (re)membering, Victor Turner's and Judith Butler's scholarship in performance studies is useful. Butler's work connects Turner's concept of ritual performance with J. L. Austin's concept of performative speech acts. Butler's work theorizes performative resistance and normativity, suggesting that performativity entails the incessant turning of normativity into subversion, and vice versa. Archivists know that embodied records present unique challenges, including the materiality of the record and concerns about archival permanence. Images, however, require bodies to be seen. Bodies, in this sense, might be thought of as living media that enable us to see, project, and remember images. Thus, the power in sharing visual records of black death on digital platforms is bound up in the materiality of the record itself. The truth of the record resides in its status as performative—a material embodiment—wherein death is performed and replayed, digitally reenacted, and widely witnessed, subverting the tendency in judicial processes to deny the normative truth of the record itself.<sup>2</sup> As Sandra L. Bloom and Michael Reichert suggest:

<sup>2</sup> For more on imaginary records, see Anne J. Gilliland and Michelle Caswell, “Records and their Imaginaries: Imagining the Impossible, Making Possible the Imagined.”

This reenactment behavior ... seems to be biologically based, part of the innate and programmed behavioral repertoire of the traumatized person. We can look at the trauma victim as someone who is—in mime—trying to tell the story of indescribable pain, the pain from which all language has been violently disengaged. From this point of view ... [social disruptions] are actually nonverbal messages from the fragmented and hurt individual to his or her social group .... [T]he individual is trying ... to engage the social group in the shared experience of tragedy, the collective experience of pain. The traumatized person is asking us to help him or her. (Bloom 187)

It is important, then, to call attention to the relationship between the digital public display of visual memory objects and the emotional agency of images: the dead body of Michael Brown has been unceasingly broadcast on small screens, handheld devices—technologies that humans literally wear on their bodies. These mediated mourning rituals can be thought of as a sacred drama, performed as a ritual of virtual—or technological—embodiment, a repetition and (re)membering that constitutes an act of digital memorialization and a palpable fight against the silence of oblivion.

## Memorialization and Commodification

There is an unresolved tension between memorialization and commodification, and a thin line between concerns about oblivion and the freedoms associated with the “right to be forgotten.” One example of the “black body” as record allows for a discussion of how a simple cell can represent an entire black body, and how a single cell, as an embodied record, can also be manipulated and disarticulated from the humanity of the black body from which it came.

In October 1951, Henrietta Lacks, a black woman from Virginia, died of cervical cancer at Johns Hopkins Hospital. In what is now a widely discussed case of medical and racial ethics, Lacks’s cells were used, without permission or informed consent, to create an immortal commercial cell line (HeLa cells), the commercial use of which continues today in contemporary biomedical research.<sup>3</sup> In March 2013, German researchers mapped Lacks’s DNA genome and published the code online. Lacks’s family argued that the published genome was a violation of their privacy and laid bare their most intimate health information, making family health information digitally available

<sup>3</sup> For more on Henrietta Lacks, see Rebecca Skloot, *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*.

to the public and denying them the opportunity to craft their own narratives about their bodies, their heritage, their health, and their future selves.

The story of HeLa has been told and re-told; many versions of the HeLa origin narrative exist. An enduring part of that narrative, however, concerns Henrietta Lacks herself, the woman whose cells live, even though she does not. In the minds of many, the HeLa cells stand for Lacks, and she for them, creating a paradox. As Hannah Landecker notes, “That one party in this relation should be alive and the other dead creates a dramatic tension that continues to generate scientific paper, newspaper and magazine articles, full-length books, and television documentaries. The resolution of the paradox in these narratives is always the same: [the] woman and the cells are immortal—the woman through the cells’ life and the cells through the woman’s death (Landecker 141–42).” Lacks gains immortality, though her death is necessary to elevate the cells from life to immortal life. The HeLa case is one that highlights tensions between memorialization and commodification and that Henrietta Lacks’s family enjoys little agency over her body as an enduring record illustrates concerns over the permanence of records versus the right to be forgotten.

Four years after the death of Henrietta Lacks, Emmett Till, a 14-year-old black child, was lynched in Mississippi for allegedly whistling at a white woman. When Till’s broken, battered body was recovered from the Tallahatchie River, his mother, Mamie Till Mosely, demanded an open casket, emphasizing that the world should see and bear witness to the sheer brutality of what had been done to her son. Mosely wrote of her experience in 2003,

From there, I went to one of his ears. Even though I could recognize the color of the only eye he had left, and even though those two teeth looked like his teeth, and his ankles and his knees were all so familiar, I felt that I still needed something, something more to let me know that was my child. With everything that I had seen and touched, I still could not identify this body as Emmett ... the back of his head was loose from the front part of his face. As I moved around, I saw a bullet hole ... and I could see light shining through the hole on the other side. (Mosely 146)

Till’s bloated, mutilated body was photographed at his funeral in 1955 and published in *Jet* magazine. While the publication of these photographs contributed to the rise of the Civil Rights movement, in the sixty years since, dozens of images of a deceased Emmett Till have now also been published online, where they will remain in perpetuity as they are downloaded and shared, archived by social media sites, and posted to sites like YouTube, Instagram, Tumblr, and Pinterest. In 2017, Dana Schutz’s painting

*Open Casket*, depicting the dead body of Emmett Till, was included in the Whitney Biennial, an art show whose mission is to indicate the country's cultural temperature.

Visual depictions of black death have a long history in the United States, as a reinforcement of and challenge to white supremacy (Fischer).<sup>4</sup> Sometimes these depictions function as acts of memorialization—which have played a significant role in transitional justice. However, as speculative fiction author William C. Anderson notes,

[b]lack people whose lives have been taken become a commons of sorts: Their bodies are utilized as signs of solidarity, collective struggle, and rallying points, and also as media commodities. We must be aware that this metamorphosis of their bodies into perdurable tools puts us at risk of desensitizing ourselves to their fatalities. (Anderson)

Where, then, is the line between memorialization and commodification? There are digital afterlife services such as Twitter's LivesOn, an application that uses the Twitter algorithm to provide a "social afterlife." The service uses an advanced analysis of a user's main Twitter feed to carefully select subjects, likes, or articles that would have been likely to interest the deceased, posting them for surviving friends and family to read. Whereas LivesOn provides social media continuity, websites such as ForeverMissed.com offer those grieving stolen over lives an array of templates and a limited selection of background music to create an online memorial. For \$35 US annually, ForeverMissed.com allows the bereaved to log in with Facebook, control privacy settings, and permit visitors to leave virtual flowers. For an extra fee, the site allows video uploads, multiple administrators, and additional picture uploads (suggesting that the basic fee limits the number of potential image uploads).<sup>5</sup> Most memorial sites are fee-based, an indication that there is money to be made on death and dying in the digital economy.

Facebook and Google have also amended their algorithms to accommodate the digital afterlife as an increasing number of people have become concerned about what happens to their digital assets when they die. Now, nearly five years after Trayvon Martin's death, a search for him on Facebook—a site driven by advertising sales—yields memorial pages, images of white people in blackface and "Trayvon Martin" costumes, several results for Trayvon Martin pages that are not hosted or populated by Martin's surviving family, and pages for activism on the part of Facebook community members inspired by the case. Martin is listed as a "public figure"—as is Emmett Till,

whose death in 1955 long predates the existence of Facebook. Similarly, an image search on Google for Trayvon Martin asks whether the user would prefer to see Martin's lifeless body in a casket or on the ground. Rather than watching lynched bodies on display in the night, humans have moved the spectacle of black death to the Internet, to social media, and to comment sections. Dead black bodies have taken on the archival permanence of digital records.<sup>6</sup> Race and racism are the forces that contribute to black death, and this racism endures online, making and re-making—starring and restaging—black death. This repetition of (re)membering and rituals of memorialization reinscribe racist ideologies and the trauma of the death event. There is marked tension, here, between memorialization and the drive toward technological and digital oblivion.

Recent developments in the European Union (EU) have highlighted the potential need for a universal online "right to be forgotten." In the United States, however, companies operating on the Internet have discovered that enforcing such a right is problematic, primarily due to First Amendment conflicts: the public's right to know stands in direct conflict with an individual's right to be forgotten. The EU's right to be forgotten stems from a legal case: *Google Spain v. AEPD and Mario Costeja González*. The right to be forgotten, in its current incarnation, is the application of a more general right of erasure under the EU's Data Protection Directive of 1995, a directive that applies to search engines as well as any organization that controls and processes EU consumer data (Werfel 30). EU individuals have the right to request that data controllers remove personal data if the information is "inaccurate, inadequate, irrelevant, or excessive" (Werfel 30). By employing content analysis to study UK media websites, a recent study found that the most frequently delisted content refers to violent crime, road accidents, drugs, murder, prostitution, financial misconduct, and sexual assault (Xue 389). In the EU and the UK, those who kill are afforded the right to be forgotten, but what about the dead? Who controls the digital afterlives of those whose lives have been stolen? (As is so often the case, to the "victor" belongs the spoils.)

Economies of spectatorship produce spectacular narratives as commodities; these commodities are then sold to spectators and sponsors (Krier 11). When analyzing the spectacle of black death, one might ask, then, how do users subvert structural decisions around spectatorship

<sup>4</sup> I am grateful to Miriam E. Sweeney for this reference.

<sup>5</sup> For more on these services, see: <http://www.forevermissed.com/> and [https://twitter.com/\\_liveson](https://twitter.com/_liveson).

<sup>6</sup> In archival studies, *permanence* refers to the inherent stability of material that allows it to resist degradation over time. See <http://www2.archivists.org/glossary/terms/p/permanence>.

and sponsorship that are made by companies like Facebook, Twitter, and Google? Accounting for collaborative consumption and a “sharing economy,” black death—particularly in overwhelmingly white online spaces—has become a powerful social, cultural, and political commodity. As Mia Fischer and K. Mohrman assert in their article about *sousveillance*, or surveillance from the ground up, “the socio-political context in which media images of black death are created and disseminated determines their viability to expose and dismantle white supremacy.”

Similarly, in her analysis of death, images, and the media, Barbie Zelizer says that meaning-making where images are concerned is about contingency, imagination, and emotion. Zelizer emphasizes that images do not have a fixed meaning—rather, how they are circulated and consumed in mainstream media governs their interpretation (Zelizer in Fischer). The interplay between memorialization and commodification—between ritual mourning and capital gains—is a matter of cultural appropriation: the use of one group’s cultural practices for the social, political, cultural, and/or economic gain of another group. In the study of race, (re)membering, and ritual in digital culture, we can see that many of those who benefit from systemic and structural racism are, quite literally, “making a killing” by inscribing and reinscribing death and trauma and benefitting socially, culturally, politically, and economically from the power that comes with violent intimidation and reinforcing white supremacy.

## Conclusion

Although a memorial to black lynching victims is planned in Montgomery, Alabama, no prominent public memorial or monument now commemorates the thousands of black Americans who were lynched in America—a powerful statement about a collective failure to value the black lives stolen in this brutal campaign of racial violence. By the same measure, no centralized digital memorial exists to commemorate those whose lives were stolen as part of a systemic and structural practice of racialized state-sponsored violence. Instead, one can observe an iterative process of digital and real-life mourning that constitutes its own ritual practice: a life is stolen; the violent death is documented on cell phones, security cameras, body cams, and dash cams; the images are shared; the public, bearing witness to violent loss of black life, mourns—spontaneous real-life and digital memorials appear, vigils are held, and protests are initiated; these events are then similarly documented and shared, in a cycle of public mourning

and outrage that continues to create digital records that can be—and often are—appropriated; these digital records live on, in perpetuity, reinscribing white supremacy, violence, and, importantly, trauma. Yet, these records rarely lead to restorative justice in a legal sense. Recordings of police violence, for example, are frequently used as evidence against the record creator, rather than as evidence of law enforcement wrongdoing. There is a marked tension here that remains unresolved: white supremacy circumscribes the potential of *sousveillance* practices and also the potential of the record to be used as evidence for restorative and transitional justice.

For black Americans, the spectacle of black death that replays itself without purpose or context is traumatic. Features like autoplay on Facebook (as well as features such as Facebook Live), wherein video posts begin playing as users scroll through their newsfeeds, make it impossible to predict the moment one might encounter footage of another human—one who bears racialized physical resemblances to the user—being killed. Ritual, then, becomes the urgent matter of binding the uncontrollable, an intentional act of making the trauma, and the space where the trauma is encountered, safe. This binding occurs through acts of bearing witness (an aspect of ritual mourning as discussed above) and also through acts of *not* bearing witness. For example, as part of this research I have forced myself to bear witness to the violent deaths of many black Americans; I have actively sought these digital records and created safe spaces in which to experience them. To do this emotional labor, for me, is to stand with the victims and their families in virtual unity and solidarity—to see, as Emmett Till’s mother wanted, what state-sanctioned violence does to people and to communities. At the same time, however, some have claimed that not viewing these digital records is an act of resistance, a refusal to engage with white supremacy and a refusal to be impacted by the commodifiable spectacle of the trauma.

Lucia McBath, the mother of Jordan Davis, a black, 17-year-old high school student who was fatally shot in November 2012 in what has infamously come to be known as the “loud music shooting,” has said that she considers it her responsibility to make sure her son’s death does not overshadow his life. McBath, a member of Mothers of the Movement, and Jordan’s father, Ron Davis, issued a statement on the third anniversary of their son’s death:

Today, we stand united in opening up the conversation about not only what happened to Jordan, but what is happening to far too many young black males in this country. We stand together as we let the world know that not only do black lives matter, but young black men are human beings with value .... Although Jordan represents our struggle on a larger scale, we are using his memory to create a more positive message. We won’t see real

reform until we acknowledge that promoting this message is everyone's business. While we may not see change in our lifetime, we are here to start the conversation and fix what is broken. (Davis and McBath)

McBath and Davis have issued a call to action as part of memorializing their son. In this work, and in future work on the topics of race, death, and digital culture, I hope to heed this call, acknowledging that promoting their message—that everyone has the moral responsibility to protect, care for, and be conscious of how we treat each other—is in itself a radical act of ritual and (re)membering. It is one way to address the affective trauma that is reified by constant exposure to a seemingly ceaseless stream of digital visual records documenting stolen life.

I have investigated here the cultural, social, and technological issues created by the increasingly widespread circulation of digital records documenting the deaths of black Americans in the United States, asking and answering foundational questions about ritual, embodiment, memorialization, and oblivion in digital spaces. Further, I have examined the interplay between the permanence of the digital sphere and the international human rights concept of the “right to be forgotten,” paying particular attention to black and brown bodies as records and as evidence. There is, however, more work to be done to increase our understanding of phenomena around race, death, and ritual mourning in digital spaces. For example, future work around race, death, and digital culture might specifically consider the ways that users subvert structural decisions around spectatorship and sponsorship on social media and in search engines like Google. Another point of analysis might address the unique needs of the bereaved when a loved one becomes famous for dying. Finally, further studies are needed on the limited existence of free public digital spaces where community mourning occurs.

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## Bionote

### Dr. Tonia Sutherland

Dr. Tonia Sutherland is assistant professor in the College of Communication and Information Sciences at the University of Alabama. Global in scope, Sutherland’s research focuses on entanglements of technology and culture. Recently, Sutherland’s work has investigated the relationships between 20<sup>th</sup>-century lynching records and 21<sup>st</sup>-century digital cultures of racialized violence. Sutherland has a PhD from the University of Pittsburgh’s iSchool.