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## #Handsupdontshoot: connective images and ethical witnessing

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### ABSTRACT

In the years since Michael Brown's death, the hashtag #HandsUpDontShoot has been criticized for supposedly misrepresenting forensic evidence as framed by the Department of Justice. However, an expressive pull has kept alive both the hashtag and the sentiment behind it. The images of #HandsUpDontShoot are compelling in that they offer a glimpse into lived experiences that are often dismissed, ignored, or refuted. In this essay, I trace the aesthetic features of the #HandsUpDontShoot images, which foreground shocking juxtapositions between nonviolent protesters and militarized police forces, to the hashtag's historical analogue: antilynching photography. Antilynching photography often utilized the aesthetic techniques of remediation, recontextualization, and juxtaposition—aesthetic features used prominently in today's digital and remix cultures. By noting #HandsUpDontShoot's use of these same techniques, I illuminate the ways in which Twitter's connective affordances shape the viewer's encounter with the images to engender ethical witnessing by affectively linking Brown's death to shared material experiences of racial minorities. Such encounters propel witnesses beyond distanced objectification and toward an embodied reckoning of those experiences.

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## Introduction

A little more than two weeks after the August 9, 2014 shooting death of Michael Brown by police officer Darren Wilson in Ferguson, Missouri, the Twitter account for “alternative” media outlet *21st Century Wire* posted a photo from the local protests that followed. Tagged with #HandsUpDontShoot, the photo shows a male protester of color, his back to the camera, facing a cadre of police officers dressed in military gear and pointing assault rifles directly at his person (Figure 1). This scene unfolds against a backdrop that includes a pointedly incendiary message painted on a nearby mailbox, underscoring the tension between the two forces in this face-off.

In this alarming juxtaposition, the protester appears particularly bare and vulnerable in his jeans and t-shirt, armed only with what appears to be a small, lightweight backpack—more fashionable than functional—slung over one shoulder. Further

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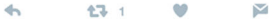
Warning: sensitive content. This article contains images of lynching and police-shooting victims.

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21st Century Wire @21WIRE · 25 Aug 2014

Has a #PoliceState already arrived? [21stcenturywire.com/2014/08/25/no-...](https://21stcenturywire.com/2014/08/25/no-...) via @21WIRE #Ferguson #HandsUpDontShoot [pic.twitter.com/oWSNjSMOW0](https://pic.twitter.com/oWSNjSMOW0)



**Figure 1.** “Has a #PoliceState already arrived?” (21st Century Wire, 2014).

attesting to the vulnerability of the protester is the fact that his bare hands are held high in the air, exposing a clear path from the assault rifles to his vital organs, as well as the fact that he has no weapon to aid in his defense. Looking closely at the image in question, one can see that the protester’s figure is slightly out of focus, placing emphasis on the six officers who menacingly point their weapons in the protester’s direction. The vulnerable protester, therefore, is meant to bring the threat of the police force into stark relief.

The contrast between the aggressive militarization of the police and the vulnerability of the protester is emblematic of the ethos behind #HandsUpDontShoot, a hashtag movement borne out of Brown’s death. #HandsUpDontShoot was found to be among the most frequently used hashtags in connection with Brown’s death, which, along with similarly-themed hashtags such as #Ferguson and #MikeBrown, accumulated 12.5 million posts in the first three weeks following Brown’s death (Freelon, McIlwain, & Clark, 2016). Although the frequency of its usage has died down in recent years, the hashtag continues to circulate weekly in the hundreds (Keyhole, 2018).

The phrase “hands up, don’t shoot,” acts as a rhetorical device from which multiple meanings emerge. On one hand, the phrase speaks to the highly debated circumstances surrounding Brown’s death, asserting that the young man of barely 18 years had his hands up when Wilson shot him six times, with the final fatal blow entering the top of his head (Apel, 2014). On the other hand, the phrase also refers to the stance that the protesters found themselves taking when confronted with an aggressively militarized police force decked out in full riot gear. The protesters’ posture was meant as a conciliatory gesture to de-escalate the rising tension between law enforcement and communities of color, as well as a gesture of solidarity with the slain Brown. Finally, a third meaning

speaks to “hands up, don’t shoot” as an everyday material reality for persons of color navigating the racialized politics of the United States.

Alongside the multiple meanings emanating from the hashtag exist the affordances presented by this digitally mediated phenomenon. As affordances are the behaviors and attitudes encouraged or discouraged by embedded technological features (Norman, 1999), I look to these affordances to understand how it guides digital users’ aesthetic experiences of digitally disseminated imagery. Hashtags perform two functions: while they serve to index online content according to the topic, they also serve to shape the meaning of the content (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015), adding subtext, context, and, sometimes, irony. On Twitter, hashtags are hyperlinked to a chronological “catalogue” of other tagged posts, which can be sorted through filters or according to content type (i.e. photos, written posts, or usernames).

In Twitter’s incorporation of multiple media forms, which combines text, hypertext, image, and video, a peculiar phenomenon surfaces when sifting through the images indexically connected by the use of the #HandsUpDontShoot hashtag. The juxtaposition between the images of vulnerable protesters with their hands up and those of aggressively militarized police units surfaces an affective stirring. This impact is beyond discursivity, as it creates a felt state of embodied awakening. Affect, or the flow of material forces that impact the sensorium, exists in a realm of excess beyond that which can be captured by symbolic representation (Gregg & Seigworth, 2010). These juxtapositions—which can be described as neither intentional nor unintentional because they are algorithmic arrangements of individual posts—engender a more visceral, embodied advancement of the third discursive meaning of the #HandsUpDontShoot hashtag. These images describe the material reality of communities of color as they navigate the network of white supremacist ideology that continues to frame civil society in the United States.

In this essay, I trace the aesthetic features of the #HandsUpDontShoot images posted within one month of Brown’s death that foreground these affective juxtapositions to what I argue is the hashtag’s historical analogue: antilynching photography. By drawing focus away from the abject black body and onto the barbaric white mobs, these historical circulations were meant to counter the photographs’ intended purpose of asserting white domination over the “animalized” Black figure. The rhetorical force of #HandsUpDontShoot images appropriates the techniques of antilynching photography to likewise place focus on law enforcement’s militarized response to Black protesters. By noting #HandsUpDontShoot’s use of these same techniques, I illuminate the ways in which Twitter’s connective affordances shape viewers’ experiences of #HandsUpDontShoot to engender ethical witnessing.<sup>1</sup>

### **Technologies of recording and objectivizing police shooting victims**

Although Brown’s death was not video recorded, in recent years scores of videos depicting the death of unarmed people of color at the hands of the police have been captured and disseminated to the public. Such a proliferation of personal recording devices has seen a shift in the cultural framing of the medium of photography and video in recent years. As Mitchell (1994) describes, we now live in an era of post-photography, where the prominence of photo- and video-manipulation technologies suggests that photographic and videographic media no longer present us with the “objective” truth. While the objectivity

of such media has long been contested due to the selective decisions inherent to photography, the post-photographic era has surfaced the critical question of how to interpret video or photographic evidence of police brutality.

Further, many point out that in the police brutality cases where unedited, raw video footage has been used in court as evidence, the overwhelming majority of defendants are still acquitted: “Like words, images are open to interpretation . . . [a]nd whose interpretation wins out will always say more about who is in power than who is in the right” (Vertesi, 2015, n.p.). Towns (2015) also asserts that these recordings may also “go a step further to create new venues to spectacularly consume anti-black violence” (p. 1), leading to the normalization, and even the commodification, of images depicting the abject black body.

In such cases where videos portraying the fatal use of force by police against unarmed persons of color prove futile in the prevention and prosecution of these deaths, one may question the value of recording an incident of police aggression. I argue that the real value of these videos is not in their utility but in their expressive capacity. While a video may not convince a grand jury of an officer’s violation of the law or of human rights, the prominence of the practice of recording these incidents suggests it is important for communities to bear witness to the deaths of their members, deaths which police units may attempt to obscure, bury, or distort. The value of these recorded deaths lies in the distinction between acting as an eyewitness within a juridical context versus bearing witness within a religious or spiritual context.

The difference between witnessing as a means of delivering legal testimony and witnessing as surfacing a subjective awakening can explain the controversy behind the #HandsUpDontShoot movement. The events leading up to Michael Brown’s shooting on August 9, 2014 have been highly contested, with conflicting reports either supporting or refuting Wilson’s claim that the encounter resulted in a physical struggle before Wilson shot Brown six times (Apel, 2014). However, the most highly controversial account of that day was that of Brown’s friend Dorian Johnson, who stated that Wilson shot Brown while the victim’s hands were held in the air (Cornish, 2015). Subsequently, more than half of the witnesses stated that Brown was in the “hands up” position when shot by Wilson (Santhanam et al., 2014), but these witnesses were deemed not credible by the Department of Justice because such testimony contradicted forensic evidence (Eckholm & Apuzzo, 2015).

As such, the #HandsUpDontShoot movement has been widely criticized to have perpetuated a misrepresentation of Brown’s death (Capehart, 2015; Gass, 2015; Lee, 2015). However, if we understand the rhetorical entreaty of “hands up, don’t shoot” as advancing a more vital understanding of the material experiences of persons of color attempting to navigate entrenched assumptions of black criminality, the draw of the #HandsUpDontShoot movement is less evidential than it is expressive. It acts as a means through which participants bear witness to the affective state that surrounds communities of color as they are forced to constantly assert their innocence—while being systematically targeted in spite of these assertions.

Images of Brown’s death continue to haunt the local community in other ways. Photographs of Brown’s corpse lying in the street for hours were widely disseminated on social media, tagged with the now familiar #HandsUpDontShoot hashtag (Hafner, 2016). The effects that this carelessness—intended or unintended—had on the community eerily parallels the ways in which lynchings in the early twentieth century came to signify the control of black communities by the white power structure. The use of images of the black body in

peril as a mechanism for control and domination over communities of color dates back beyond the turn of the nineteenth century, when lynching photography was widely disseminated among both pro- and anti-lynching movements. Ultimately, images of the abject were disparately contextualized according to the rhetorical perspective of the disseminating party.

### The figure of the abject: lynching photography and ethical witnessing

The way in which the protesters of #HandsUpDontShoot speak to the black American experience through Michael Brown's purported pose relies on the techniques of remediation, recontextualization, and juxtaposition—features commonly associated with technologies of the digital age. However, these features were previously seen almost a century earlier at the height of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People's (NAACP) anti-lynching photography campaign. The campaign sought to expose and shame the lynching practices performed by white communities with virtual impunity. Here, I focus specifically on the aesthetics—the curation, editing practices, and strategic placement—of anti-lynching photography to understand the rhetorical effects these features had on a nation in the throes of a crisis of conscience.

In order to fully understand the rhetorical efficacy of anti-lynching photography, one must note the controlled and strategic conditions of *pro-lynching* photography's production and dissemination. These images were highly posed, carefully engineered, and methodically curated. The barbaric violence leading up to the lynching—where white mobs would transport the victim to a visible site in town, subject him or her<sup>2</sup> to hours of public torture, and kill the victim by hanging, shooting, or burning at the stake—would pause as white participants collected themselves around the body and posed calmly for the camera as “orderly, respectable mobs” (Wood, 2009, p. 86). The point of these photographs was to contrast the ostensible “White emotional restraint” with the “presumed savagery and moral depravity of their victims” (Wood, 2009, p. 88).

Further, pro-lynching photography was intended for local circulation only. Local photographers were often called to the scene ahead of time—frequently by the very law enforcement officials charged with intervening in the officially illegal practice—and peddled the images “through newspapers, in drugstores, on the street—even ... door to door” (Raiford, 2011, p. 38). These images were framed as souvenirs and served as reminders to the white community of its supposed superiority and dominance over the abject, black Other.

When the NAACP began collecting and disseminating lynching photography nationally through its magazine, *The Crisis*, it forced isolated white communities to confront the optics of these practices on a national level. While inside these communities, the photographs may have served as sources of pride; outside the communities, they became “icons of disgrace” (Wood, 2009, p. 182). Anti-lynching activists, noting how the images' national exposure forced white city officials to distance themselves from, and, in some cases, condemn, the lynchings, enacted a campaign to deliberately recontextualize the photographs and shame these communities nationally. As such, anti-lynching photography featured the practices of remediation, recontextualization, and juxtaposition—esthetic features used prominently in today's digital and remix cultures.

These techniques relied on two tacks: a deliberate, curatory selection of the photographs published for circulation, and the editing techniques of cropping, captioning, compositing,

and strategic contextualizing through the layout. The NAACP paid special attention to any images that punctured the pro-lynching strategy of leaving the actual act of violence out of the frame. In the cases where photographs depicting white perpetrators in the midst of torturing, maiming, or killing the victim were obtained, the NAACP not only ran them on the front pages of *The Crisis*, but also sent copies to major news outlets and even Congress (Wood, 2009).

Many times, editors would deliberately pull focus away from the debased black body and onto the barbarity of the white mobs. Because photographs of the mobs in the midst of enacting violence were hard to come by, much of this was achieved through compositing, captioning, and contrasting. Composite “photographs” largely consisted of parts of multiple photos as well as illustrations, and often depicted white citizens in the act of lynching (Wood, 2009). Anti-lynching newspapers would also direct the viewer’s focus through strategic captioning. These captions would often point out the presence of white women and children, drawing the viewer’s attention away from the debased black body and onto the depravity of the “family portraits” that became a ritualized practice in the wake of a lynching (Wood, 2009).

By subverting the cultural framings associated with lynching photography, these campaigns invited viewers to ethically witness this ugly stain on U.S. history. Witnessing, in many of these cases, meant looking beyond what was depicted in the photographs in order to imagine what was left out. Witnessing became a means of apprehension of the embodied, material experiences of the abject black figures in order to recognize the lived truths experienced beyond the moment of the snapshot.

### The dual logic of witnessing

Years after Brown’s death, the trope of framing “hands up, don’t shoot” as a myth, a lie, or a hoax continues to hold weight on social media. The intensity behind critics’ dismissals of the entire movement are based upon the fact that the Justice Department’s forensic evidence questions whether Brown had his hands in the air when he was shot by Wilson (Lee, 2015)—judgments still seen as highly suspect. However, the rhetorical force of #HandsUpDontShoot is evidenced by the fact that the hashtag still sustains significant affirmative usage on social media. Rather than being solely applied to the circumstances surrounding Brown’s death, communities of color use the phrase to communicate their lived experiences, navigating a society still teeming with (newly emboldened) white supremacist rhetoric. In other words, “hands up, don’t shoot” may or may not have applied to the forensic circumstances surrounding Brown’s death, but it still carries the embodied truth of those who live it day in and day out. However, truly apprehending these experiences depends on one’s mode of witnessing.

Oliver (2004) argues that witnessing carries two connotations: the “juridical connotations of seeing with one’s own eyes [—the eye witness], and the religious connotations of testifying to that which cannot be seen ... [—the act of] bearing witness” (p. 197). Pro-lynching movements used their photographs as “proof” to confirm their already-held beliefs about black inferiority by positioning the object of the black body at a distance from their own subjectivity. Similarly, those determined to defend the killing of Michael Brown point to the supposed forensic impossibility of “hands up, don’t shoot” to refute the entire claim that his death was unjustified.

The idea of “eye-witnessing” remains firmly planted within the juridical context of appraising another’s experiences in order to make a judgment about the veracity of their claim(s). Eye-witnessing leaves the autonomy of the individualized subject intact, as if to assert that a detached witness is more qualified to provide “factual” evidence. As Scarry (1985) describes, white supremacists documented lynchings to testify to the “incontestable truth” of white domination, as if freezing the imagery in time would preserve the systems that work in conjunction to subordinate people of color. Bodies frozen in this way—as simply a means to demonstrate a claim—are thus objectivized.

Ethical witnessing, however, requires that subjects undergo a change in perspective at the very least, if not a change to an understanding of their own subjectivity. Oliver suggests that ethical witnessing produces an affective stirring that disrupts the terrain of the “already known” (Oliver, p. 181). Testifying to that which cannot be seen, but rather can be felt on a deeply visceral, embodied level occurs when that which is witnessed leaves traces within us, and our material identity is never the same. Such testimony cannot be written down in history books or legal records, for its impact is beyond discursivity. Anti-lynching photography, therefore, speaks to this form of witnessing as a way of bearing testimony to the subjective experience of the abject body, to its pain and torture. It serves to reconfigure the boundaries of witnessing subjects; rather than freezing experience in time, it works to move those who visually consume the images to resist these patterns of injustice. In this sense, bearing witness means testifying to *oneself* of another’s experience; this is inherent in Oliver’s insistence that ethical witnessing requires a “response-ability”—for the ethically witnessing subject must undergo a moral reckoning.

The NAACP’s anti-lynching campaign invited viewers to ethically witness the horrors of lynching, to see not the debasement of the black body present in the photograph, but the abject pain that occurred before the instance of death, a pain that bonds subjects across time and space. *The Crisis* redirected readers’ gazes away from the “triumph” of the white mob and toward the animalistic cruelty that came before the moment of the snapshot. “To look at these images and to respond with horror,” writes Wood, “was to move from the position of spectator to moral witness” (2009, p. 199). In the criticism that follows, I argue that the photographs of #HandsUpDontShoot invite viewers to do the same.

### **Ethically witnessing Brown’s figure through #HandsUpDontShoot**

The space of social media, or digitally-networked media in general, can be described as dizzying, fragmentary, and constantly in flux. While many of the visual arguments made within this space can be seen as extensions of pre-Internet logics regarding mediation as amplification, spectacle, and dissemination, scholars have pointed out that the virtual space of the Internet multiplies the speed and force of pre-digital mediation. For example, DeLuca and Peebles (2002) note that the fragmentation of social discourse and the intensification of speed afford images new and changing rhetorical capacities as they circulate throughout the networked media landscape.

Image events, Delicath and DeLuca’s (2003) term for acts of social protest specifically designed for media dissemination, advance unique rhetorical arguments. “[Image events] rely on context and the assembling of other relevant discourses and images for their rhetorical force, and in so doing, bring together public and popular discourses” (p. 330). The



rhetorical force of the protesters' "hands up" pose is not based on the singularity of the Michael Brown case. Rather, it comes from repeated exposure to the many images of protesters of color advancing the visual argument in conjunction with the stories, images, and long history—including race lynching—of criminalizing black communities as justification for racial violence. In this sense, the images of #HandsUpDontShoot can only be understood within the context of the Twitter posts that bump up against these additional rhetorical fragments. This rhetorical process parallels the NAACP's anti-lynching campaign, which compelled audiences to look beyond the frame of the snapshot to the undeniable violence and barbarity that preceded it.

In many ways, what renders these images so powerful is the way they beckon viewers to look past the image events as media representations and into the space of "real" life where the events take place. The desire to "get past" the medium and experience the "liveness" of events is intrinsic in Bolter and Grusin's (1999) theory of remediation, wherein one medium is translated into another. Even the hypermediacy—the multiplication of media forms and affordances—of cyberspace is still a symptom of our innate desire to experience media "as real" and "reproduce the rich sensorium of human experience" (p. 34). Through its constant circulation, recontextualization, and remix, "[hypermediacy] privileges fragmentation, indeterminacy, and heterogeneity, and ... emphasizes process or performance rather than the finished art object" (Mitchell, 1994, p. 8).

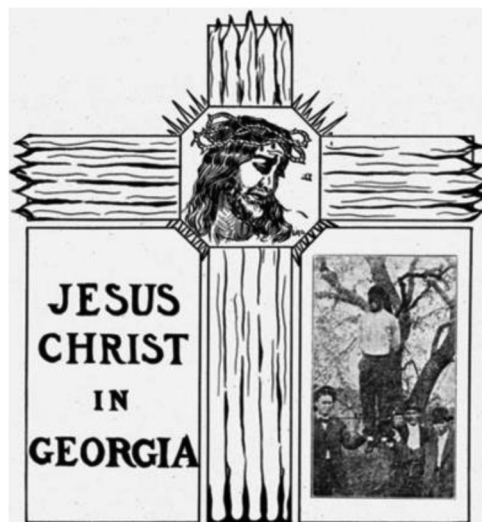
In this sense, today's media can no longer be classified as stable artifacts, but in fact contain processes of becoming—a "liveness." The images of #HandsUpDontShoot, like the antilynching photographs that came before, beckon the viewer to look at events as they existed beyond the moment of the photograph, to imagine the cruelty and systematic suppression out of which such events are borne. In a network culture wherein the logic of hypermediation rules supreme, these images are meant to collide with other visually rhetorical fragments, giving new meaning and vitality to the images. Kember and Zylinska (2012) urge media scholars to focus on mediation as "the originary process of media emergence, with media being seen as (ongoing) stabilizations of the media flow" (p. 21), rather than on media forms as stable artifacts. They argue against freezing the process of mediation as discrete media objects, because media continue to "live" on through processes of mediation, remediation, and hypermediation: "Every medium thus carries within itself both the memory of mediation and the loss of mediations never to be actualized" (p. 21). To fully assess the images of #HandsUpDontShoot and their rhetorical analogues of anti-lynching photography, one must look past the idea of photographs as stable artifacts and understand the liveness of mediation these images perform.

*The Crisis's* anti-lynching campaign relied on remediation to peel back the veil of pro-lynching propaganda. For example, in 1927, *The Crisis* published a "composite photograph" of a lynching, which pieced fragments of photographs together with drawn illustration to show "how white citizens of Little Rock burned John Carter" (Wood, 2009, p. 192; Figure 2). The scene depicted—white men, whose detailed faces and clothing must have been transferred from a post-lynching "portrait," torching the bound and gagged body of a black lynching victim—rests uncannily in the space between objective documentation and subjective expression. Similarly, the magazine's 1911 feature titled "Jesus Christ in Georgia" (Figure 3) incorporated a lynching photograph of a young unidentified black man within an illustration of Jesus on the cross, gazing down at the body and weeping. Such heavy use of symbolism not only appeals to Christian morality, it



**Figure 2.** “How White citizens of Little Rock burned John Carter.” Courtesy of the Chicago Defender.

elevates the black victim to the status of martyr and frames lynching as the sin for which he died. These composites incorporated pre-photographic media techniques in order to expose the enactment of violence the white mobs desired to keep hidden, and to “displace [the photographs] entirely from ... local circumstances” (Wood, 2009, p. 189)—to frame



**Figure 3.** “Jesus Christ in Georgia” (Wood, 2009).

them as condensation symbols of race violence in America. In these cases, *The Crisis* editors cared not about reproducing lynching images with forensic accuracy, but rather sought to evoke the affective intensity of the black victims' lived experiences.

Similarly, in the remediating performance of the #HandsUpDontShoot images, many posts tend to mimic or appropriate the conventions of other media forms, such as political cartoons, drawings, or street art. One such post ([Figure 4](#)) edits together an image of Brown and the mugshot of civil rights leader Fannie Lou Hamer as a commentary on the long history of law enforcement's racialized policies and conduct. While the translucent, ghost-like visage of Brown gazes solemnly over the resolute Hamer's shoulder, textual fragments—the featured hashtag displayed simply as a statement, along with Hamer's famous invocation about the entanglement of each person's liberty—crowd the composition, colliding with the visuals. Similarly, a post titled “If Fox News was around in the 1960s” ([Figure 5](#)) places the Fox News lower-thirds graphic and an incendiary headline atop an image of civil rights demonstrators. The image chosen is an iconic symbol of the brutal backlash against the Civil Rights Movement—the police leading a pack of growling German Shepherds toward the peaceful black protesters. In both the anti-lynching and #HandsUpDontShoot movements, the details of each individual case may differ, but the truth of lived experience transcends a singular media form or a specific moment in time, because a single photograph cannot contain the lived truth of race violence. The encounter with these images is an affective reckoning that overflows the container.

Additionally, the technique of recontextualization that many associate with digital culture was pre-empted by the NAACP's anti-lynching campaign. In fact, *The Crisis* wholly relied on the circulation of images beyond their originally intended contexts. For example, in 1937, *Crisis* editors came across gruesome photographs of Robert “Boot-jack” McDaniels in the midst of being tortured ([Figure 6](#))—McDaniels shirtless, his face and neck chained to a tree while a rope pulls his arms at a viscerally impossible angle behind his back. Not only did *The Crisis* run the photographs on its front page and send copies to other national newspaper and magazines, but one such image was depicted



**Figure 4.** Echoes of Fannie Lou Hamer's arrest (I Love Ancestry, 2014).



Figure 5. "If Fox News was around in the 1960s" (GodlessLiberals, 2014).



Figure 6. Robert "Bootjack" McDaniels before his death ("The lynching," 2015).

on a poster and displayed on the Senate floor as Congress debated a federal anti-lynching bill. This national circulation stood in contrast to the relatively small crowd that gathered in the woods outside of town to watch McDaniels' lynching (Wood, 2009).

Within #HandsUpDontShoot, a key image that circulated beyond its intended audience was the photograph of Brown's body as he lay face down in the street hours after the shooting, a pool of blood snaking through the concrete from his head, while a white police officer glances casually in his direction. Police scenes—like lynching spectacles—are highly controlled and cordoned off from the public, but the residential neighborhood in which Brown was killed made this impossible, and, when the photograph surfaced (Figure 7), it was circulated widely on Twitter.<sup>3</sup> By exposing the scene hours after the final shot had been fired, the image served to further attest to the carelessness with which law enforcement treats black lives and black bodies. Similarly, Marmel's (2014) retweet of a since-deleted manipulation of Brown's autopsy diagram, depicting the body in the hands-up pose (Figure 8), parallels *The Crisis's* composite photograph, editorializing the forensic report with a narrative that more comprehensively reflects the Black American experience. The clash between the forensic diagram's sterile and identity-less depiction of the male body—an evocation of the whiteness-as-default trope—paired with the now-iconic gesture of the Ferguson killing, once again surfaces the feeling of the uncanny. By circulating imagery beyond its original context, the hashtag collides with disparate rhetorical fragments to piece together a truth whose only recording is in the lived experiences of Americans of color.

Finally, the full affective weight of these images comes from juxtaposition, or the strategic placement of content in order to surface a shocking contrast. In these cases, *The*



**Figure 7.** Michael Brown's body in the street hours after the shooting (Dalrymple, 2014).



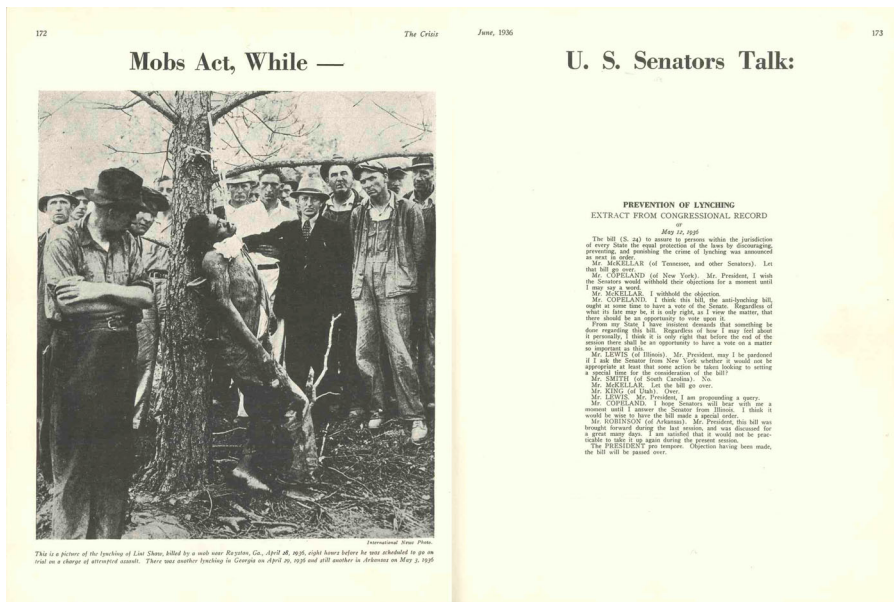
**Figure 8.** A manipulated image of Brown's autopsy report (Marmel, 2014).

*Crisis* would deliberately place coverage of a gruesome lynching directly across from a story covering the stagnation of the debate or the eventual defeat of these bills (Wood, 2009), as if appealing to congressional members to bear witness to and account for lynching's heinousness. In one such instance, a full-page photograph of a white mob surrounding its victim's hanging body sits directly across a news item announcing the Senate's decision not to vote on anti-lynching legislation as the headline spanning both pages reads: "Mobs Act While—U.S. Senators Talk" (Figure 9). These strategic placements were meant to contrast the aggression of the white mobs with the passivity of the Senate to do anything to prevent or prosecute the violence.

Additionally, in an example of the NAACP's tactic of pulling focus away from the debased black body and onto the depravity of the white mobs posing around it, *The Crisis* ran one such "family portrait" (Figure 10), wherein a white family with young daughters in their Sunday dresses gaze up at the hanging body. Also visible in the frame is a black woman—perhaps the kids' nanny, forced to attend the spectacle—who is the only figure not facing the victim. This image was captioned thusly:

Do not look at the Negro. His earthly problems have ended. Instead, look at the seven WHITE children who gaze at this gruesome spectacle. Is it horror or gloating on the face of the neatly-dressed seven-year-old on the right? Is the tiny four-year-old on the left old enough, one wonders, to comprehend the barbarism her elders have perpetrated? (Wood, 2009, p. 196)

In this example, editors used the caption to contrast the cruel and savage act with the innocence of children, and, in doing so, countered the pro-lynching movement's justification of



**Figure 9.** “Mobs Act While — U.S. Senators Talk.” Source: *The Crisis*, June 1936. The author wishes to thank the Crisis Publishing Co., Inc. for authorizing the use of this image.

its practices by claiming to protect women and children from the “hypersexualized and predatory Black male” (Finnegan, Owen, & Ehrenhaus, 2011, p. 106). This technique also transferred the inferred perversity from the black victim to the white family participating in this deprived ritual.

Juxtaposition likewise constitutes #HandsUpDontShoot’s affective rhetorical power. As mentioned, the Twitter hashtag index is sorted via algorithm, making questions of intentionality more complex than in the case of *The Crisis*. However, Twitter users arguably understand that the hashtag itself surfaces the image of victims and protesters of color in the “hands up” gesture, even if they use the hashtag on photos with disparate content, such as police units equipped with military-grade gear. Therefore, it is not wholly accidental that images of aggressively-militarized police units collide with images of peaceful demonstrators with their hands up—to the point where the algorithmic cascade ends up training the officers’ guns directly at protesters.

In one of these instances, a group of seven smartly-dressed black men, solemnly comporting themselves in the “hands up” gesture, stand next to a political cartoon depicting a militarized police tank aiming the barrel of its cannon off frame, which by coincidence is trained upon the aforementioned men of the contiguous photograph (Figure 11). In another algorithmic juxtaposition, black children sit in a line in the middle of the street with their hands up, while a group of photojournalists hover above them to capture the spectacle. To their left, across the threshold of the frame, a police officer trains his gun in the direction of the camera, a male figure lying at his feet, while his fellow officers reach for their weapons in anticipation (of what one wonders?—the man is either dead or completely vulnerable in the face-down position) (Figure 12). These juxtapositions illustrate the fact that the threat to black bodies is not circumstantial—it follows them



Do not look at the Negro.

His earthly problems are ended.

Instead, look at the seven WHITE children who gaze at this gruesome spectacle.

Is it horror or gloating on the face of the neatly dressed seven-year-old girl on the right?

Is the tiny four-year-old on the left old enough, one wonders, to comprehend the barbarism her elders have perpetrated?

Rubin Stacy, the Negro, who was lynched at Fort Lauderdale, Florida, on July 19, 1935, for "threatening and frightening a white woman," suffered PHYSICAL torture for a few short hours. But what psychological havoc is being wrought in the minds of the white children? Into what kinds of citizens

**Figure 10.** "Do Not Look at the Negro." Source: NAACP pamphlet, 1935. The author wishes to thank The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People for authorizing the use of this image.

across various contexts, to all corners of society. In parallel with anti-lynching photography, such rhetorical entreaties ask that the viewer look not at the individual victim of race violence, but at the perpetrators of that violence who create a permanent state of threat to communities of color—communities that are thereby compelled to constantly reassert their innocence. Within the collisions against images of police units, it becomes clear that the "hands up" argument is not about any one particular event, but rather about the enduring state of danger that people of color must navigate daily.





**Figure 11.** An illustrated police tank “trained” on non-resistant black protesters (author’s screengrab, 2017).



**Figure 12.** A police officer points a gun at a protester on the ground, positioned next to an image of seated protesters with their hands up (author’s screengrab, 2017).

In directing viewers’ gazes thusly, the affective impact of these collisions brings #Hand-sUpDontShoot’s rhetoricity out of the mind’s realm of calculated distance and into the body, where witnesses can feel the experiential truth of the hashtag’s claim. As such, the connective affordances of Twitter contribute to a movement that compels participants to ethically bear witness to the entire history of race violence in the U.S. In rendering them condensation symbols for the uncontainable plea for racial justice, the images of #Hand-sUpDontShoot create a depth of signification, a richness that approaches the “seeing with one’s whole body” that is critical to ethical witnessing.

## Conclusion

In engendering an invitation to bear witness to racial violence, #HandsUpDontShoot demonstrates the import of affective resonance to meaning-making and rhetoricity. Those induced to ethically witness Brown’s ordeal—and that of so many others—are sensitive to the embodied impacts resulting from the remediation, recontextualization, and juxtaposition of the hashtag’s images. Discursively, #HandsUpDontShoot makes an argument about the state of Brown’s stance when he was shot by Wilson; affectively,

the argument shifts and expands to incorporate the long, complex, and buried history of race violence in America. #HandsUpDontShoot refers to an embodied reckoning of the black American experience.

This distinction also illustrates the relationship between the affective and the discursive, in that affect both exceeds and entangles with representation. The intractable fixation on “eyewitness” logic—a closing off of affective resonance—within communities adamantly opposed to the racial justice project of police accountability produces an oppositional reading of the very same images that engender ethical witnessing for others. Today, a quick search for the hashtag on Twitter returns hundreds of posts that refute the claim that Brown’s death was unjustified based solely on the coroner’s report and the Justice Department’s determinations on witness credibility regarding Brown’s pose. That Brown’s alleged pose is contested at all provides enough “evidence” for some to ultimately claim that Michael Brown deserved to die on August 9, 2014. That pro- and anti-#HandsUpDontShoot arguments approach the topic from such wildly disparate paradigms explains the futility that one senses in reading through online debates about Ferguson, which seem to circle round and round without reaching any common understanding.

However, for so many, #HandsUpDontShoot is not confined to forensic determinations on Brown’s death; in fact, #HandsUpDontShoot’s affective pull is not solely about Brown’s death at all. It is about how #HandsUpDontShoot acts as a condensation symbol for lived experiences that exceed discursivity, evidenced by the inception of HandsUp United, an activist organization working to prevent future officer-involved deaths and achieve the liberation and empowerment of racial minorities (HandsUp United, n.d.). The entire history of race in the U.S. is stirred into the disquieting unrest that surfaces when seeing military-grade weapons trained on peaceful protesters of color who bravely and affirmatively assert their innocence in virtually every moment of their waking lives. These histories and rhetorical fragments continue to live on in every mediation and every actualization, inducing a felt responsibility to bear witness to them with one’s whole body—an invitation to ethically witness the U.S.’s long history of racial violence.

## Notes

1. By “aesthetic,” I call on the term’s secondary meaning as “a set of principles underlying the work of a particular artist or artistic movement” (“Aesthetics,” n.d.) which “describe that which can be considered emotionally stimulating on the level of the imaginative, not merely the sensual” (Coleman, 2013, p. 2).
2. While the overwhelming majority of lynching victims were men, the erasure of black female lynching victims is another historical injustice associated with race lynching. These women were often lynched as a proxy for the male target or for intervening on behalf of their male loved ones (Finnegan et al., 2011).
3. The image has since been taken down by Twitter for its graphic depiction.

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