The Visualization of Urban Black Men: Racial Discourses in Social Media

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Abstract

A single, accurate record of the number of unarmed Black men who have been killed by police in the United States does not exist, as evidenced by conflicting data from local, state, and federal governments (Demey, 2015). According to the NAACP’s partial list, since 1999 there have been 76 unarmed men and women of color killed in police custody in the United States (U.S.) (Juzwiak & Chan, 2014). The majority of victims on this list are Black men.

In the opening of this article, we recall four notable examples of unarmed Black men whose deaths gained national attention recently by way of social and mass media. The first occurred more than 15 years ago. The other three all occurred within the past year. In February 1999, Amadou Diallo, a 23-year-old Black man was killed outside his apartment in the Bronx, New York, by four plainclothes officers who fired a total of 41 shots (19 of which hit him). Allegedly approached because he matched the description of a serial rapist, the officers mistook Diallo’s wallet for a gun as he pulled it out of his pocket. The officers were eventually acquitted of all charges.

In July 2014, New York City police on Staten Island killed 43-year-old Eric Garner because he was allegedly selling untaxed cigarettes. Witnesses said he was stopped because he broke up a fight. A video of Garner’s encounter with the police officers showed he died of neck compression from a chokehold placed on him by an officer. The video of Garner’s death and final, repeated words, “I can’t breathe,” went viral and resulted in the popular #ICantBreathe hashtag on
Twitter. Garner’s death was ruled a homicide and the officer was not indicted.

On August 5, 2014, 22-year-old John Crawford III, of Beavercreek, Ohio, was shot and killed by police for carrying an unsold pellet gun, out of its package, in a Wal-Mart store. One witness first claimed, and then retracted his account a month later, that Crawford appeared to be pointing the pellet gun at people in the store. No indictments were issued for the White police officers or for the witness who retracted his account. A few days later, on August 9, 2014, 18-year-old Michael Brown was killed in Ferguson, Missouri. Brown was shot and killed as a result of an altercation inside an officer’s police car. While the officer reported that Brown “looked like a demon,” he was not indicted by a grand jury, but later resigned.

These four examples in no way account for all of the deaths of unarmed Black men involving police in the United States over the last 15 years, yet they shed light on the crisis at hand, with respect to the killings of unarmed Black men by police. Additions to this list occur on a seemingly daily basis, reaching what some observers have called an epidemic (Swaine, Laughland, Larty, and McCarthy, 2015). In 2015, police in the United States killed 1,134 young Black men. We speculate this number of reported deaths may be due to the pervasive use of digital video in urban spaces, or what we refer to as the panopticonization of Black subjects. The panopticon, a term derived from the 18th century prison design of philosopher Bentham, turned on the concept of enacting power over captives by means of surveillance by an unseen surveyor (Sweeny, 2006). Following the assertion of surveillance being part of social life (Lyon, 1994; Sweeny, 2006), contemporary urban existence is under constant watch. The pervasive nature of digital photography and video made accessible through contemporary mobile phone technology along with “the extensive electronic networks increasingly used to monitor and catalog behavior and represent an updated form of the Panopticon” (Sweeny, 2006, p. 296). In the hands of millions of citizens within urban spaces equipped with mobile phone video and photography technology, the power and control associated with centralized external surveillance practices is disrupted. This shift from a “centralized, panoptic social control, to power that is decentralized may signal an extension of the potential to oppress, or provide the openings that allow for resistance” (Sweeny, 2006, p. 297). The panopticonization of Black subjects in urban spaces, particularly with respect to documentation of shooting deaths of unarmed victims, offers possibilities to resist subjugation by way of videos captured on mobile phones.

In addition to the four victims noted above, we draw attention to Tamir Rice, a 12 year-old boy who was killed while carrying a pellet gun in a city park in Cleveland, Ohio in 2014. As was the case with Garner and Crawford, video surveillance of the moments leading up to and including Rice’s death were captured by mobile phone technology. The video footage of the final moments of their lives was made accessible to a wider audience through online social media. Rice’s death occurred in an open carry state, which means the act of holding a gun—toy, pellet, or otherwise—is not a criminal offense. In April 2016, the City of Cleveland was ordered to pay a $6 million settlement to Rice’s family, however the city does not acknowledge fault in the fatal shooting (Pearson, 2016).

That said, we recognize this current crisis of police brutality is not indicative of all police officers in the United States. We recognize the increased attention and public aware-
ness of these acts overshadows the countless officers who have and continue to put their own lives on the line daily in efforts to protect and serve the communities in which they live and work. Nevertheless, this rampant accumulation of deaths has not diminished in recent years as evidenced in protests by groups such as #BlackLivesMatter—a grassroots organization that marches in protest against the killings of unarmed Black men in the United States (Black Lives Matter, 2015). The use of a hashtag—the pound sign used as a label to facilitate content searches on social media—in the name of this group suggests the power of social media to name, chronicle, and share information. This current moment of public awareness, concern, and discourse about the abhorrent treatment and killings of Black men at the hands of police as chronicled through social media has culminated in the theoretical provocation presented here.

We do not intend this article as empirically based research. Rather, our theoretical provocation is informed by an informal survey of initial content in social media related to recent deaths of Black men involving police. Instead of a formal study, we intend this provocation to draw attention to visual depictions of Black men who lost their lives to violence and to encourage consideration of these depictions as content central to a contemporary urban education. Toward this goal we construct a foundation for a critical consideration of visual depictions of the deaths of Black men in urban contexts through social media. We acknowledge an extensive body of literature dedicated to relationships among race, privilege, and education in the United State exists currently. For example, educational theorists Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) asserted the significance of race within the United States, the privilege in United States society of property rights over human rights, and intersections of race and property as a tool to analyze inequity. From a visual culture perspective, art education historian Grant (2014) argues the arts function as part of a white master narrative through rhetoric, representations of race, and the role of curriculum in the substantiation of inequity in the absence of critical considerations.

While we neither offer nor intend a substantive review of research on the discourses of race in education, we recognize some key elements within this extensive body of work serve as foundations on which contemporary urban education might build. Specifically, we encourage race and education research that intersects with critical considerations of visual culture (Mirzoeff, 1999; Mitchell, 1994; and Pieterse, 1992) and social media. For example, stereotypes attributed to Black men in the media are particularly obvious with respect to the athlete. Beckham, a professional football player with the New York Giants, was the subject of such stereotyping in 2015. A series of online videos of Beckham dancing with another Black man raised questions for some fans about his masculinity. His mannerisms in the videos challenge stereotypes of race and masculinity about Black male professional athletes. Similar stereotypes and expectations of Black males, particularly urban Black boys, presuppose them to be threatening.

It is not hard for black [sic] men and boys to appear threatening in this country. There are several studies that show whites [sic] view black [sic] boys as less innocent and older due to unconscious bias and stereotypes...This idea aligns with police officer’s designation of Brown as a ‘demon,’ and the officer who killed...Rice’s erroneous belief that [he] was much older than he actually was. (Talley, 2015, Para. 4)
That is, social media enables widespread attention and perpetuation of unconscious bias and stereotypes of Black men and all people of color. Within the context of education, Sourdot (2013) found stereotypical depictions of people of color in popular visual culture a very useful tool in preparing pre-service educators to apply culturally responsive teaching strategies and in turn empower students to embrace diversity and the democratic principles of our nation (p. 160). Similarly, our perspective as art educators is interested in the pedagogical and curricular implications of Black identity within visual culture. The central focus of this article responds therefore to the following questions: How does visual culture within social media respond to the social crises that surround police killings of unarmed Black men within urban spaces? How do such practices encourage possibilities for a critical contemporary urban education?

First, we offer a discussion of the domination of Black male subjectivities through examples of visual culture in the United States (US). Next, we discuss various ways of seeing Black men through a colonized gaze. We use this approach as a means to describe layered ways of seeing Black subjects, as in the Beckham example, manifested between biases of viewers and visual documentation recorded through digital technology. For example, through social media and its expansion in the use of innovative technologies, historically oppressed subjects are now able to record their oppressors, essentially shifting the panopticonism of ocular, or visual, dominance and power from the captors to the captives. This shift affords agency and voice to the oppressed through practices of visual resistance. While the killings of unarmed Black men in urban spaces within the US has not ceased since we began this article, we conclude with consideration of how social media and digital communication technologies might play a role within urban education to respond to, highlight, and deter the violence. If “urban education is shaped by, and implicated in, the contested economic and social dynamics that are reshaping cities (Lipman, 2011, p. 10), the role of social media must be part of considerations about what it means to live and learn in urban spaces.” By extension, we are also interested in how these violent events, and critical considerations of them, promote pedagogical possibilities for contemporary urban education. For example, we are concerned with the ways in which the killing of Black men in urban contexts are represented within social and mass media and how education might provide critical spaces for responding to the violence. We conclude this article with curricular and pedagogical suggestions that situate these killings within the social dynamics of urban contexts as a means to reshape educational experiences and the possibilities.

Black Subjects in Visual Culture

Since the early 20th century, the subjugation of Black people in visual culture includes the production, consumption, collection and interpretation of images, performances, films, and other visual artifacts (Mirzoeff, 1999; and Pieterse, 1992). Such examples include, but are not limited to, prints from the mid 1800s of slave auctions, photographs depicting Black people drinking from “colored only” water fountains in the 1950s, and photographs on postcards from the first half of the 20th century displaying the lynching deaths of Black people with mobs of White witnesses. These examples might be considered Black visual culture to signify the role of the Black subject as mediated through visual modes. Other examples of Black visual culture have focused on Black men and their struggles.
with societal maltreatment, impoverished socio-economic conditions, employment limitations, and police brutality (Collins & Crawford, 2008; Powell, 2008). Further, such depictions of Black men within visual culture in turn have been identified as possible causes for some Black men to rebel against society as a result of the subjective ways in which they are depicted through social and mass media coverage (Collins, 2004; hooks, 1992). While positive depictions of Black males exist within visual culture, imagery also depicts negative stereotypes and complicated racial discourses (Harris, 2003; Powell, 2003). Such imagery has become increasingly more accessible, public, and complicated in recent years, aggravated and facilitated primarily through the production and reproduction of digital photographs and videos, broadcast and published by way of national news outlets and social media. The Jim Crow Museum has an online resource for visual depictions of Black male subjects (http://www.ferris.edu/jimcrow/).

Through these public visual means, the U.S. public contributes increasingly to the complicated discourse of race and race relations. For instance, Brown, the 19-year-old Missouri victim killed by a white police officer, was already criminalized before the night of his death, symptomatic of a White supremacist master script of racial discourses in a country already suspicious of Blackness (Grant, 2014). For the sake of argument, if Brown had committed a robbery or had been involved in any dubiously criminal activity prior to the moment in question, these acts would have nothing to do with the moments or conditions that instigated his death. However, due to after the fact implications perpetuated through the mass media to suggest Michael Brown may have criminal tendencies and a reiteration of the length of time that elapsed in anticipation of toxicology reports, the circumstances that surround his death illuminate how the criminal justice system can frame an individual and distract from the most egregious of crimes—police violence and brutality of citizens. For example, Black feminist studies scholar Patricia Hill Collins (2004) stated,

Media’s marketing of thug life to [Black] youth diverts attention away from social policies that deny Black youth education and jobs. It also seems designed to scare Whites and [Black people] alike into thinking that racial integration of seemingly poor and working-class Black boys (the allegedly authentic Blacks) is dangerous…the phenomenon in which young [Black boys] seemingly celebrate elements of thug life seems counterintuitive because looking and/or acting like a thug attracts discriminatory treatment (p. 159).

That is to say, “racial discourses, though they are discourses of power, ultimately rely on the visual in the sense that the visible body must be used by those in power to represent non-visual realities that differentiate insiders from outsiders” (Harris, 2003, p. 2). In a hegemonic White male patriarchal culture and society, one in which ethnicity and socio-economic conditions also enter and complicate the equation, “black [sic] males endure the worst impositions of gendered masculine patriarchal identity” (hooks, 2004, p. xii). In short, the hegemonic history of White culture in the United States has used images of subjugation to further marginalize Black men.

In the late 1880s, souvenir postcards of lynched Black men “sold by the thousands, usually featuring the tortured and maimed corpse of the victim, with the [White] executioners and spectators still present,” (Apel, 2004, p. 7). It is not that these or any other images of Black men provide no information
about Black people as people, but rather the meanings derived from these images can emerge as misleading and prejudice. As a result viewers subscribe to false stereotypes and notions such as all Black people share the same culture, beliefs, and experiences (Grant, 2014). The practice of subjugating Black bodies through visual images continues, yet rather than merely functioning as images of marginalization, these contemporary images reify a colonized gaze. For example, Black men are increasingly the focus of attention in social and mass media, most often maligned as animals, criminals, derelicts, and thugs (Giroux, 2012; West, 1993; 2008), much like they have been in photographs for more than a century. Office Wilson’s characterization of Brown as a demon falls in line with this practice.

The recent pervasiveness of digital videos of White police officers shooting and killing unarmed Black males within urban spaces, such as those identified above, function as recurring visible evidence of the domination of Black male bodies through visual media. These images of domination are broadcast increasingly through social media, news media, television, marketing, and advertising. That said, the dehumanization and reckless killing of Black men couldn’t be justified based solely on an assumed criminal record, an assumption that often represents other moments in which the United States criminal justice system gets it wrong (Bell, 1992).

According to artist and art historian Michael D. Harris (2003), “with the image” you only have a one-step process of where the image impacts on your psychology directly, and that, then, becomes what you internalize. When it comes to visual representation, clearly a lot is at stake” (p. 15). In other words, images of domination of armed White police officers over unarmed Black bodies unequivocally support a White supremacist master script of ideological constructions of race and identity. Harris (2003) observes, “despite the real-world impact of the construction of black [sic] racial identity and its derogatory imagery, it is important to recognize it as what it is: a construction, an invention. All identities are constructed” (p. 15). As with all constructions, Black racial identities within and beyond urban spaces can be constructed and deconstructed through critical interpretation. Such critical interpretation should also be central to contemporary urban education.

The Colonized Gaze: Ways of Seeing Black Men

In Visualizing Ferguson (Palmer, 2014), an online article that circulated across various social media platforms, readers can access examples of how the practice of turning the cameras back toward the oppressors and using visual technology as a means of forcing accountability shows firsthand the transgressive potential of such technologies, Palmer’s (2014) point is well argued, however further consideration of the use of digital photography as social reflexive engagement is a worthy project. Turning the cameras toward the oppressor, in these cases the police officers, is in effect a shift in power through the use of digital video and photographic recording of daily events. Similar to Sweeney’s (2006) suggestion of a decentralized panoptic practice of surveillance, such a shift in power might also function as a form of protection or resistance as it occurs in the hands of witnesses in urban contexts whose subjectivity might easily shift to that of victim. Palmer, like Sweeney (2006), suggests such a shift moves the power from figures of authority, often interpreted as synonymous with mainstream or majority population, to the marginalized
members of society. This shift thus disrupts expected and conventional power relations, or what we have referred to as the panopticonization of Black subjects.

How then does social media function as a mode of surveillance to capture and make public such actions? Through social media and its pervasive interface with innovative technologies and affordances such as microblogging, video streaming, and anonymous group chats, modes and contexts for capturing, archiving, and publishing digital photographs and videos are available to all users. Unlike YouTube and Vimeo which function as online archives and repositories of videos, recent software applications such as Periscope and Meerkat allow live video streaming through social media accounts like Twitter. In these newly democratized, accessible, public spaces, all users of these technologies are in effect simultaneously consumers and producers of digital visual culture. Following the dichotomy of White oppressors and Black male victims described above, the oppressed are now able to record their oppressors, again shifting the panopticonism of ocular dominance and power from the captors to the captives. Through this shift, the ways in which Black subjects are treated within urban and other societal context, such as educational contexts, can now be seen through the video surveillance of other Black subjects. The use of live video streaming through social media offers possibilities within contemporary urban education classrooms. Use of visual social media in this context can function as a valuable tool for students and educators in urban spaces to gain control of the depictions and reclaim the narratives of their own identities.

This shift of control and reclaimed narratives further disrupts the ways in which Black subjectivities are seen and interpreted publicly through social media. Increasingly, what seems to matter more is not so much what the technology devices record as visual documentation, but rather what the users of these technologies see as they record the events as they unfold. That is, when mainstream viewers access digital video or photographic documentation recorded by bystanders of violence waged on Black subjects, they might imagine what they want to see rather than what is depicted in the imagery. In other words, their interpretations may reflect what they imagine took place based on their own biased visuality. Visual culture theorist Nicholas Mirzoeff (1999) challenges this way of seeing when he notes, “the visual disrupts and challenges an attempt to define culture in purely linguistic terms” (p. 5). The disruption of visual and linguistic modes of describing and interpreting are central to the use of Black visual culture within urban education.

Historically and through public visual means, social forces such as class and gender shape the ways people view and engage with the world and contribute increasingly to the complicated discourse of race and race relations (Pieterse, 1992). Similarly, visual culture theorist Mitchell (1994) posits,

The picture is understood in terms of the complex interplay between visuality, apparatus, institutions, discourse, bodies and figuration; with the realization that spectatorship (the look, the gaze, the glance, surveillance and visual pleasure) may be as deep a problem as various forms of reading (decipherment, decoding interpretation). (p. 16)

Mitchell speculates the need for a critique of visual culture that takes viewers beyond cultural conservative anxieties about visual imagery, particularly television and literacy. We take Mitchell’s suggestions as a call for a critique of visual culture that is more open to
the ways in which critical interpretations of images and pretextual discourses might instigate discerning assessments of cultural and social normativity, morals, and ethics. Mitchell (1994) discusses, the problematic of the image/text—an unstable dialectic of the relationship between the two that constantly shifts its location in heterogeneous representational practices, transgressing both pictorial and discursive frames and undermining the assumptions that underwrite the separation of the discursive and visual disciplines. (p. 16)

It is the complex relationships between discursive and visual modes that offer rich and meaningful possibilities for critical engagement within urban education. Such critiques of digital videos and photographs that serve as documentation of Black subjects captured by bystanders, for example, should discriminate among the variety and historical specificity of conflicting interpretations that emerge through both visual and discursive modes.

In what ways do interpretations of visual culture documentations of Black male subjects resonate with or against similar images, actions, and reactions beyond cultural, social, and national borders? The visual culture documentations of protesters in the 2014 Umbrella Revolution protests seeking democracy in response to decisions by elected officials in Hong Kong, and other public protest actions across the United States demand consideration. For example, how might these protests and the visual documentation of them on social media critique and reference the oppressor-oppressed dialectic so explicitly tied to the events in Ferguson, Missouri. The images of protestors’ in Hong Kong with their hands above their heads is one example of a visual reference to Ferguson made public through social media. Within the United States, flash mob-like “die in” protests, inspired by the killing of Brown, have become popular. In these protests, participants assume the poses of dead people to simulate a mass assassination. These are but two examples of numerous protests with connections to the recent killings of unarmed subjects at the hands of White authorities captured through digital video and made public through social media.

Seeing Black People: The Panopticonization Of Black Subjects

While it may seem as if more and more news stories and social media outlets are sharing visual documentation of occurrences of police brutality of Black subjects in urban spaces than before, such a perceived increase of examples does not necessarily mean more events like these are happening. It is perhaps safe to conclude acceptance of how panopticonism, or panoptic surveillance through social and mass media, has facilitated the publication of ongoing injustice against people of color in the United States. As noted above, digital panopticonism enables any user with a smartphone or other digital recording device as a surveyor in a position of power over all subjects under surveillance. The use of cell phone photographs to chronicle and present the Ferguson protests, for example, render these events accessible on a global scale through social media. When read as a form of collaborative public art in reflection of social conditions, the protests function as visual critiques of the instigating event. The protests themselves however may be confined by the very oppressor-oppressed dichotomy they seek to critique.

The irony of the view of black [sic] art as protest—as description of the inhul-
mane circumstances of much of black life and as heartfelt resistance to the circumstances—is that it is still preoccupied with the white [sic] normative gaze, and it reduces black [sic] people to mere reactors to White power. (West, cited in Pinder, 2002, p. 328)

This statement by philosopher and public intellectual West (2002), aligns with what is happening in major cities such as Washington DC, Chicago, and New York City. Protesters in these cities are performing collaborative public art as protest. Additionally, protesters are using artworks and performance pedagogy as lenses to represent mistreatment of people of color by White authority, primarily police officers and the criminal justice system (Workneh and Reilly, 2014). For example, in New York City protesters took to the streets and major highways causing traffic jams and shutting down highways. These protestors were methodical with their approach. They went to several major retail stores where they performed die-ins to recreate the death of Garner, who was suffocated to death by a strangle hold inflicted by White police officers. Visual documentation of the protests were labeled on social media with the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter, and as such facilitated ongoing commentary among users in support of and in resistance to the protests.

Visual documentation of the protests through digital photography shared on social media provides additional representations of dissonance between what is viewed and what is seen. To this point, critic Berger (1972) states, “the relation between what we see and what we know is never settled (p. 1). It is the disconnect between the seen and the known—in this sense the prejudiced notion of what is seen—that is at the heart of visual dissonance.

We never look at just one thing: we are always looking at the relation between things and ourselves. Our vision is continually active, continually moving, continually holding things in a circle around itself, constituting what is present to us as we are. (p. 9)

In short, the ways in which viewers see events is exaggerated by what they know, what they think they know, what they have been told to know, what they believe, and what they see.

However, even with all of the marches and protests in recent years, an underlined White normative gaze remains. This gaze encapsulates written and visual accounts of these events and reifies America's preoccupation with the hegemonic force that is the White normative gaze. This current condition is similar to how philosopher Fanon (1952) notes, “The white [sic] gaze, the only valid one, is already dissecting me. I am fixed. Once their microtomes are sharpened, the Whites objectively cut sections of my reality. I have been betrayed” (p. 95). Fanon solidifies the duality of the Black subject, which is still as prevalent as it has been for centuries, through his own lived experience. Fanon’s ideology supplements historical evidence for the psychological effects of racialized and anti-Black injustice in the African diaspora.

Digital images and videos captured on smartphones that circulate on social media in response to public protests such as those in response to the deaths of Brown, Garner, and others, are also forms of language and imagery that operate from racial assumptions and resist critical inquiry if left only to a White, normalized gaze. These forms of documentation are contemporary means of confronting the fraudulent nature of contemporary America. In order to encourage critical inquiry, the images and language used to document, dis-
Discuss, and interpret contemporary America must move beyond a White hegemonic perspective and include “Other” ways of seeing. For example, and admittedly somewhat ironically, White cultural critic and theorist Giroux (2012) offers the following as a means to consider racial violence that resists the historically White hegemonic perspective.

The larger reasons behind Eric Garner’s execution seem to be missed by most commentators. The issue is not simply police misconduct, or racist acts of police brutality, however deadly, but the growing use of systemic terror of the sort we associate with Arendt’s notion of totalitarianism that needs to be explored. When fear and terror become the organizing principles of a society in which the tyranny of the state has been replaced by the tyranny of an unaccountable market, violence becomes the only valid form of control. (p. 14)

The goal is to point out what is in operation through the White gaze; a means to operationalize fear through visual example. The visual images from bystanders of brutality and violence, or the senseless killing of citizens at the hands of police officers, are forms of visualizing fear and by association, visualizing power. Giroux (2012) continues with the example of public spectacle of lynching’s in the history of the United States, acknowledging cultural and social critic bell hooks’ (1992) observation.

The point of lynching historically was not to kill individuals but to let everybody know: ‘This could happen to you.’ This is how a terrorist state controls people. It individualizes fear and insecurity and undercuts the formation of collective struggle. Fear of punishment, of being killed, tortured, or reduced to the mere level of survival has become the government’s weapon of choice. As the endless killings by the police make clear we now live in a state of absolute lawlessness, one that both fills the Hollywood screens with prurient entertainment and a culture of cruelty and, unfortunately, provides testimony to the ravaging violence that marks everyday life as well. (p. 25)

We hope the deaths of Brown, Rice, and Garner provide the beginning of a political and social movement to fight what has become a dark and gruesome political state of governance in the United States. As mentioned in the introduction of this article, there were 76 known killings of unarmed people of color by the police in 2014 (Juzwiak & Chan, 2014) at the time we began this writing. How many people have died since the death of Brown? Garner? How many have died in the past week or month? As a result of the increased public awareness and reaction to the deaths of unarmed people of color in the United States, we wonder how the use of social and mass media by some users might underscore a preoccupation with a White normative gaze to critique or resist the gaze, rather than merely react to it. The claiming, critiquing, and resisting of social media as a normative space of power through instantaneous dissemination must be a shared project of all users, producers, and consumers of social media.

**Conclusion**

In the early part of the twentieth century, activist and philosopher Du Bois (1986) reflected on the education of the Black people in the United States. He provided instruction on how Black men in particular could attain knowledge of the world around them rather than be relegated to recipients of a narrowly constructed history perpetuated by a colonizing gaze of Eurocentric White American culture. Du Bois (1986) directed his attention...
to the education of Black men and shed light on how they could resist racism in the United States. In addition, in the early 1900s when Du Bois wrote and spoke on these issues, he foreshadowed a devastation within Black America should education not be positioned as a priority. For Du Bois, the curriculum must include the history of all peoples. Expanding from DuBois’ (1986) premonition, we seek to position all Black subjects within the space of “all peoples” through critical consideration in contemporary urban education. Critical consideration of all peoples in relationship to the current epidemic of shootings by police and harassment by the criminal justice system in urban spaces could be manifested through increased production, publication, and analysis of video and social media documentation. Such panoptic practices of Black subjects would render them explicit within the larger set of all urban subjects, and would promote layered ways of seeing urban subjects through visual documentation and digital imagery. In other words, we believe the promotion of critical considerations of urban subjects through contemporary digital technology provides new ways to engage all students—all peoples—in what might be considered a contemporary urban education.

In this article we have been interested primarily in a theoretical consideration of the visual culture of violence against Black male subjects in urban spaces as evidenced through online publications, videos, and social media activity. The Black youth protesters of Ferguson, and their allies in protest of other senseless killings of unarmed victims, have accomplished an unprecedented record of consistent resistance. Protesters continue, day after day, seeking relentlessly to affect positive change. Protesters have shaken-up effectively the racist law enforcement and government systems of Ferguson, Missouri and other jurisdictions across the country. It seems the only appeasement that protesters may approve is the arrest and conviction of the perpetrators of these killings. At the time of the writing of this article no such arrests or convictions have occurred in response to the deaths of Brown or Garner, or the other victims. No one has been formally charged or held responsible for their deaths.

It is extremely rare for a predominantly White male run system, with a blatant history of racist practices, to sacrifice one of its own for justice. Grand juries rarely indict in cases under such circumstances (Klarman, 2004, 2007). That is, if this cultural response to the murders of unarmed Black men continues, future Grand Jury and Department of Justice decisions may have already been made. Perhaps all that is possible in response to this violence at this point is to hope no one else is killed in protest, and that responses to such murders will result in new justice in this country.

As Tyrone Palmer (2015) suggests at the end of his online response to the Ferguson protests, clearly, the long-term effects of what is happening in Ferguson have yet to be seen, as the coming weeks, months, and years will be filled with new developments, protests, and—unfortunately—more cases of police brutality. However, due primarily to the strong visual imprint they have left, it is doubtful that anyone will soon forget the Ferguson protests. One apparent touchpoint for the Ferguson livestreams is the live footage of Vietnam War that played all over America’s television screens—the latest visual technology at that time. Much like that moment in history, the events of Ferguson have the potential to be a transformative and radi-
The protests probably will not end, nor should they, until the act of killing unarmed people, Black or otherwise, becomes politically dangerous. In our view, a form of political protest also resides within new curricular and pedagogical strategies that situate these killings at the center of urban educational experiences and possibilities. For example, in response to the killings, many universities across the country have developed new courses dedicated to documenting, analyzing, reflecting, and discussing the violence, killings, and criminal justice responses. For example, in Spring 2015 at Penn State, the Department of African American Studies offered “The Fire This Time—Understanding Ferguson.” This special topics course was designed by Taylor (2016), as a means to explore “the facts of the case, the limits of public knowledge, the meaning and structure of the legal proceedings, and the implications of the protest, and of the state’s responses” (Taylor, 2016, personal communication). This course and others like it across the country are to be expected and encouraged, and should move from special topics status to permanent status within the university curriculum. Courses such as the one at Penn State exemplify of how urban spaces, and the events that occur within them, function as rich curricular and pedagogical fodder. That said, in what follows we turn attention to a few urban educational possibilities within online spaces that take advantage of social media and video technologies.

One possibility is the use of video live-streams through social media. For example, Palmer (2015) suggests live video coverage of events as they take place by users of smartphone and other digital technology are one form of the “latest visual technology” (Para. 8) available to the public to record and publicize the heinous acts of violence as well as the socially conscious public responses. Meerkat and Periscope, as noted earlier, are forms of live streaming that fall into this category. Additionally, as small-scale video recording and broadcasting technologies such as GoCam and GoPro cameras become more affordable and thereby more available, access to and publication of daily events of violence, peace, and other human experiences will increase.

Social media hashtags, also noted earlier, provide users with a means to search content relevant to a shared topic, event, or person. We see the use of hashtags as a powerful pedagogical device for learners to search reports, videos, images, and commentary about the ongoing unarmed killings of Black men in urban spaces. For example, the hashtag #museumsrespondtoferguson, was created as a direct response to Brown’s murder. Museum evangelist and arts agitator Russell (2016) manages a website that features the hashtag. The website archives resources and museum-centric responses to current protest movements in the U.S. against police brutality, extrajudicial killings of black people, anti-blackness, and racial injustice” (n.p.). The content on Russell’s site, as well as the comments and other postings on Twitter marked with this hashtag, are two of the many examples for use in contemporary urban education. Such online educational spaces enable users to participate as co-learners who share equal access to a range of perspectives and information about killings in urban spaces, protests in response to these events, actions of the criminal justice system, and the role public opinion plays in facilitating racial politics.

A simple online search for the keywords “Ferguson” and “Curriculum” rendered 1,120,000 hits. Like any online search, not all...
of these hits are related directly to Brown’s death, however several results are worth notice. For example, “Open Letter: How to teach students about Ferguson” is a story that includes a video editorial by Harris-Perry (msnbc, 2014), in response to a school superintendent in Illinois, who told his teachers to not talk about Ferguson in class and to change the subject if it did. Harris-Perry (msnbc, 2014) declares, “a classroom is exactly the space where young people should be examining their assumptions, and exchanging ideas, and engaging in democratic deliberation over the complicated questions of race invoked by the events in Ferguson” (n.p.). Harris-Perry also notes the use of the hashtag #Fergusonsyllabus as a useful resource for teachers and learners. Another example, “Montage of the Last Word (2014),” includes activities for classroom use and a video with a montage of quotations of the last words spoken by victims killed by police. These examples are two of numerous sites educators and learners can use to promote critical urban education.

Our few examples here speak to the educational significance and pedagogical implications of the current devastation of Black life in urban spaces. Until the killings stop, surveillance enacted through digital photography, video, and social media may be the most effective, if not the only, means of enacting a contemporary urban education grounded in collaborative social protest and public resistance.

References


