Looking Back

Racializing Assemblages and the Biopolitics of Resistance

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Abstract

The topic of this thesis is the biopolitics of video activism vis-à-vis racialized police violence. It is written against the backdrop of recent developments in the critique of two central concepts in field of biopolitics, namely Giorgio Agamben’s *bare life* and Michel Foucault’s *biopower*. Offsetting their respective framework, Alexander G. Weheliye (et al.) has introduced the imposition of race onto bodies as anterior to biopolitics. I incorporate this in a critique of Pasi Väliaho’s notion of *biopolitical screens*.

To facilitate grounded theorizing, a field study of police accountability video activist groups in the United States was conducted. I argue that their observed practices should be seen as forms of embodied counter-surveillance and I situate them in the racially saturated field of visibility specific to the U.S. context. Moreover, I argue that the practices entail an extension of corporealities which is not inherently political in the sense of overt discursive iconography. It is, however, ideologically disrupting in how it networks politicized bodies through time and space.

I conclude that raising the video camera to “look back” in the face of racializing assemblages constitutes a rights claim to a political subjectivity, however not necessarily in terms of polity or citizenship. Instead, the media practices are transversal and hold the potential to entail a political subjectivity ontologically anterior to state sovereignty.

**Keywords**

copwatch, counter-surveillance, sousveillance, race, biopolitics, embodiment, corporeality
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1. Introduction

I asked, "Why do you have your cameras out?" When they [the NYPD] jumped out on me, they had their phones in their hand, instead of a gun or anything [...]. So I asked him: Why is he filming me? And he said, "Because you filmed us."¹

Ramsey Orta

On March 3rd 1991, George Holliday filmed four Los Angeles Police officers brutally beating Rodney King, a black man stopped for a traffic misdemeanor.² Holliday happened to see the beating from his own terrace and used his Sony Handycam to capture what was unfolding. Holliday’s footage was later given to KTLA – a local Los Angeles television station – and was aired and spread to other media, in turn causing a national outcry on police brutality and misconduct.³

23 years after the Rodney King incident, in August 2014, Ramsey Orta filmed the death of his friend Eric Garner, a black man suspected of selling cigarettes illegally in New York City – also with mainstream publicity and protests as a consequence.⁴ A major difference from the Rodney King case – which essentially was the first “viral video” documenting police brutality – is of course that Orta’s video was disseminated on the Internet; through social media and video platforms.

As Tina Askanius notes in an article on contemporary modes of video activism, YouTube is indeed the prevalent space in which radical video is screened and experienced today.⁵ During the last decades of global interconnectedness through the Internet, video activism has been evolving, bringing with it new strategies and new functions.⁶ Such strategies and functions overlap with contestations over online public spheres – a battle largely won by capital interests to date.⁷ Still, politically charged videos – like Orta’s – manage to pierce the online media noise, largely thanks to the inflated public discourse on race.

³ Ibid., 1400.
⁵ Tina Askanius, Radical online video: YouTube, video activism and social movement media practices. (Lund University, 2012), 3.
⁶ See e.g. Peter Dahlgren, Media and Political Engagement: Citizens, Communication and Democracy (New York: Cambridge University Press), 2009.
in the U.S.; particularly following the last years’ large number of high profile shootings of unarmed civilians and criticized “stop and frisk” practices.8

Consequently, we can indeed discern a tendency, or a “subfield,” pertaining to racialized violence within the development of new media and online emerging public spheres; a subfield in which there is a vast circulation of images of black male deaths at the hands of police officers in the U.S., in what Jerome Dent has called “Lynching 2.0.”9 I would argue, this is the subfield in which Ramsey Orta’s video should be situated. Orta was not an activist, however, but an accidental witness of his friend’s death; an eyewitness who spontaneously grabbed his cell phone to record.10 Only after the fact, Orta became organized in so-called “copwatching” on a national level – holding workshops and patrolling the streets in a proactive effort to “hold police accountable,” in his own wording.11

After doing some research on Orta’s case, the practice of copwatching caught my eye as an extremely interesting converging point of contemporary (bio)politics, technology, and identity formation. It sparked the idea(s) for the current thesis and all the following theoretical work. The first research literature on the subject I found of interest was Mary Angela Bock’s extensive field study of a copwatch group in the U.S. (which I will come back to later in the thesis).12 Bock argues that simply focusing on the technology of copwatching, or its cultural texts (e.g. video clips), fails to see the larger implications for a new political subjectivity and thus paves the way for an impoverished analysis.13 Instead, she argues for ethnographic field studies and grounded analyses which can account for the relatively unique phenomenon copwatching is.14

Needless to say, Bock’s argument convinced me, since I conducted a field study during spring 2017 – in NYC and in several smaller cities in the Southwest – to facilitate grounded theorizing of copwatching. During my four-week trip, I interviewed individual scholars, leaders and activists, as well as visited three different copwatch groups to observe them in the field.15 Just as Bock, I hoped to gain original insights into the internal workings of the groups, but my interests were aligned specifically toward biopolitics and the moving image, rather than journalistic aspects of citizen witnessing in general (as in the case of Bock). Thus, the previous research section below is not focusing on copwatching per se, but rather on literature relevant to biopolitics as it relates to media activism.

13 Ibid., 15.
14 Ibid., 15.
15 See subchapter 2.3, as well as appendix 1 and 2 for more details on the field study.
1.1 Previous Research and Relevance

“[Man] can lose all the so-called Rights of Man without losing his essential quality as man, his human dignity. Only the loss of a polity itself expels him from humanity.”¹⁶ In other words, human rights are in reality citizen rights, and by extension the stateless essentially lack “the right to have rights,” to use Hannah Arendt’s famous phrase.¹⁷

In media studies, there is a large corpus on citizen witnessing, civil rights media activism, and related phenomena.¹⁸ Few studies, however, have been made on the media agency of groups or individuals whose subjectivity is not formed as part of a marginalized group inside a given community, but rather as expelled from humanity (polity) altogether as a result of being de jure or de facto stateless.¹⁹ In the current thesis, I situate copwatching in an adjacent domain to that of de facto statelessness. We can think of copwatching as possibly eschewing the realm of the state and especially its particular iteration in the the U.S. prison-industrial complex.²⁰ Firstly, because of copwatching’s inherent connection to blackness and black lives, both of which I will show to be expelled from the construct of polity (see chapter 3). Secondly, because of its overt antagonisms with local sovereign biopower (e.g. enforcement of the law) and the subsequent “resistance of the flesh” (see chapter 5).

Recent media scholarship has begun to move beyond the state-centeredness which has been, and still is, prevalent even when states are analyzed as discursive social constructs or “imagined communities.”²¹ There is an emerging critique of “methodological nationalism” – against academic practices which marginalize certain forms of human agency, and leave especially the stateless untheorized and thus invisible.²² To the extent it exists, this growing concern has mainly dealt with the representation of diasporas and the stateless in media and has yet to study their own agency and media output.²³

While an international outlook makes us see what may occur between states, the transnational focus on a level above or beyond any singular sovereign state. This does not, however, mean a necessary

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¹⁷ Shown to be valid also in a contemporary context by e.g. Brad K. Blitz and Caroline Sawyer, ed., Statelessness in the European Union: Displaced, Undocumented, Unwanted (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).
²¹ Brooten, 6f.
rejection of a nationalist categorization. By contrast, the *transversal* makes us see liminal and interstitial non-state spaces of refuge from sovereign biopower. Following this distinction, Lisa Brooten has studied the *transversal* media output of activist-refugee themselves, which will be used as a productive concept in relation to copwatching.  

Further, the stateless identity has been analyzed by Giorgio Agamben as formed through an inclusive exclusion – a form of constitutive violence – within the social order of the sovereign state. Thus, as Brooten puts it, the stateless person must “find the cracks through which to break from the ‘state of exception’ and assert their agency and political subjectivity.” I want to examine if and how this is reflected in the copwatch media practices and output, as it should be a corollary if my postulates are valid (i.e., if copwatching can be seen as a form of statelessness).

Since the “state of exception” in Brooten’s quote above refers back to Agamben – and his famous notion of the *camp* as the stateless condition of being left outside polity and exposed to *bare life* – there is a natural link to the theoretical framework of biopolitics/biopower, pioneered by Michel Foucault. Agamben and Foucault’s respective framework have in turn been extended by Pasi Väliaho in order to examine media and biopolitical screens – and also been criticized by Black Studies scholars to not account for race as an inherent category of biopolitics. I will draw from these diverging fields and attempt a critical rereading of both of them in light of each other (see chapters 3, 4 and 5 for more precise delineations of the concepts mentioned above).

Apart from filling a gap in the study of transversal media practices, I believe putting Black Studies in conversation with Media Studies on biopolitics could expand our sense of interdisciplinary fields. The wider relevance of the study could also lie in the understanding of transforming politics and the process of deterritorialization. This intersects various fields’ genealogies and ways of grappling with agency or, as Mary O’Kane puts it,

[a]ctivist-refugees straddle the ontological divide between citizen and noncitizen. They blur the barriers between the interlinking sovereign power regimes of the state and nation-state system. Yet, they cannot fit into the symbolic order of either and therefore carry the real potential to reveal the contingency and hence the insecurity of both narratives.

I am interested in the question if this holds true for the copwatcher as well.

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24 Brooten, 8f.
26 Brooten, 12.
30 See e.g. chapter 5 for suggestions on further research.
2. Material and Methods

2.1. The Field Study and its Participants

During spring 2017 I spent one month in the U.S. – ten days in New York and the remainder of the time in different smaller cities throughout the Southwest (I have chosen not to disclose the cities for participant anonymity). During the trip, I interviewed individual scholars, leaders and activists – as well as visited three different copwatch groups to observe them in their daily activities. Among other things, I got to see educational days, workshops, meetings, promotional work, and days out filming. I was able to time my trip with two major “campaigns” of copwatching, meaning they were out every night filming police interactions during a certain period – providing an intense experience for me and a rich material to work with. I brought a video camera and a sound device – with a shotgun mic and a lavaliere wireless transmitter – to record as much as possible to be able to transcribe afterwards (see Appendix 1 and 2).

Below, I will briefly outline the three groups and some of the individuals I met, to provide an overview.

The first group I visited was formed 2012 in a Southwestern city, after its current leader “Eric” got arrested for filming what he thought was two officers abusing a young woman. For filming, he was charged with interfering and was set-up by false testimony from the law officials – allegedly spitting an officer in his face. He later got acquitted thanks to another witness capturing the event with his cell phone camera, proving the testimonies wrong. The incident sparked the idea for a local movement and he founded the copwatch group. As I heard and experienced myself during my eleven days there, they often go out to film downtown at the bar district – or “roam around” in a car. The activists and volunteers in the group are from all over the political spectrum – from the libertarian right to the communist left, by their own definitions. What they shared was a distrust for the federal state and what we could provisionally call an anti-racist counter-surveillance ideology. It was very “racially mixed” as well, but with some predominance of white people – which distinguished it from all of the other organizations I visited, which were predominantly black and Hispanic. Out of the fifteen people I met, roughly half were male and half female – but with at least two gender non-conforming persons. This was the volunteers that participated during the particular campaign I came for, however, and they should not be seen as representative in any strict sense – especially since I heard from the leader that they have a large turnover of volunteers.

The next pre-planned stop was meeting Simone Browne at the University of Texas at Austin. There, Browne is Associate Professor in the Department of African and African Diaspora Studies. The meeting served two main purposes: First, I wanted to discuss some of the issues brought up in her 2015 volume *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness*. Second, before scheduling the interview I thought that perhaps Browne could be viewed as a kind of counter-surveillance activist herself – given her research, which included a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request for U.S. intelligence on Frantz Fanon.
We spent three and a half hours together – first in a formal interview, later turning into an informal conversation.  

The third stop on my trip was a couple of hours away by car. I had followed a story in the news about an African American family violently abused by a white police officer, in a town nearby where I was. The recent development in the case had been that a video from the officer’s own body-camera had surfaced, in what I later learned was a leak from two officers within the department. The footage arguably shows the officer abuse his powers, but he was suspended for ten days only – while the two officers who had leaked the footage were being “witch hunted” by the police department in public. I came in contact with a local activist, “Said,” who set out to “just do something” as he said – and thus organized activism in support of the family. He created a visually striking banner counting the days that the officer had “still been on the streets.” He rallied with the banner in public and was highlighted in national media for it. With the help of this momentum, he spoke before the city mayor and organized different town hall meetings to “hold police accountable.” He was also rallying for the two officers who had released the footage, calling them “the real heroes” of the case. I was able to contact Said, drive over, and spend a day together with him: we first did a two hour long semi-structured interview and I then shadowed him around in his daily life.  

The second copwatch group I visited was affiliated with The Coalition to End Broken Windows in New York. The coalition name refers to the NYPD policing strategy to go after petty crimes and minor infractions (e.g. fare-evasion and jaywalking) which according to the coalition is an inherently racist practice, targeting communities of color. The NYPD “broken windows policing” is based on a crime prevention theory introduced in the early 80’s, named after the analogy that if one window is broken on a building, soon more will be. What I could observe was the coalition taking fundamental issue with this analogy gaining traction in the public consciousness. I was able to sit in on the coalition’s monthly meeting, as well as spending three days with “Carlos” – the founder of one of the copwatch branches within the coalition. “Carlos” was at the center of an unfolding news story when I came to New York. He was thus busy planning media appearances and I also got to meet his volunteering attorney and press secretary – both involved in helping “Carlos” to strategize. I was also able to follow “Carlos” out in the streets when he was filming police activity and taking part in a Union Square protest for black lives.  

During the same ten days in New York, I was embedded in another copwatch organization. While “Carlos” literally pointed his video camera at officers, this organization used a number of other counter-surveillance tactics. In addition to its core members – an older Jewish man (“Sandy”) and a young black gender non-conforming person (“Elsa”) – they attracted volunteers to help with specific campaigns. I was able to sit in on their “Court Monitoring,” for instance, meaning directly observing and taking

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32 See Appendix 2: 14-03-17.  
written notes in a criminal court (since cameras are prohibited there). This, in combination with talking to and filming the defendants’ personal accounts outside the court building, was an effort in trying to make visible “that which otherwise is offset into the margins of statistics,” in the words of Sandy. In the same vein as that of the coalition, the organizational discourse was very much focused on racial issues and broken windows policing.

During my time in New York, I visited the main offices of Witness – a global NGO deeply engaged in organizing people in “democratizing” video activism (documenting war crimes, environmental catastrophe, police abuse, etc.).

I met with Jackie Zammuto, Program Manager at Witness, to interview her about their video activism and specifically the work they do with copwatch organizations in the U.S. I was also shown around the offices and their video editing suite. I got to see archival practices and how they work technically with large amounts of video data sent in from affiliates all over the world.

2.2. Grounded Theory

Grounded theory is a qualitative empirical method, first developed by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss in the 1960s. One of the method’s most distinctive traits is its “constant comparative mode.” More precisely, that the researcher start out with two empirical samples and from that point a comparative analysis unfolds. In Barbara Czarniawska’s words, “a tentative hypothesis based on [the] two samples directs the choice of the third one, and so on, until a theory emerges.” Thus, a thesis based on grounded theorizing will likely be at an angle in relation to previous literature in the field; cutting across otherwise more linear progression in the respective research corpus. In my view, this is one of the great affordances of grounded theorizing – you think with, against, and through the field to develop an original theory.

Following Glaser and Strauss’s method, the current thesis will move between ethnographic data and the theoretical frameworks outlined in the previous chapter. Consequently, it will facilitate the means to (at least partly) fill the research gap Bock has identified, as mentioned in the previous chapter. The method will also enable quite radical shifts of register between, for instance, the particulars of the field and more abstract analyses of their ontological status. Further, the geographical scope of the field study enables a comparative study of localities, spaces, and their connections. This echoes Vicki Meyer – the Production Studies scholar – who claims that it is precisely the “connection between macro and micro that is so frequently lost in the efforts to describe the current media landscape, its interconnected

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36 See Appendix 2: 22-03-17.
38 Ibid., 101.
39 Barbara Czarniawska, Shadowing: And Other Techniques for Doing Fieldwork in Modern Societies (Malmö: Liber, 2007), 108.
industries, and its networks of professionals.” Retrofitting Meyer’s quote for the present field, you could say that it is the connection between transversal and local that is so frequently lost in the efforts to describe current media activism, its interconnected affiliations, and its networks of political subjects. Czarniawska offers a productive complement to Meyers: In relation to the methods of ethnology, she points out that every village is local, but when villages are tightly interconnected as the global village, the connections become more interesting than local customs alone. Put differently, there is no way to understand local customs without reference to the global village. This is why all possibilities for doing a mobile ethnology are worth investigating.

Following Czarniawska’s line of reasoning – but doing ethnography rather than ethnology – I conducted field studies in multiple cities and have incorporated a kaleidoscopic range of empirical source material. The ethnographic data consists of a field diary (based on participatory-observations), transcribed interviews, scanned documents, and cyberethnography data (e.g. copies of emails and social media posts). This enabled me to tackle the virtualization of practices found in many of the copwatch groups and the simultaneity of experience (e.g. coeval time) it entailed. I also interlace with case studies and ethnographic material from previous scholarly publications.

In logical terms, grounded theory is an abductive approach. Abduction is, in short, a process with multiple inferential steps toward a hypothesis; a process of generating and selecting hypotheses. It is thus as type of inference – deduction and induction being the two other forms. While deduction shows that something is necessarily true, and induction shows that something is operative, “abduction merely suggests that something may be.” Based on this outline, abduction may seem like a weak choice. It has major advantages, however, since it is the only form of inference to account for explanatory power.

Consider induction, which only deal with raw data in order to infer logically “from the bottom up” (e.g. frequencies and statistics). Such an approach is seriously flawed in dealing with the present field study, since part of the study is in finding the object-of-study itself. In other words, to do original grounded theory we need to explore different options, since we do not know what to measure from the start – and “[u]nlike induction, abduction does not infer the truth of a hypothesis, but rather poses it as a question.”

Moreover, if we instead consider deduction, it will only allow for strictly logical reasoning from a given set of premises – which can be of use once you have a set of premises at hand, but hardly as an

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42 Czarniawska, 80.
43 Ibid., 17.
44 Ibid., 108.
46 Ibid., 303.
47 Ibid., 302f.
an overarching method of inference for a field study. Thus, abduction and grounded theory seem to go hand-in-hand. Georgina Born even points us to the fact that abduction is inherent to ethnography itself, since she claims that ethnography “entails an oscillation between phases of more deductive and more inductive work; it is a subtle tool for the application and the amendment of theory.”\(^{48}\)

Consequently, in the tradition of ethnography, the present study will not be striving to be representative – rather, it is an abductive line of reasoning through the specific, meaningful and exceptional which is of interest.

2.3. Methodology and Race

Race and racializing assemblages are subjects which can be found discussed throughout the thesis. In this subchapter I focus-in on the implications race has on epistemic hierarchies, and on ethnography in particular. I begin by outlining the former category to give an overview and proceed to discuss my own ethnography in relation to critical race studies.

Western knowledge production – and especially ethnography – has historically and intrinsically been entangled with Eurocentrism, imperial endeavors, and colonization.\(^{49}\) Counter to this, there is a contemporary tendency in (parts of) the academic world to revise and/or subvert Western thought by introducing new philosophical idioms and categories which are not contingent on racist assumptions – thus “decolonizing the epistemic.”\(^{50}\) Broadly speaking, it is a project aimed at unsettling central concepts otherwise taken for granted in Western education – for example, the European notion of Modernity.\(^{51}\) This interdisciplinary project is arguably pioneered by latina/o studies, critical race theory, postcolonial studies, Black studies, and adjacent fields. A famous name in this context is, of course, Fred Moten – whose work is both preoccupied with critically re-examining the canon of European Philosophy and with developing an original theoretical framework.\(^{52}\) In the thesis, I draw from Moten, as well as from Hortense Spillers, Sara Ahmed, and Alexander G. Weheliye (et. al.), to outline an ontology which accounts for racialization.

Keffrelyn Brown contends that ethnographic research, despite self-reflexivity and nuance, “is vulnerable and often silent on how to manage challenges that emerge in a racialised research context.”\(^{53}\) In my reading, Brown points out a general failure to incorporate race as a factor in what otherwise are critical examinations of positionality; of the researcher vis-à-vis the participant(s). Operating from a


\(^{51}\) Sérgio Boatcã, Manuela Costa, Encarnacion Gutierrez Rodriguez, \textit{Decolonizing European Sociology: Transdisciplinary Approaches} (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Group 2010), 71ff.


color-blind perspective is dangerous, according to Brown, since race will be precluded as a part of the object-of-study.⁵⁴ To counteract this, the researcher needs to be aware of “the racialized nature of the research epistemologies.”⁵⁵ Brown argues for a narrative approach which gives voices to the subaltern – a kind of choir, in my reading – to elevate the framework from a locked distribution of positionalities.⁵⁶ Following Brown, throughout the thesis I interlace my theoretical argument with direct quotes from the field study participants – and in that sense “giving them voice.”

As a white researcher, incorporating race into a self-reflexive ethnography necessarily means making my own whiteness visible. I contend this because whiteness equals privilege, but it also tends to evade description, as Sara Ahmed has shown.⁵⁷ In her words, “whiteness is invisible and unmarked, as the absent centre against which others appear only as deviants, or points of deviation.”⁵⁸ While blackness is seen as something particular, whiteness is just the normal and universal – or, as Richard Dyer puts it, whiteness “is not seen as any race in particular.”⁵⁹ I would argue, making my whiteness visible is a self-reflective act of problematizing positionality and power, as well as a more precise ethnographic description of the field in question. It is not an easy task, however, since whiteness especially evades the white person – to be white is to be extended by the spaces you inhabit.⁶⁰

The practice of self-reflexivity is also complicated by the specific circumstances in the field. Entering predominantly black communities in the U.S., as a privileged white Scandinavian, giving voice to the subaltern seemed very much like an arrogant, top-down, way to frame the study. In other words, who am I to do that? This is crucial question, of course, and an important one to grapple with throughout any field study. However, coming completely from the outside of the field also has its advantages – for one, everyone let their guard down because I was such a complete stranger.⁶¹ Moreover, you can never know better than the actors or participants of your study, but you can see something different.⁶² In Czarniawska’s words, there “is no view from nowhere […] there can only be views from different points – compared.”⁶³ What is important to add is that I do not read this as a “behaviorist imperative,” nor to simply observe at a (social) distance. I tried to enter a dialogical relationship with the participants of my field study, giving them “voice” but adding my critical perspective – in an effort of “neither surrendering […] to the views received, nor asserting [their] supremacy, but simply adding [my views] to the views from the field.”⁶⁴

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⁵⁴ Brown, 99.
⁵⁵ Ibid., 109.
⁵⁶ Ibid., 99f.
⁵⁸ Ibid., 157.
⁶¹ See e.g. Appendix 1: 10-03-17.
⁶² Czarniawska, 21.
⁶³ Ibid., 36.
⁶⁴ Ibid., 38.
2.4. Ethnography and Ethics

Anthropologist Georgina Born has termed her preferred methodology as “postpositivist empiricism.”65 It is in line with grounded theorizing and can further be read as an important counterpoint to Bock’s de-emphasis of the activists’ own cultural output (outlined in the previous chapter) – namely because Born asserts that the sociology of cultural productions have to address the specificity of the aesthetic and the art object, in order to not become reductive or fail to see aesthetic conventions at the producer’s end.66 By extension, this “post-Bourdiesuan” take on sociology implies that we should not disregard that certain aesthetic properties can form social relations. We should instead allow these properties to “play a part in the unfolding analysis.”67 An important aspect of this is to reinsert agency into what could otherwise be construed as a predetermined field of economically maximizing subject: “[What is lacking is the] existential reality of the historical orientation of producers by reference to the aesthetic and ethical trajectories or coordinates of the genres in which they work, an orientation that enables or affords agency.”68 In other words, there are other values at stake than the maximizing of social-, cultural-, or symbolic capital within a contested field (to use a Bourdieusian framework). To reach “beyond Bourdieu” we need creative invention as a theory of agency, according to Born.69 She borrows the term from social anthropologist Alfred Gell, who stresses “art’s embeddedness in immediate social relations, its role in construing networks of exchange.”70 Gell’s theory centers around the idea that cultural objects resulting from creative agency mediates social relations that are entailed in their production.71

I align myself with Born’s methodology and would further argue that we need an ethical self-reflexivity to account for actual human agency. More precisely, we need to acknowledge the researcher’s own position and treat it critically as part of the process of writing ethnography itself. Thus, I will insert my own field presence into the analysis rather than construing myself as an invisible – fly on the wall – observer. A truly symmetric fieldwork, as Czarniawska contends, does not consist of “‘being nice to the natives,’ but of allowing oneself to be problematized in turn – at a certain cost to the researcher, of course.”72 For instance, this includes making my own whiteness visible.73

All participants were informed about the research activities and provided written or verbal consent. Pseudonyms are used to protect the identity of all participants, with the exception of a few individuals who were interviewed in the role of public figures or as spokespersons for major organizations, rather than laying bare their daily private life for me to observe. For transparency: I have been working myself as a filmmaker, dealing with social issues, activism, and “political art.” Thus, I entered the field

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65 Born, 172.
66 Ibid., 174.
67 Ibid., 178.
68 Ibid., 192.
69 Ibid., 180.
70 Ibid., 183.
71 Ibid., 183.
72 Ibid., 12.
73 See subchapter 2.3.
sympathetic to the will to change social injustice through filmmaking. I kept an appropriate social
distance, however, and I was also bit suspicious of what I initially considered hyperbole about the
potential to end deep seated structural injustice through visibility alone.\textsuperscript{74}

\textsuperscript{74} See 6.1. for a further discussion on visibility and representation.
3. The (Para)ontology of Blackness

[B]lackness means to render unanswerable the question of how to govern the thing that loses and finds itself to be what it is not.75

Fred Moten

Simone Browne points out that we have to grapple with the ontological conditions of blackness in order to develop a theory of racializing surveillance.76 I align myself with Browne and further suggest that the same holds true regarding any resistance to racializing surveillance (e.g. copwatching). It is not enough, however, to situate blackness in relation to ontology. The Western conceptualization of being falls short when it comes to blackness – and thus we need new philosophical idioms and categories which are not contingent on racist assumptions (in a “decolonialization of the epistemic”).77 On the following pages I argue for a paraontological framing of black resistance/being in the vein of Black Optimism. It is mainly an abstract discussion serving to lay a theoretical foundation for the subsequent chapters.

An important first distinction to make is that between blackness and the lived experience of being (considered) black. It has been suggested by Frantz Fanon, through Sylvia Wynter, that blackness can be seen as an objective fact – that is, a separate entity from any multitude of black subjectivities.78 We can think about it the way any culture tend to be framed through a post-modern lens; as something constantly in flux but nevertheless real.79 For Rinaldo Walcott blackness can be seen as a sign “that carries with it particular histories of resistance and domination” – “never closed and always under contestation.”80 From such an outset you can infer the general postulate that not all persons who are deemed black by society are necessarily part of (the culture of) blackness. Blackness is something you take active part in (shaping), but the lines between signifier and signified are blurred, since blackness is both “identity and culture, history and present […]”.81

The lived experience of blackness actualizes the imposition of race onto black bodies and lives.82 “[O]ne’s being is experienced through others,” as Browne describes it.83 This is echoed in Sara Ahmed, who claims that “racism ensures that the black gaze returns to the black body, which is not a loving

75 Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study (Wivenhoe, New York, Port Watson: Minor Compositions 2013), 49.
77 Isasi-Díaz, 19-43.
78 Browne, 7.
79 Browne, 7f.
80 Rinaldo Walcott, Black like who? Writing Black Canada (Toronto, Ont.: Insomniac Press, 2003), 27.
81 Browne, 15.
82 Ibid., 7f.
83 Ibid., 7.
return but rather follows the line of the white hostile gaze.”

The phenomenon Ahmed describes is arguably the same phenomenon which led Fanon to famously say that his black body was reduced to “an object among other object.” At this juncture, the ontology of blackness intersects the constitutive forces which racializes the black body, as Ahmed shows:

The alignment of race and space are crucial to how they materialize as givens, as if each “extends” the other. In other words, while “the other side of the world” is associated with “racial otherness,” racial others become associated with “the other side of the world.” They come to embody distance. The embodiment of distance is what makes whiteness “proximate,” as the “starting point” for orientation.

Consequently, blackness is not only constructed as the negation of ontology through a hierarchical episteme – but its ontological status is also reified and veiled as something natural by the “alignment of race and space.” Thus, although separate, blackness and black bodies are intimately related to each other. By extension, I assert that the black person should have an ethical interpretative prerogative with regards to the lived experience and phenomenological aspects of blackness – a reason why I so frequently quote participants in the field study. However, the statements of participants must be read critically against each other, and in relation to scholars such as Ahmed. One participant alone cannot represent the overarching complexity of blackness. Nor should they be forced to do so, or construed as doing so. I thus align myself with Harney and Moten, who states that blackness “must be understood in its ontological difference from black people who are, nevertheless, (under)privileged insofar as they are given (to) an understanding of it.”

3.1. Ontology as Resistance

The paraontological hinges on the notion that blackness comes prior to governance. In other words, that blackness is not a response to regulative power, but rather the other way around: “Power is a response to the uncontainable priority of blackness.” To be clear, we can think of the slave trader as imposing a regulatory violence seeking to “ensnare” an already prior freedom. To Harney and Moten, this prior freedom is integral to blackness, as an “anoriginary drive” – which translates to something

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86 Ahmed (2006), 121.
88 See subchapter 6.1.
89 Harney and Moten, 47.
90 Gupta-Nigam, 6.
91 Ibid., 6.
92 Ibid., 6.
like an immanent force of resistance or insubordination, in my reading.\footnote{Fred Moten, “Blackness and Nothingness (Mysticism in the Flesh),” \textit{South Atlantic Quarterly} 112, no. 4 (2013): 762.} The important point at this stage is that blackness is constitutive; “neither an aberration nor an effect of power.”\footnote{Gupta-Nigam, 9.} What emerges from this line of thinking is

[not only that] blackness is ontologically prior to the logistic and regulative power that is supposed to have brought it into existence but that blackness is prior to ontology; or, in a slight variation of what [Nahum Dimitri] Chandler would say, blackness is the anoriginal displacement of ontology, that it is ontology’s anti- and ante-foundation, ontology’s underground, the irreparable disturbance of ontology’s time and space.\footnote{Moten (2013), 739.}

In other words, the paraontological entails not only that blackness is anterior to ontology, but also that this anteriority (“anti- and ante-foundation” in Moten) displaces ontology and inhabits an “underground” position – or the “undercommons” – from which resistance can take shape.\footnote{Ibid., 742.} According to Moten, the “undercommons” must withdraw from the framework posed by ontology and “refuse subjection to ontology’s sanction against the very idea of black subjectivity.”\footnote{Ibid., 749.} By extension, framing the distinction between blackness and black people through a paraontological lens lets us separate blackness from the question of (Western ontological) being altogether.\footnote{Ibid., 750.} Drawing from Moten, this leads David Kline to claim that “[b]lackness is a counter-force \textit{to ontology itself} [italicized in original].”\footnote{Kline, 63.}

\section*{3.2. Anteriority and Activism}

This subchapter is an extension of the discussion above, but it is also an attempt to specifically highlight aspects of paraontology which can be productive for a discussion in relation to the field study. An important first step is to delineate the paraontological as separate from the politico-ontological, in order to avoid a misreading. In contrast to the politico-ontological, the paraontological namely designates a mode of being which is “always [by definition] already resisting the imposing logic of (political) ontology.”\footnote{Fred Moten, \textit{In the break: the aesthetics of the Black radical tradition} (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press: 2003), 197.} In other words, by being prior to ontology it conjoins with utopian visions to establish a political position outside of ontology altogether.\footnote{Ibid., 63.}
In the vein of Black Optimism, Moten sees blackness as “not reducible to its social costs; [but] also manifest in a set of benefits and responsibilities.”\textsuperscript{102} There is always a surplus to the suppression of blackness; or, “lines of flight” to speak with Deleuze.\textsuperscript{103}

There is an anoriginary drive whose fateful internal difference (as opposed to fatal flaw) is that it brings regulation into existence, into a history irregularly punctuated by transformations that drive imposes upon regulation. Those transformative impositions show up for us now as compensation and surplus: as the payment of a massive and incalculable debt by the ones who not only never promised it […].\textsuperscript{104}

To be clear, the “transformative impositions” Moten refers to could be read as, for instance, impositions on lawmakers brought about by the civil rights movement – which today creates a “surplus” and spaces for resistance. However, such “transformative impositions” do not necessarily have to occur in a formal way, changing dominant structures of society (e.g. laws); these impositions are the effect of the “anoriginary drive” and could take place on a micropolitical scale or outside the sovereign state itself (e.g. black nationalism).\textsuperscript{105}

The ontological foundation in and of “Man” circumscribes blackness into negation. In Moten’s words, “[t]he givenness and substantiveness of transcendental subjectivity is assured by a relative nothingness.”\textsuperscript{106} Moten’s use of “nothingness” corresponds to a famous passage in Frantz Fanon’s \textit{Black Skin, White Masks}:

I feel my soul as vast as the world, truly a soul as deep as the deepest of rivers; my chest has the power to expand to infinity. I was made to give and they prescribe for me the humility of the cripple. When I opened my eyes yesterday I saw the sky in total revulsion. I tried to get up but eviscerated silence surged toward me with paralyzed wings. Not responsible for my acts, at the crossroads between Nothingness and Infinity, I began to weep.\textsuperscript{107}

We could read Fanon’s first sentence as something closely related to Moten’s anorginary drive; a freedom which is then “crippled” by external forces. This is also in line with Nana Adusei-Poku, who further suggests that the lived experience of blackness can recode this nothingness into a “foundational ground, or as anti-/ante-ground, as a void that sustains.”\textsuperscript{108} Thus, although Fanon was trapped in this nothingness, the same “black abyss” can serve as a space to draw creative power from – which reconnects back to Moten and the intellectual project of Black Optimism.\textsuperscript{109} In short, the discussed “nothingness is not absence but foundation.”\textsuperscript{110}

\textsuperscript{102} Moten (2013), 774.
\textsuperscript{103} See 5.3
\textsuperscript{104} Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, \textit{The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study} (Wivenhoe, New York, Port Watson: Minor Compositions 2013), 47.
\textsuperscript{105} See chapter 5.
\textsuperscript{106} Moten (2013), 749.
\textsuperscript{107} Fanon, 119.
\textsuperscript{109} See e.g. Moten (2003), 197ff.
\textsuperscript{110} Adusei-Poku, 1/1.
So how does this foundation translate into concrete political activism and something relevant to the present thesis’ field study? First, the fact that paraontology lets us see blackness as a separate entity makes it possible for activists (e.g. copwatchers) to align themselves with blackness regardless of their own status of being racialized. Further, to take a position outside of ontology can be achieved by a reconstruction of aesthetics in line with the main argument of Moten’s *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*. For instance, Moten discuss how the photograph of Emmett Till – the black fourteen-year old boy murdered in 1955 – could possibly challenge ontological questioning. He asks “what the hegemony of the visual” have to do with the death – and connects a critical aesthetic reading to the necessary re-construction of ontology. In relation to the moving image specifically, the “ante-ground” of blackness can perhaps offer a new type of aesthetics, outside of ontology. Following Judith Butler’s line of thought, there needs to be such an aesthetics, since “[t]he visual field is not neutral to the question of race; it is itself a racial formation, an episteme, hegemonic and forceful.

The fact that blackness is prior to regulatory violence could make possible a certain kind of resistance and political subjectivity. This was a working hypothesis I came up with through abductive reasoning while in the field. Moten suggests that “one wants to assert the presence of something between the subjectivity that is refused [“Man”] and which one refuses and nothing, whatever that is.” I argue that copwatching and other acts of “looking back” have the potential to inhabit that interstitial space. This is, of course, a main topic of the thesis and is further explored in the subsequent chapters.

111 Moten (2013), 750.
112 See e.g. Appendix 1: 14-03-17.
113 Moten (2003), 197.
114 Ibid., 197.
115 See 6.1
117 Moten (2013), 741.
4. Visual Economies

4.1. The Surveillance of Blackness

In the oft-cited 1977 volume *Discipline and Punish*, Michel Foucault outlines and theorizes the history of “disciplining societies.”

A point of departure for Foucault is the public execution as a site for spectacle, instilling fear and control in the people to be governed. In his analysis, the public execution has a juridical and political function, and is to be considered a “ceremonial by which a momentarily injured sovereignty is reconstituted.”

It entails an indirect “hold over the body”:

Thanks to the techniques of surveillance, the “physics” of power, the hold over the body, operate according to the laws of optics and mechanics, according to a whole play of spaces, lines, screens, beams, degrees and without recourse, in principle at least, to excess, force or violence.

With less support for public scaffolds and gallows, the late 18th century saw the “slackening on the hold of the body.” More precisely, Foucault outlines a transition to a society of control which relied on internalization rather than overt physical discipline.

This is, however, a highly Eurocentric historiography, as Simone Browne contends. She points out that when the “body is black, the grip [over the body] hardly loosened during slavery and continued post-Emancipation with, for example, the mob violence of lynching and other acts of racial terrorism.”

Browne further underscores her point by examining how slave surveillance practices dovetailed the invention of modern surveillance – in turn offering new ways to understand contemporary surveillance practices. An important thing we can learn from this is that “[t]he historical formation of surveillance is not outside the historical formation of slavery.”

Browne shows how slave surveillance was antecedent to still ongoing practices. Thus, she argues for a “surveillance studies that grapples with its constitutive genealogies,” since the Foucauldian framework still prevails.

Going back to the 18th century, we can see how the slave pass system – monitoring blackness as property – was a direct and violent intrusion into the mobility of black bodies. Further, in 1790 the

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119 Ibid., 3ff.
120 Ibid., 48.
121 Ibid., 177.
122 Ibid., 10.
123 Ibid., 14.
124 Browne, 38.
125 Ibid., 38.
126 Ibid., 50f.
127 Ibid., 50.
128 Ibid., 16f.
129 Ibid., 13.
130 Ibid., 53.
U.S. federal government introduced racial nomenclature as a population management tool.”\textsuperscript{131} The list of surveillance along racial lines goes on, with “[bodily] branding, the one-drop rule, quantitative plantation records that listed enslaved people alongside livestock and crops, slave passes, slave patrols, and runaway notices.”\textsuperscript{132} In other words, racializing surveillance exercise social control through technology and defines what is “in or out of place.”\textsuperscript{133}

Racializing surveillance is not only relegated to the era of slavery. While it is true that surveillance today is ubiquitous and penetrates throughout contemporary society – the surveilling gaze is \textit{differential}.\textsuperscript{134} “Today’s seeing eye is white,” to use John Fiske’s words.\textsuperscript{135} This in turn results in what Browne calls “black luminosity,” namely the “condition wherein blackness is rendered permanently visible, knowable, and traceable through a range of technological prostheses.”\textsuperscript{136} For instance: among U.S. citizens, black women are nine times more likely to get x-rayed at airports than white women (but still half as likely to carry contraband as white women).\textsuperscript{137} Moreover, and with reference to over ten empirical studies, Brian Jordan Jeffersson shows how “policies explicitly track down black and Latino males, [showing] racialized police brutality to be symptoms rather than aberrations of the NYPD’s emphasis on profiling, regulating behaviour, and overreliance on force.”\textsuperscript{138}

Based on my field study, I suggest below that racializing surveillance is equally pervading in the specific field of copwatching (i.e. for political subjects allied with blackness). Public spaces are shaped for and by whiteness, and by extension some acts in public “are abnormalized by way of racializing surveillance and then coded for disciplinary measures that are punitive in their effects.”\textsuperscript{139} I would argue that copwatching is precisely such an abnormalized act, regardless of its actual legal status as a constitutional right.\textsuperscript{140} This is echoed in the way the copwatcher “Carlos” narrate his own contacts with the NYPD:

I see three plainclothes males running out of a car real fast, so I was like, they have to be police. They started to proceed towards a male standing... and I pulled out my video recording camera and started recording quick. And I started walking towards the Pattison housing, which is in Bronx. I documented everything [...]. The officers then approached me, we exchanged words. I put away my video cameras so that they’d think, like you know, that there’s nothing recording – sometimes when they see you do that, they would act like who they really are. One of them gave me a direct order to “get out of here.” I replied: “Did I break the law? I ain’t going

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{131} Browne, 55f.
\bibitem{132} Ibid., 22ff.
\bibitem{133} Ibid., 16.
\bibitem{134} Ibid., 17.
\bibitem{135} John Fiske, ”Surveilling the City: Whiteness, the Black Man and Democratic Totalitarianism,” \textit{Theory, Culture and Society} 15, no. 2 (1998): 81.
\bibitem{136} Gupta-Nigam, 2.
\bibitem{137} Browne, 132.
\bibitem{139} Browne, 17.
\end{thebibliography}
nowhere if I ain’t break no law.” And so he said: “Ok, motherfucker, now you’re going to jail.” And they locked me up […] As soon as I entered the precinct, I heard officers calling my name. Like a big celebration, like a prize party for me […]. They searched me and got to my two-way receiver radio, my walkie-talkie which I use to communicate with other copwatchers. So he said: “Oh, this is a scanner and a transmit. My man, you’re going down, you’re a felon now.” Then they all started clapping and yelling again, like “we got this motherfucker.”

Now I know I got a target in my back. They want to remove me from the streets. They see me as a threat to their way of operating, their broken windows policing, and the aggressiveness they bring to communities of colors.141

The quote above is quite representative of how I heard “Carlos” frame the NYPD in general – as an antagonistic force; a kind of enemy. This also echoes the general activist discourse I encountered in all other copwatch groups.142 In the case of “Carlos” it was also, in my perception, imbued with a lot of personal affect. Regarding the actual truth value of the NYPD practices referred to in the quote, you can of course claim that it is in “Carlos’s” interest to depict them as more brutal than they actually are – because of his antagonistic relationship to the department. However, he provided me with covert audio recordings of the precinct’s “prize party” and a video of the initial stop-and-frisk situation, substantiating these specific claims. Moreover,

[Carlos] also showed me a scanned document on his cell phone. It was an official intelligence file, showing his picture. He told me, and I could read in the document, that the Metropolitan Transit Authority [MTA] and the NYPD had an undercover police officer who had surveilled [Carlos], noting his location, tracked his individual movement during protests, and taking photos of him in secret. It was clear that [Carlos] was both scared by this and a bit thrilled to be considered “public enemy number one,” as he said.143

The document had originally been released by The Intercept as part of a larger Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request, showing that the MTA and NYPD surveilled a number of Black Lives Matter protests throughout 2015, monitoring activists and their movements – “Carlos” among others.144 The document indicates a possible larger trend in the contemporary U.S. surveillance of blackness, focusing on political activists – or instances when “blackness is looking back,” as I frame it further on in the thesis.

As a counterpoint to “Carlos” seeing himself as “public enemy number one,” we should avoid the pitfall of a monolithic analysis of power – for instance, by looking at how race intersects other factors in policing. The bureaucracy of policing and the departments’ statistical emphasis has “created an internal accountability system which not only widens the chasm between police and ‘problem communities,’ but also pits them against one another […].”145 In other words, police officers are forced

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141 Appendix 2: 24-03-17.
142 See e.g. Appendix 1: 09-03-17.
143 Appendix 1: 24-03-17.
145 Jefferson, 10.
to “produce numbers” in order to account for themselves within the departments, which in combination with the broken windows mantra has created an aggressive enforcement of petty crimes, in turn targeting communities of color.\textsuperscript{146}

I do not want to imply that the structural preconditions outlined above necessarily take individual agency away from police officers, nor that “Carlos” is wrong in his framing of a direct antagonism. Still, people form their activities to be accounted for – as Czarniawska notes, “accounting creates a space in which they [targets or goals] will be performed, dictating the coordinates of this space and structuring it in advance […]”\textsuperscript{147} What I want to highlight with the example of accounting, is that there are multiple powers at play behind what can appear as “blunt” racism. A policed situation or space does not even have to be race-inflicted itself, but since surveillance reify bodies along racial lines “the outcome is often discriminatory treatment of those who are negatively racialized by such surveillance.”\textsuperscript{148}

The nature of surveillance has changed with the advent of the digital – and so has the surveillance of blackness.\textsuperscript{149} The ways of looking have been diversified and with them the power relationships behind.\textsuperscript{150} We are not living under a Foucauldian “panoptic gaze” (the invisible, singular all-seeing eye) – rather, we are entangled in a playing field of multiple gazes which are also being “abstracted to the level of symbols, or binary codes, aggregated and reconstituted at will, by those who control it.”\textsuperscript{151} Indeed, after the release of the article from The Intercept referenced above – and after Edward Snowden’s NSA leak\textsuperscript{152} – all of the activists I met were highly aware that someone could track their digital communication:

[Eric] then got everybody to write down the name and number of a “point of contact” in case any of us got arrested, and also got everybody to install a message encryption app and started a new group chat through it – for safety reasons: “They keep track of us.”\textsuperscript{153}

Data and information generated online (and offline) are today the subjects of aggregation by powerful institutions (e.g. corporations or governments) as mentioned above. Thus, “surveillance has become more of a matter of collecting and analyzing information rather than merely ‘looking down at people.'”\textsuperscript{154} Consequently, I will use the term “surveillance” in a broad and not necessarily ocular sense throughout the rest of this thesis.

Browne further argues that the surveillance of blackness in the digitized era also has brought with it a new form of racializing, namely what she terms digital epidermalization (as the imposition of race

\textsuperscript{146} Jefferson, 10.
\textsuperscript{147} Czarniawska, 101.
\textsuperscript{148} Browne, 16.
\textsuperscript{149} Ibid., 110.
\textsuperscript{151} Mann and Ferenbok, 22.
\textsuperscript{153} Appendix 1: 10-03-17.
\textsuperscript{154} Mann and Ferenbok, 32.
onto bodies). She identifies it by looking at how certain lineages of race thinking can be found in contemporary biometric technology. While biometric data seem to objectively ascribe gender and race to a person, it fails to account for the many nonconforming bodies who are absent in the underlying algorithm. For instance, based on prototypical whiteness, facial scanning systems can fail to read a black person’s face. At this juncture, biopolitics and visual media meet – which is further explored in Chapter 5.

4.2. The Racially Saturated Field of Visibility

Black luminosity – the permanent visibility of blackness, as described in the previous subchapter – extends outside the field of surveillance to other visual economies. Amir Gupta-Nigam contends that “if whiteness evades description, blackness is saturated with signifiers.” This is not a rectified saturation, however, but rather an overdetermination of blackness, extending in many contradictory directions. Through popular visual culture (e.g. sports and crime shows) blackness is constructed as an undisciplined and transgressive force; with “extraordinary ability, criminal deviance, and libidinal pleasure.” At the same time, as Ella Shohat and Robert Stam argue, race and ethnicity as structural factors themselves are veiled by being “submerged” into colorblind representations. This is a result of the patriarchal white gaze permeating the field of visibility – a gaze which, of course, has deep roots and, for instance, can be traced back to the U.S. constitution and its “false universalism” (absenting black people from the conception of “Man”). Blackness is thus paradoxically both saturated with signifiers and made invisible at the same time, in an aporia between Black being and political ontology.

The overdetermination of blackness in the U.S. has been marked especially by corporeal depictions:

Black bodies in pain for public consumption have been an American national spectacle for centuries. This history moves from public rapes, beatings and lynchings to the gladiatorial arenas of basketball and boxing. In the 1990s African American bodies on videotape have been the site on which national trauma – sexual harassment, date rape, drug abuse, AIDS, racial and economic urban conflict – has been dramatized.

155 Browne, 110.
156 Ibid., 113ff.
157 Ibid., 113ff.
158 Ibid., 161f.
159 Gupta-Nigam, 2.
162 Ibid., 220.
163 See chapter 3 for a discussion on the (para)ontology of blackness.
164 Elisabeth Alexander, “‘Can you be BLACK and Look at This?’: Reading the Rodney King Video(s),” Public Culture 7 (1994): 78f.
An epitome in this context is of course the video of police officers brutally beating Rodney King in 1991. King was later described as an aggressive, “probable ex-con,” acting “like a wounded animal.” According to Judith Butler, it is the kind of “racially saturated field of visibility” outlined above which made it possible for Rodney King’s self-defense to look aggressive to the non-black jury, during the subsequent trial against the police officers. In addition, the video tape of King getting beaten was slowed-down in court – making it stylized, decontextualized, and more ambiguous. This technique was then repeated in conservative media, “playing a snippet of the tape over and over and over again until it did look like Rodney King was advancing on the police officers, and there was no context for the movement.” In other words, the body getting beaten was reframed into the source of danger itself – with an intention to injure the police officers.

The Rodney King case shows that mere visibility cannot be the sole answer for activists wanting to hold police accountable. Not as long as the visual culture is permeated by a racializing gaze, at least. This was echoed in my interview with Simone Browne:

There are these calls, that if we just have more cameras on police, then we will be able to tell a different story of what is happening. But it doesn’t change the racial framing, the anti-black framing in which that story is told, in which those moments are recorded, and in which they are told again in cases of court, or in the press.

Byron B. Craig and Stephen E. Rahko are also skeptical to the question whether requirements for officers to wear cameras at all times would lead to any progressive outcomes. They go beyond Browne’s concerns about racial framing, however, and suggest that more cameras may also intensify “the already present visually based mechanisms of biopolitical surveillance.” Cameras, they contend, are “remiss in changing the gazes through which the racialized Other is recognized.”

This was indeed actualized during my field study. For instance, I visited “Said,” who had been deeply involved as an activist in a specific case of police abuse against a black woman and her daughter, in a Southwestern city. A police bodycam-video depicting the situation had recently leaked from within the police department when I met “Said”:

The police chief [...] only punished Officer Martin [who had violently abused the woman and daughter] with a ten-day suspension. It was just a slap on the wrist. But the [bodycam] video itself was actually “illegally” leaked to the public by two police officers, as we’ve come to find. Police chief [...] released a statement saying “we will expose the leaker and enforce the law.” It’s absurd he would ignore the actual police brutality itself...

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165 Alexander, 80f.
166 Butler, 20f.
167 Alexander, 92.
168 Ibid., 92.
169 Butler, 15.
170 Appendix 2: 14-03-17.
172 Ibid., 294.
173 Ibid., 294.
and the two police officers who released the video are actually black…and that might have been a factor. I believe [the two officers] are the real heroes of this case. 174

“Said’s” narration seems to substantiate Craig and Rahko’s skepticism about police cameras. However, he added that

[m]aybe if we had another agency monitoring these videos and there’s like a citizen board which reviews these videos, I think much more justice would come out of that. In this case it’s: who polices the police. The most important change is this [picks up cell phone]. Now everyone is a journalist. Everybody can record these videos and expose police officers. These are issues that oppressed people, minorities, and the black community, have been speaking about for centuries, really. But nobody listened because there’s no evidence […]. 175

Thus, “Said” falls back to a discourse on visibility, which seems to run contrary to Browne, as well as to Craig and Rahko. In other words, “Said” puts a lot of emphasis on technology and evidence while not mentioning the structural issues influencing how such evidence would subsequently be viewed within a visual culture. The suggestion of a citizen board is interesting, however, since it could potentially mitigate the racializing gaze if it would be composed of a critically conscious and/or “racially diverse” group of people.

Moreover, “Said’s” emphasis on technology also runs contrary to the position of another activist/spokesperson I met during the field study – namely, Jackie Zamutto at Witness. During our initial email contact, she sent me a link to their website and the blog post “The NYPD Wants to Know Your Thoughts on Bodycams (Kind of).” 176 The blog post clearly marks what I would call an “anti-solutionist” 177 stance: “You can’t fix a political problem with a technical solution, and even a perfect bodycams program – if there is such a thing – wouldn’t be satisfactory.” 178 The organization also seems to share Craig and Rahko’s concern about biopolitical (or at least biometric) surveillance: “There are no safeguards against cameras becoming a tool for surveillance, such as limits on the use of biometric technologies like facial recognition software.” 179 Instead Witness outline alternative ways of resistance and accountability, some which will be explored in the subsequent subchapter.

174 Appendix 2: 19-03-17.
175 Ibid.
177 Referring to “solutionism,” which is a term for the notion that social or political problems can be solved by technology alone; see e.g. Adam Fish, Technoliberalism and the End of Participatory Culture in the United States (Palgrave MacMillan, 2017), 7. [unpublished manuscript]
178 Hargrave, 1/1.
179 Ibid, 1/1.
4.3. The Look Back

They have the guns and they have the law on their side, but we outnumber them vastly [...] “Eric”

While surveillance roughly translates from the French into “oversight” and more precisely can be understood as the “[m]onitoring undertaken by an entity in a position of authority” vis-à-vis the subject recorded – sousveillance is its opposite. Consequently, sousveillance (i.e. “undersight”) can be understood as monitoring undertaken from a position without authority. In other words, if we illustrate surveillance as the police watching the citizen, we can think of sousveillance as the citizen’s look back; through the use of small or wearable cameras borne by the citizen him-/herself, “controlled by the wearer, and not worn on behalf of another party.” In contrast to surveillance, the sousveillance gaze has multiple agents/focal points, thus tending to be rhizomatic and heterogeneous. Steve Mann, a pioneer in the field, claims that sousveillance is not necessarily an antagonistic force to surveillance, since they are orthogonal – i.e. at right angles to each other on an abstract plane – meaning that they are in theory independent of each other (see fig. 1). You can increase sousveillance without necessarily having to decrease surveillance. In other words, sousveillance should be equated with counter-surveillance rather than anti-surveillance. As we can see in figure 1, this opens up the possibility for additional positions to take in relation to “veillances” – for instance, you can be for surveillance at the same time as you are against sousveillance (a position termed “McVeillance” in the figure).

Needless to say, the veillance compass seems to be a productive outset for theorizing copwatching and the other practices encountered in the field study. In many cases, the practices overlap with the definition of sousveillance and indeed encompassed its characteristic “watchful vigilance from below.” However, I would argue that the abstract delineation of veillances needs contextualizing and a historical outlook before any attempt to bring it in conversation with the field study. Joseph Ferenbok and Steve Mann provide a point of departure:

[S]urveillance and sousveillance go beyond a 20th century “us versus them” argument and need to be understood in the broader intellectual landscape. The nature of surveillance itself has been irrevocably changed by digitization, networking and ubiquitous computing. Surveillance has pushed well beyond Foucault’s vision of its prison context. Surveillance has both diversified in the kinds of looking and the kinds of power relationships it involves, and it has become abstracted to the level of symbols, or binary codes, aggregated and reconstituted at will, by those who control it.

180 See Appendix 2: 18-03-17.
182 Ibid., 243.
183 Ibid., 243.
184 Mann and Ferenbok, 19.
185 Ibid., 22.
186 Ibid., 22.
Thus, we do not necessarily have to think about veillances in ocular terms. Using “seeing” or “gazing” in this context is rather a circumscription for a set of dispositions upholding or opposing a dominant order of monitoring. This holds especially true for the digital era. Here, Alexander R. Galloway’s conception of spatial digitality – i.e. flat digitality vs. deep digitality – can help to nuance our understanding.\(^{187}\)

Drawing from French philosopher François Laruelle, Galloway situates flat digitality as resulting from the “reduplicative multiplexing” of the object rather than the subject.\(^{188}\) We can think of flat digitality as overlapping with the grid screen of modern surveillance. More precisely, flat digitality displace space onto a surface – from which a single gaze can monitor activities. To be clear, Galloway exemplifies with “the security guard’s multichannel montage of close-circuit security camera feeds; [and the] the cellular grids of video compression codecs [...].”\(^{189}\) Contrary to this, Galloway situates deep digitality – which I suggest overlaps with sousveillance (and by extension copwatching). Deep digitality concerns the “reduplicative multiplexing” of the subject: “Instead of a single point of view scanning a multiplicity of image feeds, deep digitality is a question of a multiplicity, nay an infinity, of points of view flanking and flooding the world viewed. These are not so much matrices of screens but matrices of vision.”\(^{190}\) This indeed seems to overlap with Mann and Ferenbok’s conception of sousveillance, as outlined above. Further, Galloway agrees with them that the networked digital era has rendered Foucault’s theory of the panopticon insufficient and somewhat obsolete: “The prison is now reversed, a reverse panopticon in which a multiplicity of watchers all collaborate to convene upon a singular point [...].”\(^{191}\) A similar analysis can also be found in Thomas Mathiesen’s notion of “synopticism” (i.e. the many watching the few).\(^{192}\) This reverse panopticon, or synopticism, could indeed be observed throughout my field work – in different iterations. For instance, one group was doing a roleplay to prepare for a night of copwatching:

We gathered (10 people) out in the parking lot to have a short training session – a sort of roleplay workshop – because there were two new guys. It was dark, only lit by the neon lights coming from the coffee house nearby.

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\(^{188}\) Ibid., 68.
\(^{189}\) Ibid., 68.
\(^{190}\) Ibid., 68.
\(^{191}\) Ibid., 69.
\(^{192}\) Thomas Mathiesen, “The Viewer Society: Michel Foucault’s ’Panopticon’ Revisited,” *Theoretical Criminology* 1, no. 2, 218f.
“What we’re going to do is that [Casey] and I are going to be the cops […] at a situation. Okay? You guys are copwatchers, so put your cameras down, because you’re just walking around. You don’t think anything is necessarily going to happen.

They walk over and [Casey] is “arresting” someone:

[Eric]: “Go cover him!”

Everybody circles the “scene.”

[Casey]: “Stop resisting!”

[Casey] fights an imaginative person. But he starts to smirk self-consciously and freezes to look over at the new guys, to see how they have reacted.

[Eric]: “It’s gonna be busy down there!”

[Eric] pretends to be a random person, aggressively pushing the copwatcher around on the parking lot.

Then a cop [Eric] emerges: “Hey, back up! Back up!” He pushes one of the youngest copwatch volunteers back.

The roleplay clearly illustrates and reflects the distribution of multiple visions Galloway discuss. The copwatchers circle the scene to convene upon one point – e.g. the police officer – in a “reverse panopticon.” The singular point that sousveillance activists convene upon could be seen as

a Euclidean point, while the “subjective” [sousveillance] points of view have metastasized into multiplicity.

What this produces is a curvature of space. Space bends and recedes. Space grows deep as the subject metastasizes and engulfs it.

In the specific field of copwatching, I argue this creates a contestation of space interrelated with the inherent antagonism between whiteness and blackness. The contestation of space could be quite viscerally experienced out in the field – between the natural order of whiteness’ extension in space and the “curvature” created by multiple subalterns “looking back.” As Sara Ahmed notes: “White bodies are comfortable as they inhabit spaces that extend their shape [italicized in original].” Copwatchers raising the video camera to “look back” potentially unsettle this dynamic.

Moreover, “Eric” pushed people around during the roleplay in order to show how copwatchers themselves could easily become entangled in an ongoing physical situation. Further, when we were out copwatching, we were told to not only cover a potential crime scene but also each other. To not end up alone, we were divided into pairs when we were out filming. As “Eric” instructed us: copwatchers should “film themselves film the police.” It is a security measure, he told me, in case a police officer seizes a camera you have that situation recorded as well. “Otherwise they can claim whatever they want.” This is an apprehension he told me he had since his 2012 arrest at a gas station (which sparked the initial idea for the copwatch organization):

I started yelling at them “stop hurting her!” and I tried to take some pictures. And because of that, one of the cops came after me, arresting me and then claimed that I spit in his face – which is a felony and carries a 2 to
10-year prison sentence. After that, fortunately, I found witnesses who were willing to come forward, including one who took video with his cell phone.\textsuperscript{197}

The cell phone footage from the witness later got “Eric” exonerated in court.\textsuperscript{198} The subsequent precaution and strategies are not unique for “Eric,” however. I could discern a prevailing notion that “you have to be careful,” keep back-up records, and protect yourself – both among the activists I met and the organizers at Witness.\textsuperscript{199} For instance, “Carlos” always used a dashboard video camera in his car, in case the NYPD tried to “falsify anything” against him.\textsuperscript{200} Thus, in this specific context, we could extend Galloway’s model and say that the reverse panopticon not only convenes on one point, but also turns in other directions as a means of protection (from real or perceived threats). As an additional example of this, cameras are used to cast what I would call a demarcating gaze:

\begin{quote}
We’re committed to anti-oppression in our dealings with each other, and in our community we don’t tolerate racism, sexism, homophobia, xenophobia, or other forms of oppression. Should anyone violate these rules, participants shall turn their cameras on them, publicly admonishing and rebuking them – and in addition, notify an organizer.\textsuperscript{201}
\end{quote}

Thus, by “turning the cameras” the sousveillance gaze demarcates space into an outside and inside of the group. It marks a line through space between the subaltern and hegemonic forces.

We can further trace the dynamics of these gazes by re-considering Galloway’s model, cited above.\textsuperscript{202} Even if we do think about Galloway’s “matrices of vision” – or Mann’s “veillances” – in strictly ocular terms, we can think about them beyond the camera’s mediating optics. Mann points out that before the advent of cameras, “the only veillance was sousveillance which was given by the body-borne camera formed by the eye, and the body-borne recording device comprised of the mind and brain.”\textsuperscript{203}

This seemingly equal distribution of veillance capacity (i.e. to each their own eyes) does not necessarily render an equal distribution of power, however – as visual culture scholar Nicholas Mirzoeff shows.\textsuperscript{204} With reference to French colonization in the Caribbean – and specifically sugarcane plantations – Mirzoeff shows how the white overseer surveilled the native unpaid workers from a central, high position: “While the overseer is present as sign of the compulsion that ultimately underpinned the labor force, his cane is at rest [i.e. the stick which could wield punishment]. It is his eyes that are doing the work.”\textsuperscript{205} With this in mind – as well as “the racially saturated field of visibility” from the previous

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{197} Appendix 2: 18-03-17.  \\
\textsuperscript{198} Ibid.  \\
\textsuperscript{199} See e.g. Appendix 2: 22-03-17.  \\
\textsuperscript{200} Appendix 1: 24-03-17.  \\
\textsuperscript{201} Appendix 1: 10-03-17.  \\
\textsuperscript{202} Galloway, 68.  \\
\textsuperscript{204} Nicholas Mirzoeff, \textit{The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visuality} (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 51ff.  \\
\textsuperscript{205} Ibid., 52.
\end{flushright}
subchapter – sousveillance can only in-itself become a balancing force against racializing surveillance in a society which is already democratic and anti-racist. In other words, there needs to be some amendment to this framework in order to account for actual resistance under a state of oppression.

In this theoretical void, Simone Browne has intervened and coined the term “dark sousveillance.” She introduces the concept as a critical position in relation to racializing surveillance – manifesting itself in sousveillance, anti-surveillance, and other practices. Browne further shows how such forms of resistance can be traced back to the era of slavery in the U.S. Among other things, it included pranks at the expense of those surveilling plantations, warnings veiled in songs, the forging of slave passes, the observation of slave owners, and the planning of escape. Browne further suggests that we should think about the “strategies used in the flight to freedom from slavery as necessarily ones of undersight [i.e. sousveillance].”

Even after the abolition and the Reconstruction, there were clear looking hierarchies in place in the U.S. – the most striking example being “reckless eyeballing.” Forbidden under the Jim Crow segregation laws, “reckless eyeballing” meant that if you were deemed a “colored” person, simply looking at a white person could get you punished; “especially a white woman or person in authority.” As bell hooks points out, “black people learned to appear before whites as though they were zombies, cultivating the habit of casting the gaze downward so as to not appear uppity.” Still, there were resistance practices growing beneath the surface. The prohibitions had resulted in a “longing to look” – an “oppositional gaze” – infusing black looks with the politicized potential to disrupt racializing surveillance. The looks proclaimed: “Not only will I stare. I want my look to change reality.” However, Southern laws were pitted against such resistance: In a famous case, as late as 1951, the black man Matt Ingram was convicted for “assaulting a white woman in North Carolina because she had not liked the way he had looked at her from a distance of sixty-five Feet.” According to Mirzoeff, this eyeballing disposition still lives on in the U.S. prison system today.

Shifting focus to the oppositional look of contemporary copwatching, we can see that it has legally been acknowledged as a First Amendment constitutional right by federal and state courts.

In a landmark case in 2011, the First Circuit held that the First Amendment clearly gave citizens the right to record police officers and other public officials while they were performing their official duties in public

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206 Browne, 26.
207 Ibid., 21.
208 Ibid., 23.
209 Ibid., 21f.
210 Ibid., 21.
211 Mirzoeff (2011), 482.
213 Ibid., 116.
214 Ibid., 116.
215 Ibid., 482f.
217 Newell, 63.
spaces, as long as the citizens did not interfere with the police officer's legitimate work and made the recordings overtly (not secretly).\textsuperscript{218}

Still, just as the oppositional gaze during U.S. segregation, there are forces pitted against copwatching practices. For instance, in a number of states, eavesdropping statues will prohibit any citizen from making recordings without the consent of all participating parties.\textsuperscript{219} Overriding the First Amendment, such laws have frequently been used to “arrest, detain, and harass photographers, including citizens and members of the credentialed press.”\textsuperscript{220} Moreover, there are direct historical connections to be made between segregation and copwatching, since Hans Toch has shown that the history of copwatching in the U.S. can be traced back to the protest movements of the 1960s.\textsuperscript{221}

There are not only ongoing legal contestations about the right to record, but also about the resulting evidence status of footage from such recordings. Thus, in several states the police have equipped their force with “body cams,” i.e. small video cameras mounted on the uniforms.\textsuperscript{222} In other words, there is a fight over the filmic representation of the reality of law enforcement – and in particular, cases of misconduct and of fatal outcome. Documentation generated from both sides has caused a lot of attention, especially when the video material has been disseminated through mainstream media or social media.\textsuperscript{223} Such moving images have also been the object of legal scrutiny when presented in court as evidence.\textsuperscript{224}

As noted above, we do not have to circumscribe sousveillance to only pertain to direct observation or ocular practices. Ali and Mann points out that sousveillance could even include filing requests through the U.S. federal Freedom Of Information Act (FOIA).\textsuperscript{225} This found an interesting manifestation in my meeting with Simone Browne, who had filed a FOIA-request for CIA and FBI files on Frantz Fanon:

I asked [CIA and FBI] for any data or information they had about Fanon […] It was a lot of redacted pages; those black or white boxes that block out much of the information you think might be there […] there was something about Fanon – even though he was dead – he was that unnamable matter that matters to how we think about surveillance. Interestingly, with Fanon, while he was in exile he gave a number of lectures on surveillance at the University of Tunis – and the notes from them […] they were in French and I was able to translate them. It’s quite short, but he talks about some of those key things we think about when we think about surveillance – CCTV, wiretapping, listening in to phone operators… so there was a sort of absenting of black theorizing when it comes to surveillance.

Browne was acting in the capacity of a scholar and researcher – but her request was simultaneously a concrete act of sousveillance; claiming the right to documents generated under government surveillance.

\textsuperscript{218} Newell, 67f.
\textsuperscript{219} Ibid., 67.
\textsuperscript{220} Ibid., 67.
\textsuperscript{224} Newell, 59f.
\textsuperscript{225} Ali and Mann, 250.
The fact that the FOIA-request concerns Fanon of course makes it a double-edged sousveillance, as Browne indicates (i.e. that both the act in itself and the contents of the files concerns sousveillance).

During the field study, I could see other examples of sousveillance practices which were aligned with copwatching but did not entail video cameras. For instance, one of the organizations I visited in New York did what they called “Court Monitoring” on a regular basis:

We went into the Court Building and went through an airport type security check. Then we sat down outside a courtroom to have a briefing. We introduced ourselves and [Sandy] told us about the work [the organization] does. We were also handed a flyer:

We work to expose and end abusive police tactics that routinely and disproportionately do harm to our city’s low-income communities and people of color.

[THE ORGANIZATION] VISITS COURTS IN NYC TO MONITOR:

- The most common arrests made by the NYPD
- Patterns in who is being arrested
- Collateral consequences of low-level charges.

Then we were handed a paper with a copy of the matrix they fill out during their Court Monitoring. It contained boxes for age, gender, charge(s), verdict, if released, other notes, and duration. And also for race:

- B = Black/African American
- H = Hispanic/Latino
- W = White - Caucasian
- A = Asian
- ME = Middle Eastern
- U = Undecided

We were told race were the most important characteristic to find out, because they were interested in the “systemic racism of NYPD” which they seemed to postulate from the outset.

[Sandy] said it could be hard to see the race sometimes. “Latinos and Asians could pass as Caucasians” he said – he also pointed out that it’s especially hard because you only see the back of the defendant when you’re in the audience section of the courtroom. You have to wait until they turn around, if they do.

Since cameras are prohibited in the court room, they only wrote down direct observations. I would argue this is an act of what Nicholas Mirzoeff calls “the right to look” – claiming autonomy, not “individualism or voyeurism, but the claim to a political subjectivity and collectivity […]”227 At its core, Court Monitoring is not about gathering real statistics – the methods I could observe where largely unscientific – but rather about claiming the right to do so; to be present in the courtroom and act as a witness to the daily workings of the prison-industrial complex.

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226 Appendix 1: 23-04-17.
The court monitoring practice actualize another aspect of Mirzoeff’s “right to look,” namely what he terms a “countervisuality” with a claim to the real.\footnote{Mirzoeff (2011), 1ff.} This is the visualization of a performative claim in the face of authority; to a right that you assert, but are denied.\footnote{Ibid., 78.} In the context of the field study, I would argue such an aesthetic claim to the real comes from multiple directions. It is also contested by what Mirzoeff calls (the dominant) “visuality,” which manifest and reproduce authority.\footnote{Ibid., 35ff.} An example of this could be seen in the previous subchapter, namely that the racially saturated field of visibility can be veiled as objectivity in the courtroom. The “Court Monitoring” I observed did not explicitly contest such objectivity, but rather invented its own. For instance, the papers we were handed were designed to seem scientific, objective, and systematic – while serving a teleological purpose (see figure 2).

Thus, both the visual aesthetics of surveillance and of sousveillance seem to be susceptible to underlying presumptions and narratives. Lev Manovich offers a precise account for this phenomenon, with reference to forensic video:

The varying levels of skill that forensic video analysts acquire in achieving an “aesthetics of objectivity” in the production of video evidence cannot help but be informed by the cultural prevalence of surveillant forms of narration, regardless of how circumscribed evidence production techniques are by legal requirements.\footnote{Lev Manovich, The Language of New Media (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), 257.}
Lorraine Daston and Peter Gallison agree and extend the scope to include the wider field of all “professional vision” – since techniques that facilitate and automate dimensions of such vision “necessarily embody social[ly] situated, unevenly distributed ways of seeing.”232 Moreover, as Kelly Gates asserts, the production of visual evidence “[i]nvolves the repurposing of new technologies borrowed from the domain of creative media.”233 Thus, cinema studies and adjacent fields can help us to understand the techniques of creating genres of realism within the field of visual evidence. Surveillance video in itself, for instance, has little or no evidentiary value; the video evidence must be produced from a “chaotic field” of raw surveillance footage.234 Such “creative” video production is not only relegated to surveillance, however, but could be seen in copwatching as well:

[Casey] stopped by some street musicians on the way and filmed them. “We use storytelling to humanize and show the community, before the cops come into the picture.”235

[Eric] instructs us to not swear while an incident is happening: “It will mess up the audio track. A jury would be influenced negatively if you hear someone yelling pig – like ‘oh, they must have such a stressful job’ – even if what you see is police abuse.”236

Here, latent conceptions of storytelling are actualized – “Eric” and “Casey” construct a certain kind of realism to serve as potential visual evidence at a later stage. As with surveillance, “a significant amount of production labor goes into transforming [the] video into evidence and ensuring that images maintain a seemingly ‘unproduced’ quality.”237

In contemporary U.S. government surveillance, software like SoptLight and MAGNIFI are used to direct the viewer’s attention toward visual signifiers with evidentiary meaning or relevance, while turning away from other visuals – “enabling video analysts to construct preferred interpretations of images.”238 Apart from “Eric” and “Casey,” I found another counterpart to this in counter-surveillance practices, namely through my interview with Jackie Zamutto at Witness:

[Basiclaly, we live in a world in which video is near, you can just pull out your phone out of your pocket and document an abuse, if you see something happening, and share that immediately. But a lot of times, those videos don’t contain the right information, or they are not verifiable to be used as evidence in court. Sometimes they are confiscated or lost. So we are working really hard to ensure that more video equals more rights and more justice.239

Zamutto further told me how they instruct activists to film street signs, landmarks, and other signifiers of where and when the footage was shot. In other words, while “Eric” and “Casey” construct a narration

234 Ibid., 244.
235 Appendix 1: 14-03-17.
236 Appendix 1: 16-03-17.
237 Gates, 248.
238 Ibid., 251.
239 Appendix 2: 22-03-17.
– a counterpart to “preferred interpretation” in U.S. government surveillance – Witness points out the importance of visual signifiers with evidentiary meaning or relevance.

Consequently, there are some clear parallels to be made between the field study and Mirzoeff’s visuality vis-à-vis countervisuality. However, in the present thesis I am interested specifically in how these “visualities” relate to biopolitics and racialization. Thus, we need a framework which extends beyond manifest visuals. In the subsequent chapter I will introduce precisely that, while also attempting to reconnect to the veillances, visualities, looks, and gazes outlined above.
5. Resistance of the Flesh

The flesh is nothing less than the ethereal social (after) life of bare existence.\textsuperscript{240} Alexander G. Weheliye

5.1. Biopolitical Screens

While the term “biopolitics” has a history of competing meanings, the one dominating academia today was pioneered by Michel Foucault in the 1970s.\textsuperscript{241} It is an interdisciplinary term used to denote political power over human life and/or the intersection of politics and biology.\textsuperscript{242} Biopolitics, and the interrelated biopower, can thus be used to subjugate bodies and control populations.\textsuperscript{243} However, biopower is not only used in order to discipline, but is a constitutive force “aggressively molding, shaping and forming human behavior, personalities and desires.”\textsuperscript{244}

Pasi Väliaho connects this theoretical framework to the moving image and a notion of “biopolitical screens.”\textsuperscript{245} According to Väliaho, a certain kind of cinema “takes biological life as its task, or to put it otherwise, the differentiation between the bare fact of living and politically qualified existence.”\textsuperscript{246} This differentiation hinges on what Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben has termed \textit{bare life} – the depoliticized status of the human; of being left outside citizenship/polity and by extension humanity (e.g. statelessness).\textsuperscript{247} For Agamben \textit{bare life} is at the core of biopolitics and political subjectivity in modernity.\textsuperscript{248} Moreover, \textit{bare life} is formed through an “inclusive exclusion” – a form of constitutive violence – within the social order of the sovereign state.\textsuperscript{249} On biopolitical screens, \textit{bare life} is manifested in a certain kind of “animality” prior to the political subject – for instance, in breath, movement, and bodily reactions.\textsuperscript{250}

Väliaho argues that cinema instrumentalized the “neurological gaze” which was prevalent during the turn of the century – in turn “[tracking] down the corporeal surface, disinterested of the depths of the

\textsuperscript{240} Weheliye, 72.
\textsuperscript{241} Nielsen and Walsh, 2.
\textsuperscript{242} Ibid., 2f.
\textsuperscript{243} Ibid., 5.
\textsuperscript{244} Ibid., 5.
\textsuperscript{245} Väliaho (Biopolitical Screens), 1ff.
\textsuperscript{247} Agamben, 9ff.
\textsuperscript{248} Ibid. 73ff.
\textsuperscript{249} Ibid., 20.
\textsuperscript{250} Väliaho (Cinema and Agamben), 116.
flesh or of the psyche.” In other words, cinematic subjectivity was “reduced to the facticity of the body’s materiality.” This can also be found in contemporary iterations; or, in biopolitical screens, to speak with Väliaho.

In line with Väliaho we can think of the triad image-medium-body as an indivisible, singular concept. Technical media carry images, but so do our bodies – “it is in our bodies that images are born, received, and transported.” This leads Väliaho to outline a visual economy beyond the field of visibility:

We can thus think about images as themselves “quasi-corporeal.” The contemporary visual economy is in other words at the intersection of images, screens, and bodies. By extension, contemporary contestations over the visual – or “image wars” – are in many cases interrelated to biopolitics. Väliaho shows, for instance, how the U.S. military’s virtual reality equipment seeks to enter the brain’s “endogenous production of images” – that is to say, for images to originate from the human organism itself.

I argue that the videos of police violence actualized in the field study can also be thought of as highly biopolitically charged. Piercing the saturated media noise – with their graphic contents – I would situate them as part of what Bruno Latour calls the “iconoclash.” In his precise formulation, iconoclash is “the contemporary and perpetual image wars in the public sphere, both destructive and constructive, and driven by advanced technologies of capitalist hypermodernity, new media mobilization, and the global economy of the extensive consumption and regeneration of violent imagery [...].” The iconoclash is punctuated by certain high profile cases, such as the video of Eric Garner’s death. Following Väliaho’s line of thinking, after such a punctuation, the images would proliferate in the visual economy and throughout the image-medium-body triad.

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251 Väliaho (Agamben), 116.
252 Ibid., 116.
253 Väliaho (Biopolitical Screens), 5.
254 Ibid., 5.
255 Ibid., 89.
256 Ibid., 5.
257 Ibid., 11.
258 Ibid., 79.
259 Ibid., 75.
261 Ibid., 176.
262 See chapter 1.
An elucidatory example of this can be found in Elisabeth Alexander’s depiction of what happened to the visual economy after the release of the Rodney King video in 1991.263 Already infused with a long history of violence, the latent collective (bodily) memory of African Americans was “activated” by the videotape.264 Alexander points out how the state-sanctioned violence against King got stuck as something always present to mind; as a potentiality for any black person.265 One of her interviewees:

You know where I was when I first heard about the verdict? I was laying down in my bed asleep and when I heard the words not guilty on my TV I instantly woke up. It was a pain that went from the top of my head to the tip of my toes. It was an empty, hollow feeling. It was a rage inside of me, burning. I wanted to kill. I wanted to kill. By the time they was done I needed 28 stitches in my head. When I saw the Rodney King video I thought of myself laying on the ground and getting beat. I felt the same way all our people felt when we blew up [subsequent Los Angeles riot/insurrection].”266

According to Alexander, such a reaction hinges on the fact that African Americans have forged a “traumatized collective historical memory” which is then “reinvoked at contemporary sites of conflict.”267 Bodies remember, as Sara Ahmed puts it.268 The Rodney King video indeed activated trauma and (created) bodily memories, as Alexander shows, but it was also followed by bodily histories. For instance, the notion that King was acting “like a wounded animal.”269 In line with this – and the quoted interview above – David Marriott asserts that the Black subject is forced to see him- or herself “in an orb of abjection.”270 That is to say, a gaze upon yourself – taking the route via bodily histories and the racially saturated field of visibility. This phenomenon is also highlighted in Chapter 2; in conjunction with Sara Ahmed’s claim that “racism ensures that the black gaze returns to the black body, which is not a loving return but rather follows the line of the white hostile gaze.”271 In short, abjection; or, seeing yourself as the Other.272

This offers a way to connect back to Väliaho’s framework and in turn to think about the Rodney King video – and its contemporary counterparts – through the biopolitical. Väliaho namely sees trauma as functioning according to an “immunitary logic” – as something trying to violently incorporate the exterior.273 This is a kind of paradox of the psyche, according to Väliaho, because what in first instance seems to be self-preservation, turns into self-destruction:

263 Alexander, 84.
264 Ibid., 84.
265 Ibid., 84.
266 Ibid., 85.
267 Ibid., 79.
269 Ibid., 80f.
271 Ahmed (2006), 111.
272 See e.g. Julia Kristeva, Powers of horror: an essay on abjection (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).
273 Väliaho (Biopolitical Screens), 79.
In the traumatized body, certain memories, instead of being identified as integral to the organism, appear as foreign forces that the subject can only get rid of by destroying itself. The species-being, that is to say, begins to see itself as a foreign element of threat and consequently attacks itself.274

Following Ahmed, Alexander, and Mariott, it is quite clear that the black person is especially susceptible to see him-/herself as such a foreign element – even more so when state-sanctioned violence against black bodies are ever-present in the media. Consequently, I would like to suggest that the contemporary violent images of police violence in the U.S. might constitute a new “hold of the body.” This was echoed throughout the field study. For instance, the copwatcher also had to overcome such a hold of the body, before going out in the streets:

The beginning was really scary. I was afraid, I didn’t wanna get locked up. After doing it awhile, I became more aggressive and ended up locked-up a few times – they falsified charges against me. And I ended up better and better, more savvy with technology to a point when now I can protect myself.275

Now I know I got a target in my back. They want to remove me from the streets. They see me as a threat to their way of operating, their broken windows policing, and the aggressiveness they bring to communities of colors [...].276

As we could see in Chapter 3, Foucault has claimed that punishment “leaves the domain of more or less everyday perception and enters that of abstract consciousness” during the 18th century.277 This supposedly meant a “slackening on the hold of the body.”278 But in the context of police violence, state-sanctioned violence does not leave the domain of everyday perception – we can rather see violence against black bodies all the time on our cell phones or tablets; pervading our contemporary screen culture.279 There is a certain echo in this contemporary phenomenon from Foucault’s notion of a “policy of terror.”280 In other words, that the videos might appear “to make everyone aware, through the body of the criminal [or just any black person], of the unrestrained presence of the sovereign.”281 Not that we should equal staged and planned public executions with today’s extra-legal killings – but the spectatorship Alexander theorizes indeed seems like a slight variation of what Foucault outlined regarding public executions:

Not only must people know, they must see with their own eyes. Because they must be made to be afraid; but also because they must be the witnesses, the guarantors, of the punishment, and because they must to a certain extent take part in it.282

274 Väliaho (Biopolitical Screens), 80.
275 Appendix 2: 24-03-17.
276 Ibid.
277 Foucault, 9.
278 Ibid., 10.
279 Dent, 1/1.
280 Foucault., 49.
281 Ibid., 49.
282 Ibid., 58.
While the African American is especially targeted and affected by – for instance – the Eric Garner video, I would argue a part-taking in such violence is not necessarily limited to a certain identity or geographical proximity. Needless to say, due to the Internet and social media, the filmed body can be synchronously viewed all over the world.

This finds an interesting parallel in Karl Schoonover’s discussion about Italian neorealism. Schoonover argues that the body was central to neorealist aesthetics and further contends that “[t]he filmed body functions as a transnational beacon for global transits of sympathy […]”. For Schoonover, especially the imperiled body “makes plain the need for witnesses and points to cinema as an ideal means of collapsing geographical and cultural distance, lending an affective and scopic dimension to the networks of geopolitical compassion […]”.

Though appearing long before the networked era, Italian neorealism is nevertheless an interesting parallel to social media videos depicting violence – in part thanks to the global trajectory and outreach it had in its time (the films were not only made for an Italian audience). Shoonover uses the term “brutal humanism” to name the “strange symbiosis of violence and humanitarianism, spectacular suffering and benefaction” neorealist aesthetics entailed. In brutal humanism the body is center stage, allowing films to obscure the fact of overt discourses and direct the senses towards the prediscursive or profilmic. The body thus becomes a means for self-authentication. Moreover – and echoing André Bazin’s theory of realism – Schoonover claims that “[t]he ambiguity of the image often seems most available at moments of urgent corporeality.” In other words, the cinematic body – especially in violent situations – makes the cinematic image itself seem like something raw, indexical, objective, or unmediated.

The ambiguity which follows the cinematic body is arguably what opened up the possibility for differing interpretations of the Rodney King video. At this juncture, it is important to recontextualize however: What seems like “objective” or “raw” in the videos of violence against black bodies takes on implicit and explicit meanings within the racially saturated field of visibility (as is discussed at length in Chapter 3). In turn, the field of visibility is only part of a wider distribution of racializing assemblages throughout society – and due to the ontological status of such assemblages, the framework of Väliaho is rendered somewhat limited. This is further discussed in the following subchapter.

284 Ibid., 151.
285 Ibid., xvii.
286 Ibid., xix.
287 Ibid., xxix.
288 Ibid., xxix.
289 Ibid., 4.
290 See chapter 3.
5.2. Habeas Corpus/Habeas Viscus

[The novelty of modern racializing assemblages lies in the fact that the biological given is as such immediately racialized, and the political is as such immediately the racialized given: Man.]

Alexander G. Weheliye

As we could see in the previous subchapter, Pasi Väliaho claims that a certain kind of cinema “takes biological life as its task, or [...] the differentiation between the bare fact of living and politically qualified existence.” At its core, this differentiation – and by extension much of Väliaho’s framework – hinges on the validity of Giorgio Agamben’s notion of bare life and the homo sacer. Through the necessary detour of critiquing Agamben’s framework, I want to call into question certain traits of Väliaho’s framework – specifically as they relate to racialization.

The 1679 writ of habeas corpus – “You shall have the body” – has been widely adopted throughout Western democracies to assure physical presence before a court of justice, as well as to ensure the right to one’s own body (e.g. against arbitrary detention). For Agamben, this is a defining feature in the formation of modern political subjectivity:

The fact that, of all the various jurisdictional regulations concerned with the protection of individual freedom, it was habeas corpus that assumed the form of law and thus became inseparable from the history of Western democracy is surely due to mere circumstance. It is just as certain, however, that nascent European democracy thereby placed at the center of its battle against absolutism not bios, the qualified life of the citizen, but zoê – the bare, anonymous life that is as such taken into the sovereign ban [...] Through this “inclusive exclusion,” what comes into being is a new political subject – namely one founded on the body of homo sacer; or, bare life.

However, with the 2014 volume Habeas Viscus – “You shall have the flesh” – Alexander G. Weheliye makes an intervention in this line of thought (and in the larger field of biopolitics). He namely asserts that racialization is prior to bare life and the biopolitical – and further situates “flesh” as a concept distinct from corpus/the body (thus “Habeas Viscus”). This “flesh” appears in the interstitial space between Nothingness and “Man.” In Weheliye’s words, “the flesh is not an abject zone of exclusion that culminates in death [e.g. bare life in Agamben] but an alternate instantiation of humanity

291 Weheliye, 73.
292 Väliaho (Cinema and Agamben), 116.
293 Agamben, 73.
294 Ibid., 73.
295 Ibid., 73.
296 Weheliye, 1ff.
297 Ibid., 33ff.
298 See chapter 2 for an in-depth discussion on this "interstitial space."
that does not rest on the mirage of western Man as the mirror image of human life as such.”

In other words, the flesh “runs parallel” to “Man” and can be seen as an alternative form of human life.  

To be clear, with *Habeas Viscus*, Weheliye outlines a subjectivity which is neither based on the ontological formation of “Man,” nor *bare life*. It thus correlates to paraontology in a number of ways.

In making the distinction between flesh and body, Weheliye draws from literary critic and scholar Hortense Spillers. She namely shows how the captive body under slavery formed a subject position which cannot be equaled to *bare life*. Weheliye clarifies Spillers point by drawing from the legal case of Dred Scott, who in 1857 was deemed a slave rather than a legal person. What the Scott case shows, is that the writ *habeas corpus* only proscribes “deserving” subjects (legal persons) to have – or rather own – the right to one’s body. What this means is, in Spillers words, that “before the ‘body’ there is the ‘flesh,’ that zero degree of social conceptualization that does not escape concealment under the brush of discourse, or the reflexes of iconography.”

By drawing from Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s ontological assemblage theory, Weheliye argues that “racializing assemblages” comes into play at precisely this “zero degree” point in Spillers

Deleuze and Guattari’s assemblage theory is further discussed in the following subchapter, but is in short a dynamic systems theory in which “coding,” “stratification,” and “territorialization” form interrelated arrangements; or, “assemblages.” These assemblages relate to the “intermingling of bodies in a society [understood in a broad sense], including all the attractions and repulsions, sympathies and antipathies, alterations, amalgamations, penetrations, and expansions that affect bodies of all kinds in their relations to one another.”

Weheliye’s racializing assemblages specifically form connections between human physiology and flesh, which in turn produce categories of race, coded as natural substance or biological fact. These racializing assemblages then take root in political relations.  

Weheliye goes as far as to say “[t]here can never be an absolute biopolitical substance [e.g. *bare life*] and racializing assemblages cannot escape the flesh.”

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299 Weheliye, 43.
300 Ibid., 43.
301 See chapter 2.
303 Ibid., 82.
304 Ibid., 82.
305 Ibid., 67.
306 Weheliye, 17ff.
308 Ibid., 99.
309 Weheliye, 46ff.
310 Ibid., 74.
311 Ibid., 52.
Needless to say, if this argument is valid it would render Agamben’s framework less than universal.\textsuperscript{312} Weheliye addresses this fact explicitly, claiming that Agamben’s transcendence of race “rests on the philosophical unseeing of racializing assemblages [italicized in the original].”\textsuperscript{313} Following Weheliye’s line of argument we can thus start to re-think Väliaho’s “biopolitical screens” – which hinges on Agamben – and in turn, reciprocally, discuss the validity of Weheliye’s argument through the field study.

5.3. Lines of Flight

[B]lackness operates as the modality of life’s constant escape and takes the form, the held and errant pattern, of flight.”\textsuperscript{314}

Stefano Harney and Fred Moten

For Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, lines of flight (ligne de fuite) are a situated at the outside of a given multiplicity rendered by an assemblage.\textsuperscript{315} They are the surplus of the assemblage, holding the potential for difference – an “abstract line” which can connect to other multiplicities and deterritorialize constellations of bodies in society.\textsuperscript{316} They are especially relevant for the understanding of copwatching and other counter-surveillance practices, since the pragmatics of the micropolitical “is all about drawing lines and making maps against macropolitical sedimentations that lead somewhere, that create something new [italicized in the original].”\textsuperscript{317}

The path of the line of flight is never given, however, which is perhaps why some of the activists I met have strategized that incessant presence is more important than to have a grand ideological plan.\textsuperscript{318} This is not to say that individual agency should be disregarded in the making of difference, but that the self-organization of social systems can productively be understood through an assemblage theory. Deleuze namely points out that in the making of difference, we can only trace the determining force as a “dark precursor.”\textsuperscript{319} In Deleuze’s vivid idiom, “[I]thunderbolts explode between different intensities, but they are preceded by an invisible, imperceptible dark precursor, which determines their path in advance but in reverse, as though intagliated.”\textsuperscript{320} In my reading, we can thus only understand difference like a forensic technician at a crime scene, trying to reconstruct the forces that led to an event backwards in time. The dark precursor is a sort of “placeholder” for that force in Deleuze, rather than existing in

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{312} See 5.1.  
\textsuperscript{313} Weheliye, 65.  
\textsuperscript{314} Harney and Moten, 51.  
\textsuperscript{315} Deleuze and Guattari, 9.  
\textsuperscript{316} Ibid., 9.  
\textsuperscript{317} Kline, 64f.  
\textsuperscript{318} Appendix 1: 09-03-17.  
\textsuperscript{320} Ibid., 119.}
itself. The dark precursor draws its way as it goes, leaving a trace behind rather than signaling a map ahead.

In Deleuze’s vein, Weheliye argues that racializing assemblages should not be reduced to their manifestation in political violence – there is always a line of flight that “evades capture.” This echoes David Kline, who claims that the “micropolitical field is where movement and resistance happens against or in excess of the macropolitical in ways not reducible to the kind of formal binary organization that Agamben and Wilderson’s political ontology prioritizes [reffering to Wilderson’s notion of structural antagonism between racial formations].” We could think of the micropolitical as a field with the possibility for “paraontological resistance.” Because of such a potential ontological offset, there is friction in concrete social organizing – as could be observed in the field:

I was early and let into the room to sit in on an ongoing meeting while I waited. It was a large conference room on the seventh floor: the whole coalition of leaders from different activist groups throughout New York City had gathered for a monthly meeting. Among them were two well-known copwatchers I knew well from my research (apart from [Carlos] who hadn’t arrived yet). Around 15 people: mostly people of color in the room – black and Hispanic women dominated – with a few black and Hispanic males, one Irish guy, two white women and me. They talked about a group which wanted to join the coalition and wanted to make events about protest art and performance in general – and not tied to any specific political cause. A woman joined in over a loudspeaker phone: “We ain't performing shit. Like our banners are just for show, to look nice? Are those white folks from Brooklyn? It’s really white supremacy through the artsy thing. Nah nah, that shit ain’t right, white folks will screw you over, we are not getting pacified like that. It will take out everything political of what we do. They can’t just twitter a bit, and get a logo – and think that what they’re doing is activism. They gotta get some work done from their own shop.” Some other people agreed: “Our work will get watered down, apolitical, it will just mix up with other protests and the issues themselves will get away.” But a black woman disagreed: “You can’t just generalize like that, it’s important we build alliances too. Even outside our own community.” They eventually voted with majority rule against the group joining. Later [Carlos] poked fun at me and the other white people in the room, to ease what I think he perceived as a tension after the woman had spoken over the phone. [Carlos] also felt obliged to say she didn’t mean it literarily.

This extract shows the complex set of notions about antagonisms between blackness and whiteness which can be held within a single space. I do not want to focus-in on a discourse analysis, however, but rather the foundation the discourse relies upon. Within an assemblage, the territorializing of bodies will namely influence the contents and forms of enunciation (or expression in a wider sense). An enunciation is subjectified “only to the extent that an impersonal collective assemblage requires it and determines it to be so.” Since racializing assemblages produce categories of race coded as natural substance or biological fact, even the black person could fall into an essentialist view of race. We can thus see the animosity towards engaging “white folks” (in the excerpt) as either an essentialist view or what I would call “the resistance of the flesh” – which in this context takes the shape of a separatist

321 Weheliye, 57.
322 Kline, 58.
323 Appendix 1: 25-03-17.
324 Deleuze and Guattari, 60ff.
325 Ibid., 80.
strategy. Such a strategy could in turn be based on an implicit Wildersonian idea of structural antagonisms, or that the flesh “runs parallel” to “Man” and thus can be seen as an anterior form of human life. Needless to say, these are speculations about the field – mainly to highlight the complex interrelations when the present theories are grounded in a specific social-material context.

Returning to the Rodney King video – and by extension biopolitical screens in general – we can reframe the violence as not only being interpreted within a racially saturated field of visibility, but occurring as a result of prior racializing assemblages which are in turn reinforced. In contrast to Agamben, Weheliye claims that “racialized political violence always possesses a function beyond its mere exercise, which is the façade of race as an absolute biological substance that enforces existent categories while also producing new ones.” Instead of on-screen representational politics, the core question thus becomes whether the “resistance of the flesh” can be found at all in relation to biopolitical screens. Weheliye points out that we can in fact find lines of flight:

Racializing assemblages represent, among other things, the visual modalities in which dehumanization is practiced and lived [but] the conceptual tools of racialized minority discourse augment and reframe bare life and biopolitics discourse, because they focus on the nexus of differentiation, hierarchy, and the human, and ultimately on devising new forms of human life that are not constructed from the noxious concoction of racialization and/as political violence.

In line with Weheliye, I would argue the “new forms of human life” can already be found in lines of flight surrounding biopolitical screens today; or, in Weheliye’s words, “[in the] sorrow songs, smooth glitches, miniscule movements, shards of hope, scraps of food, and interrupted dreams of freedom that already swarm the ether […]” Parts of the activism I observed, which could be said to form “shards of hope” by its mere existence, could not have occurred within Agamben’s framework – simply because his philosophy hinges on the notion that “invention can occur only after the abolition of present life.” In other words, no lines of flight as in the surplus of racial assemblages – nor paraontology.

According to Sara Ahmed, to be nonwhite “is to feel pressure upon your bodily surface; your body feels the pressure point, as a restriction in what it can do.” As we could see in Fanon, it is the existential reality of racism – to be “not.” Here, I would like to extend nonwhite to include copwatchers in general, as they align themselves with blackness and the subaltern. Through copwatching, I could see a kind of inversion of the pressure mentioned in Ahmed above. It could be observed in a claiming of space while we were out copwatching – but was also made quite clear to me already in an initial email:

On Mar 9, 2017, at 2:46 PM <[address]@[domain].com> wrote:

Kick ass activists,

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326 Weheliye, 71f.
327 Ibid., 6.
328 Ibid., 131.
329 Ibid., 83.
The annual […] campaign kicks off tomorrow night! Last year’s campaign was epic as we filmed cops abusing people from day one, they then tried to intimidate us, so we went hard at the cops, and they backed down and started treating people with kid gloves by the final weekend. We made a huge difference and prevented people from abuse and false arrests. One of the incidents we filmed went viral and resulted in a cop being suspended for 45 days (not even rapist or murderer cops get that type of punishment). We provided multiple people with video evidence to use in their criminal defense, and we even assisted someone in a lawsuit against the terrorist cops.

This year we are going to keep the pressure on!!

The call to “keep the pressure on” was taken seriously. “Eric” and other copwatchers were constantly in the face of the police officers, claiming the right to look as (non)citizens. They did not take a step back, even when ordered to do so. At this juncture, the resistance of the flesh coincides with many of the oppositional looks explored in Chapter 3. As Nicholas Mirzoeff himself contends, “the right to look is not simply a matter of assembled visual images but the grounds on which such assemblages can register as meaningful renditions of a given event.” He further outlines the right to look as

the claim to a subjectivity that has the autonomy to arrange the relations of the visible and the sayable. The right to look confronts the police who say to us, “move on, there’s nothing to see here.” Only there is; we know it, and so do they. The opposite of the right to look is not censorship, then, but visuality, that authority to tell us to move on and that exclusive claim to be able to look.

To be clear, what I am arguing is that the distribution of looks and the sensible coincides with hierarchies of racialized bodies – and by extension this means that any notion of biopolitical screens has to account for racializing assemblages. This claim is further substantiated by a close study of the Michael Brown case, conducted by Byron B. Craig and Stephen E. Rahko. In it, they contend that “vernacular visuality of race activates racial logics […] that function to operationalize biopolitical interventions in the form of policing.” What in policing can appear as “mere” tactical strategy or discrete acts of racism, in fact hinges on racialization at its core. Michael Dillon namely points out that securitization itself demands that “people, territory, and things are transformed into epistemic objects.” This connects us back to Chapter 3 and is further echoed in Ahmed:

Black activism has shown us how policing involves a differential economy of stopping: some bodies more than others are ‘stopped’, by being the subject of the policeman’s address. The ‘hey you’ is not here addressed to the body that can inherit the ego ideal of an organization, or who can be recruited to follow a given line, but to the body who cannot be recruited, to the body that is ‘out of place’ in this place. In other words, the ‘unrecruitable’ body must still be ‘recruited’ into this place, through the very repetition of the action of ‘being stopped’.

331 Appendix 1: 09-03-17.
332 Appendix 1: 17-03-17.
334 Ibid., 474.
335 Craig and Rahko, 289.
336 Ibid., 289.
I assert that copwatching, and the other counter-surveillance practices actualized in the present thesis, subvert the “differential economy” Ahmed outlines. The practices thus hold the potential to open up a space in which “the resistance of the flesh” can operate. We can see a slight variation of this assertion in Elisabeth Alexander’s essay on the Rodney King case. She namely points out that the interstitial space between the “objective” courtroom version of the King tape and the TV narrative “raises questions concerning how bodily experience […] comes to reside in the flesh as forms of memory reactivated and articulated at moments of collective spectatorship.”

Following Weheliye I understand racialization as foundational to biopolitics. Racism requires grounding in the biological and the masking of “the semiosis of procedure” (ideology, medical discourse, etc.) by way of racializing assemblages. In theorizing biopolitics as it relates to media, we must not only account for these assemblages but have a split-vision; taking into consideration agency and the resistance of the flesh. As is discussed in the subsequent chapter, such resistance might entail a new form of transversal media.

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339 Alexander, 80.
6. Concluding Discussion

6.1. Against Representation

[E]mancipation through some form of discursive or symbolic intervention is wanting in the face of a subject position that is not a subject position.

Frank B. Wilderson III

As a white person, you do not have to speak for “your” particular group; you do not have to be a representative. Richard Dyer – as quoted previously – contends that in the construction of whiteness, “[w]hites are not of a certain race, they are just the human race.” This is a cornerstone in the foundation of transcendent “Man” as inherently white. By contrast, the nonwhite person is seen as particular – and construed as such by racializing assemblages.

Consequently, when “Carlos” organized a press conference for mainstream media, it entailed the risk of ultimately only creating a narrative of conflict within hegemonic society (i.e. that he only represented his particular group) rather than a questioning of society’s ontological structuring. It is this necessary distinction between mere conflict and structural antagonism that Wilderson seeks to highlight in the subchapter’s opening quote. To be clear, a narrative of “whites against blacks” in the news media is not necessarily conjoined with a “resistance of the flesh.” By contrast, such news stories could rather be seen as media performances that mobilize the consumerism of visual media – I would assert. In the same vein, Amir Gupta-Nigam points out the futility of demanding “better representation” as a politics of resistance. He poses the relevant question: “[W]hen the apparatus is constitutively racist, what does an image of equality look like?”

To attempt an answer to this question we need to look beyond visibilization, as I have shown in Chapter 5 – and as Gupta-Nigam also contends. This poses a concrete challenge for copwatch activism, which often take recourse to precisely a discourse of visibilization – as could be seen in the field study. Even beyond copwatching there is a prevailing notion that blackness must be brought into

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341 Dyer, 3.
342 See Chapter 3.
343 See Chapter 5.
344 Appendix 1: 24-03-17.
345 Gupta-Nigam, 3.
346 Ibid., 3.
347 Ibid., 6.
348 See e.g. Appendix 2: 19-03-17.
light – that is, for public consciousness and “scrutiny.” However, with reference to the Rodney King video, Elisabeth Alexander asserts that “it is possible within this racist episteme that no black person can seek recourse to the visible as the sure ground of evidence.” By extension, you could claim that it is possible that witness videos of violence against the black body are never enough in themselves – no matter how visible they are. In François Laruelle’s thought, through Alexander Galloway, “[v]ictims are overexposed when they are allowed to circulate purely as images, granted more media coverage in the bargain […] but ultimately silenced in that mute fixity that is the special signature of representation.”

Trinh T. Minh-ha agrees implicitly:

How much more there is to the conventional claim of making visible the invisible. Such a claim not only thrives on the binary opposition between visibility and invisibility, overlooking the complex interrelationship of seeing and not seeing. It also abides by the optical imperative that conventionally determines our approach to events and induces us to think and act according to the measure of the visible.

Needless to say, in this discussion there are countless ethical stakes embedded. How does a witness or a survivor testify without visibility? How do we understand suffering without a representative voice? For Laruelle, the answer is what he calls the victim-in-person. It is a “nonrepresentational victim” – withdrawn from overexposure and the circulation of images in the media. I read the victim-in-person as not against mediation per se, but always in presence as a him- or herself – a human being rather than the stand-in for whatever event or group is to be represented. Not in the abstract, but “firmly rooted in lived reality.” This echoes Eric Sundquist, who suggests that the danger of representation lies in the fact that lived reality and memory turns into hypermemory, or meta-politics.

What this could mean, concretely, is that a war, crime, or collective trauma does not necessarily vanish into forgetfulness, but rather that it is increasingly made an empty referent through visibility – as is arguably the case with the Second World War and Shoah. Or, in the context of the present field study, that the violence against the black body is made an empty referent. As Craig and Rahko puts it, “another Black body streaming through a suburban simulacrum that fetishizes it as such through the spectacle of commodified forms.

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349 Gupta-Nigam, 4f.
350 Ibid., 17.
351 Galloway, 178.
353 Galloway, 179.
354 Ibid., 179.
355 Ibid., 179.
356 Ibid., 179.
358 Ibid., 74.
359 Craig and Rahko, 290.
What is the alternative then? Fred Moten offers an optimistic outset, in that “[b]lackness is more than exacted cost. Nothing is not absence.” As we could see in the previous chapters, this means there are creative anoriginary forces at play – a new political subject in the making – or “a movement from the subject of politics to the subject of life.” If this “life” in Moten is specifically founded in the flesh – which he indicates – then any subversive politics starts with “the resistance of the flesh,” rather than representation, visibility or discursive contestations.

6.2. Transversal Media

The Black Panthers did go ‘round with shotguns and guns, but today we can’t do that, so what we do, we use video cameras just as they had shotguns and we point it at them as threatening as they did back then. Back then you could’ve shot bullets out, or projectiles, now we shoot images.

“Carlos”

I would argue “Carlos’s” analogy above is not too far-fetched. On the contrary, it highlights some important aspects of copwatching. When we were out in the field, “Eric” screamed “pig” – clearly inspired by The Black Panther Party (BPP). In Meredith Roman’s words, the BPP used the same tactic to “eliminate Black people’s fear of those police officers who seemed invincible and terrorized their communities.” Thus, screaming “pig” is a performative rights claim in the face of the local iteration of sovereign power – however dehumanizing for the receiving end. If we pursue the analogy even further, the BPP did indeed try to establish their own sovereignty, much like the copwatcher tries to eschew state power. Although the BPP evolved ideologically from revolutionary socialism, to Black nationalism, to intercommunalism and internationalism, they continuously inhabited a kind of non-state space in which a parallel society took shape. They took up shotguns in a paramilitary fashion and also started their own community services. In the same revolutionary vein, “Eric” – when asked about the ultimate goals of copwatching – responded: “For me, personally, I want to see the police state abolished. That means getting rid of police, getting rid of jails, and getting rid of prisons. And I think that’s completely possible in a civilized society. The only question is: Are we civilized?”

360 Moten (2013), 774.
361 Ibid., 774f.
362 Appendix 2: 24-03-17.
364 Ibid., 17f.
365 Ibid., 23ff.
366 Ibid., 17f.
367 Appendix 2: 18-03-17.
To think about an alternative to representation and visibility in the context of copwatching in the U.S. is to think about transversal media. I assert this because neither a national, nor a transnational focus means a necessary rejection of a nationalist categorization. By contrast, the transversal makes us see liminal and interstitial non-state spaces – to reiterate the introduction of the present thesis. Since we can think of copwatchers as de facto stateless in their operation – at least at certain instants – they indeed inhabit such non-state space. Even when they see themselves a merely trying to reform society from within, as citizens, the practice itself entails the potential to reveal contingencies in the sovereign state and its construction of “Man.”

In Chapter 3 and 5 we could see that blackness and black lives are expelled from the ontological construct of polity and citizenship (thus in a way de facto stateless). However, as I have observed in the field, copwatching holds the potential to eschew the hegemony of whiteness. Since copwatching is aligned with blackness in multiple ways, we need to theorize copwatch media output as (possibly) coming from “the resistance of the flesh.” In other words, enfleshed transversal media, as I will provisionally call it on these last pages.

As a conclusion to the thesis I would like to make a proposition about the possible nature of this media, as I have come to understand it through the field study. In line with abductive reasoning, it is a proposition about how enfleshed transversal media might manifest itself. A new hypothesis, of sorts – in the long line of abductive working hypotheses. Thus, I will end the proposition with some final suggestions for further research.

My proposition is that enfleshed transversal media is inherently connected to the aesthetic effect of a break; making one world appear within another (e.g. the paraontological within the ontological). Apart from the field study, I draw from the framework of Jacques Rancière in making this claim. In Rancière, the break – or dissensus – means that a new community between humans is formed as a result of an aesthetic rupture.\(^368\) In other words, a transformed distribution of the sensible; or, a new sensorium constructed through art.\(^369\) It could be achieved in the form of an extension of corporeality through Väliaho’s image-medium-body triad – which is exactly what I propose that enfleshed transversal media do. The break in Rancière is namely an “operation [which] takes the form of a superimposition that transforms a given form or body into a new one.”\(^370\) It is a reconfiguration of what is political and what is normalcy or “everyday.” Copwatching indeed entail the potential for such a break and thus a radical shift in the distribution of the sensible – which according to Rancière is precisely the major formative and (pre-)political affordance of art and media.\(^371\)

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\(^{369}\) Ibid., 57.

\(^{370}\) Ibid., 66.

\(^{371}\) Ibid., 66f.
Rancière’s *dissensus* is further compatible with the previous discussion on Deleuze and lines of flight. It is worth quoting Rancière at length, as this relates specifically to aesthetics:

Aesthetic experience has a political effect to the extent that the loss of destination it presupposes disrupts the way in which bodies fit their functions and destinations. What it produces is not rhetorical persuasion about what must be done. Nor is it the framing of a collective body. It is a multiplication of connections and disconnections that reframe the relation between bodies, the world they live in and the way in which they are “equipped” to adapt to it. It is a multiplicity of folds and gaps in the fabric of common experience that change the cartography of the perceivable, the thinkable and the feasible.\(^{372}\)

This is clearly also in line with my argument against representational politics (e.g. “not rhetorical persuasion” and “not a framing of a collective body” in the quote). Instead political effect hinges on the aesthetic break – a suspension of cause and effect.\(^{373}\)

As we have seen in Väliaho, “images act as vital links to join bodies and persons together into dominant social realities.”\(^{374}\) With an aesthetic break those bodies are rejoined in new configurations. Nicholas Mirzoeff has probably made the most cogent case for why this would be so necessary in theorizing oppositional looks (e.g. enfleshed transversal media):

The decisive intervention in a dissensus over rights comes when a person who does not have a given right claims it as if they already do. It is a performative claim, validated only by the act of making it and visualized as […] the right to look.\(^{375}\)

I would like to end by calling for further research on *dissensus* as it relates to enfleshed transversal media. For one, this would mean we have to study blackness as ground, rather than merely its figuration – as Gupta-Nigam demonstrates.\(^{376}\) In the same vein, Wilderson has called for cinema studies to adopt a “different conceptual framework, predicated not on the subject-effect of cultural performance but on the structure of political ontology; one that allows us to substitute a politics of culture for a culture of politics.”\(^{377}\) I would like to add that this presupposes a conceptualization of enfleshed transversal media which cuts across the binary notion of an opposition between *l'art pour l'art* and so-called political art.

When the image is controlled by neither TV networks nor the forensic technicians – but the nonwhite/subaltern/allied – lines of flight might manifest themselves in new ways. In order to identify such manifestations, I would argue the quest for the scholar is to follow and anticipate the dark precursor of blackness – which is “a rhizome, a dynamic, creative, and desiring counter-force in which lines of flight present possible modes of freedom and sociality in excess to political ontological positioning.”\(^{378}\)

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\(^{372}\) Rancière, 72.
\(^{373}\) Ibid., 73.
\(^{374}\) Väliaho, 9.
\(^{375}\) Mirzoeff, 77.
\(^{376}\) Gupta-Nigam, 3.
\(^{377}\) Wilderson, 57.
\(^{378}\) Kline, 63.
Appendices

Appendix 1 – Field Diary

09-03-17
On Mar 9, 2017, at 2:46 PM &lt;[address]@[domain].com&gt; wrote:
Kick ass activists,

The annual […] campaign kicks off tomorrow night! Last year’s campaign was epic as we filmed cops abusing people from day one, they then tried to intimidate us, so we went hard at the cops, and they backed down and started treating people with kid gloves by the final weekend. We made a huge difference and prevented people from abuse and false arrests. One of the incidents we filmed went viral and resulted in a cop being suspended for 45 days (not even rapist or murderer cops get that type of punishment). We provided multiple people with video evidence to use in their criminal defense, and we even assisted someone in a lawsuit against the terrorist cops.

This year we are going to keep the pressure on!!

10-03-17
After some initial email contact with the group’s leader [Eric], discussing logistics, we met up at the local coffee house at 9 pm for the kick-off for their ten-day campaign of copwatching. [In Southwestern USA, city not disclosed for anonymity].

I was early and I could recognize [Casey] sitting alone in a corner, since I had seen Eir picture on social media. Around thirty years old, [Casey] had a characteristic hair band, J-pop style clothes, and a nit belt around the neck. I presented myself and sat down. [Casey] was polite, but in the middle of playing Pokémon on a NES and it was clear E didn’t really want to start a conversation at this point. After a while [Eric] entered – a thirtysome well-trained Asian-American who was very outgoing and charismatic, as I could notice already as I saw him making his way from the other side of the coffee house. It was obvious that he was well known by the local community since he instantly started talking to random people he met at the way to our table.

After waiting for three other activists to arrive – an older white man with a large beard [Gary], a young black woman [Stina], and a paralyzed older hispanic woman [Maria] – we did some small talk. We

379 E–Eir–Eirs–Emself is one of the gender-neutral pronouns “Casey” let us know E prefers.
started talking about the weather (yes, really). It was about 30 degrees Celsius and I had just come from snow and minus degrees in Sweden. In order to establish some connection, I tried to be funny and tease the people in the group who said it was “chilly tonight”: When they wanted a jacket I said a T-shirt would do fine, and so on. The cost of making dad jokes paid off though, as I as instantly made part of the group. It seemed to them, my background was kind of exotic which made for interesting conversations and thus less social strain. Also, even if I was a foreigner-outsider, the coffee house was located in a white affluent neighborhood which let me blend in – maybe even easier than the locals who were racialized.

[Casey]: My biggest concern going into this night is the actual neonazis and the rising fascists actually being down there [downtown]. They are the ones who are not going to hesitate to take a shot at us and, as we know, that’s what the cops wait for. Someone takes a shot at us and then they’ll pounce on us. We’ve got to know that over the last couple of years. That’s about it. Those are the tactics for tonight. Nobody worry…. But, I’m going to take risks.

[Eric]: Yeah, let’s take measured risk. Like, if you’re going to get arrested, do it tomorrow night. I’m going to be out then […] Because Christian is new to this (I tried to look relaxed to let them do their thing without consideration to me).

After buying us all coffee, [Eric] started a pep-talk for the first day of the ninemday campaign of copwatching each night. He then read the “code of conduct” from his phone:

[Casey]: You wanna read it? I know it by heart.

[Eric]: The [organization] is dedicated documenting the actions of police and their interactions with the public. In order to effectively and safely do so, we must hold ourselves to a higher standard of conduct than police. Participants shall not use violent rhetoric, make violent threats, or engage in violent activity. Participants shall make any necessary effort to not interfere with law enforcement officials while they are carrying out their official duties – it means, basically, don’t get closer to the police than anyone else. Don’t cross any yellow lines… While engaging in copwatching, we shall not be intoxicated or under the influence of drugs. While engaging in copwatching, we shall not carry firearms. We shall not curse at police officers or engage in name calling [Eric starts to smirk while reading this]. However, when participants are being bullied or harassed by police, we encourage restrain [sic, means the opposite]. So basically, if the cops cross the line all bets are off. We’re committed to anti-oppression in our dealings with each other, and in our community we don’t tolerate racism, sexism, homophobia, xenophobia, or other forms of oppression. Should anyone violate these rules, participants shall turn their cameras on them, publicly admonishing and rebuking them – and in addition, notify an organiser.
[Casey]: Important for us to evolve and move forward. So we should all address each other with gender neutral pronouns, like they, them, y’all, comrades.

[Gary]: I’m all for calling people what they wanna be called, but I’m working on it.

[Casey]: […] Last weekend an activist [affiliated with Casey] was assaulted, by a Trump supporter, while the cops saw and jumped in a few minutes after he had been given a concussion. And they arrested the guy who was assaulted… the comrade who was assaulted. Absolutely expect that. Those who we are getting into small arguments with, they are gonna try to fight us now. This is an absolute reality. Don’t slip at any point, at no minute let your guard down. You’re gonna have to stay hyper-aware of the people around us […]. Last time anything happened was when nobody saw me or stopped filming me, and I got hit in the back of my head with a nightstick. That’s the reality, you have to keep your guard up.

[Eric] then got everybody to write down the name and number of a “point of contact” in case any of us got arrested, and also got everybody to install a message encryption app and started a new group chat through it – for safety reasons: “They keep track of us.”

We got out to the car with some printed items in a cardboard box – one with contacts, social media, and “Know Your Rights” information [bold and italics in the original]:

**DO NOT:**

- *Physically* interfere with police
- Enter a designated crime scene
- Touch a police officer at any time
  
  […] If threatened with arrest, clearly state, “*I am not physically interfering.*” Speech is not interfering.

We also got another card to distribute to important witnesses at potential incidents of interest:

“**WE FILMED THE INCIDENT, Get the video FREE: [address]@[domain].com**” and at the bottom margin, “We document police interaction for the benefit of the suspect and to discourage officers from violating people’s rights”

**IF POLICE STOP YOU**

- Remain calm
- Film the encounter
• Ask, “Am I being detained, or am I free to go?”
• If you are not being detained, leave the scene!
• If you are being detained, ask, “Why am I being detained?”

[Eric] gave us a lift downtown. We bought some burgers on the way and [Eric] picked up the check. We were given “pro-sume” grade camcorders with copwatch stickers on them. [Eric] also had an additional wearable Sony Action Cam on a mount on his shoulder [similar to a GoPro video camera]. [Gary] carried a monopod with his camcorder on – and also had an additional Movo small mini-cam clipped to the shoulder strap of his bag. It was rolling basically all the time, he said.

Downtown: We made it through the crowds of the main bar street. Walked back and forth. When we had to go to the toilet, we used a hotel a few blocks away. The first task was identifying which officers were out that night. [Eric] yelled and asked every officer to show his badge. [Gary] made notations. We were there to “make our presence known” primarily, as [Eric] said. The video material was seen as secondary – but potentially important as evidence if there were any incidents.

Me and [Eric] were standing on the other side of the street (we had split up to cover different parts of the busy bar strip) when a bar fight broke out. [Gary], however, was standing right next to the two fighting latino men. Five or six officers stormed the scene in an instant. [Gary] later made a remark about police changing their behaviour when he pointed his camera toward them: “[That was] [a]t least something I contributed with, otherwise they would’ve probably smashed his head harder against that wall [referring to one of the latino men being strip-searched outside the bar, against a wall].”

Otherwise: Mostly waiting. A lot of stories were told, constantly, of old glorious days of activism. We also talked a lot about how to deal with batteries and recharging. They apparently had a lot of extra batteries, but only one charger – so they had to schedule how to pick them up, and so on. A cause for some frustration: “But you had the Canon batteries!? I’m sure you said so! Come on, we don’t have time for this.”

11-03-17

[Casey] picked me up and on the way to the meetup at the coffee house. I asked E about his background, to initiate an informal interview while driving to meet the others, and he told me that he came from a small village in Texas with a highly active chapter of the KKK. He connected his activism with anti-fascism – against local racism and gentrification specifically. It apparently was tied to both ideological convictions as an anarcho-communist and as an extension of his own queer working class identity – he identified as non-binary and worked a minimum-wage job in IT repairs. He clearly saw himself aligned
with the interest of other poor and marginalized people – especially people of color, which were “bottom rank” in the environment he had been brought up in. Given his surname he has a latino “background,” but I forgot to ask for any detail on it in the car.

At the coffee place the discussion about ideology continued. [Eric] had a long rant about how it’s hard to navigate for him as a leader, because they are supposed to be “non-partisan” and all-over the political spectrum. He said there had been tensions and that they’d had to kick out a few people who were openly racist and sexist.

[Casey] started arguing with [Eric] and said they must be anti-capitalist, that it must be the basis of their activism – because, he contended, it is at the root of the problem. It started an infected argument. [Bert], an older, white bearded man with a strong southern accent, was listening all the time without voicing his opinion. But as I found out later he was apparently from the libertarian right. [Eric] said they need to build coalitions. But never accept sexism or racism. The discussion came to a deadlock – kind of awkwardly and they all decided it was time to head to the cars.

It was raining, so we went out “roaming” with a car. Basically, it meant looking for cop cars and following them – or looking for lights in alleys (i.e., crime scenes or traffic stops.) We made four stops. They would talk to the officers, who already knew the others in my group. The cops gave their name and badge number without hesitation – they knew the question was coming – and they knew the law apparently.

The stories of activist achievements continued, with “urban legends” about copwatch incidents and arrests. One was about how Joshua’s head was smashed against the floor one time so he had to stitch it up. And while continuing talking, we stopped by a local hamburger chain. We had veggie burgers and watched clips of Zlatan’s greatest goals. It was a common ground for us. We discussed AFL and Champion’s League. Suddenly [Eric] woke up: “Come on, we got to get out there and make our presence known”.

We circled around an area of the inner city in which most stops were made according to [Eric] and [Casey]. And indeed, after just a few minutes we saw the first blue-red lights and pulled up. [Eric]: “You get out here and I’ll park on the back side.” We rushed out with camcorders and hit “record” in the rush. The police gave a glance at us and pointed his flashlight to see if we were a threat, I guess. Once he saw the cameras he seemed to realize directly it was copwatch. He was calm – or “performing calmness” to show he was in control. I was nervous before – but calm during – all of these encounters. [Eric] instilled a sense of calm control into every situation – probably because of his long experience and because he had a military background with service in Iraq.
After getting into the car and roaming another half hour:
An older man through the window, seeing [Casey]: “You folks all RuPaul or what?” I think he was referencing RuPaul’s Dragrace and trans/crossdressing – since [Casey] is gender non-conforming.

[Eric]: “I’m so tired. [hick-ups] Should we call it? Sorry to be lame tonight guys.”
I scheduled to make an interview with Antonio before our next night out copwatching.

**14-03-17**
It was just me and [Casey]. We drove by the usual hamburger place.

Then we went out on the bar strip. It was a calm night. We talked about his last year of copwatching, when there was more going on, E said, and they actually got a police officer suspended. They also filmed a drunk white guy with a revolver getting arrested, but treated as a “friend” by the cops. [Casey] showed me video of it on his cell phone: the copwatchers tried to make one of the police officers see how differently they treated the white man from people of color. They yelled it at him: “don’t you see it’s some white privilege right there?”

Later E picked up a hat for sale in a convenience [store], which had the confederate flag on it: “This is how fucked up we are.”

[Casey] stopped by some street musicians on the way and filmed them. “We use storytelling to humanize and show the community, before the cops come into the picture.”

We distributed some cards to people (of color, mainly) wondering what we did. [Casey] facebooked pictures of the officers on duty that night. He also wrote some public statuses for the group’s Facebook account.

**16-03-17**
At the coffee house [Parts transcribed from video recordings]:
[Eric] instructs us to not swear while an incident is happening: “It will mess up the audio track. A jury would be influenced negatively if you hear someone yelling pig – like ‘oh, they must have such a stressful job’ – even if what you see is police abuse.”

We gathered (10 people) out in the parking lot to have a short training session – a sort of roleplay workshop – because there were two new guys. It was dark, only lit by the neon lights coming from the coffee house nearby.
[Eric]: So basically, the way it’s set up, there’s gonna be a big part in the middle closed with barriers, so the cops and vehicles can drive up and down the street when they need to. So everyone is going to be pushed out on the sides of the street.

[Eric] walks on the parking lot, with his hands outstretched like a flight controller to demonstrate: “Just imagine a big area right down the middle and that the cops control everything. [Casey] can you come here?” [Casey] moves over.

[Eric]: “What we’re going to do is that [Casey] and I are going to be the cops […] at a situation. Okay? You guys are copwatchers, so put your cameras down, because you’re just walking around. You don’t think anything is necessarily going to happen.

They walk over and [Casey] is “arresting” someone:
[Eric]: “Go cover him!”
Everybody circles the “scene.”
[Casey]: “Stop resisting!”
[Casey] fights an imaginative person. But he starts to smirk self-consciously and freezes to look over at the new guys, to see how they have reacted.
[Eric]: “It’s gonna be busy down there!”
[Eric] pretends to be a random person, aggressively pushing the copwatcher around on the parking lot. Then a cop [Eric] emerges: “Hey, back up! Back up!” He pushes one of the youngest copwatch volunteers back.

[Eric]: “One thing that you can do, is that you can go to a knee. If you’re up close, and you’re trying to film – one thing you can do is go to a knee, to film. What that does is that you’re clearly not a threat… The cops hate it (laughs coming from everybody). Because you’re proving that you’re not a threat, that you’re just filming, and there’s something about that which makes them really upset. And if you’re willing to get arrested doing that, it’s gold for the jury […]”

[Eric]: “If there are people fighting, we definitely want to film it. But we are filming the periphery, because we know cops are gonna come rushing in. But we are not filming the fight. Just be mindful about that.”
17-03-17

On Mar 17, 2017, at 11:33 AM <[address]@[domain].com> wrote:

Wow, last night’s copwatch was amazing! Perhaps for the first time ever, the police did not interfere with our ability to film or even try to intimidate us. More importantly, they were super restrained. You could tell there were cops who were very uncomfortable with being so restrained, but nonetheless, we did not see any of the police abusing anyone last night. This is why we copwatch - to deter the police from engaging in violence or abusing people.

We will be out there again tonight and tomorrow night and we would love to see you there!
In Solidarity

17-03-17

At the regular coffee house: [Casey] explained for some new volunteers that they use gender neutral pronouns, like “Y’all, comrade, they, E, one.” E further instructed us to “Go after police as they break up the crowd,” and drew a map of how we were supposed to follow them to get through the massive crowd of people at the bar street.

[Casey]: “They do ‘fake outs’ – they go one way, and pretends to listen to the earpiece. They know that we will follow if something is up. But when you see the adrenaline pumping, you see the difference – when they’re actually onto something, that’s when you have to stay alert.”

Downtown: A lot of fights, but the police kept pretty calm. [Eric] got into heated verbal arguments with some officers, who told him to back up at several times throughout the night. [Eric] found an enemy cop, which he tracked all night, yelling “coward” at.

At one point, around 1pm: There were gunshots and everybody on the bar street ran. It was a “stampede” as some people said. Apparently a bar fight had broken out and somebody had [fired] a warning shot (not the police). We saw the following arrest, as we were only 30 meters from the shooting.

We had a meetup place where an older lady in a wheelchair sat (a volunteer for the night). She only filmed 1 min or so, she said. Everybody in the group said it didn’t matter; that her presence and support was the most important. I talked some with her and she said her husband had been at Standing Rock, copwatching during the raids, and that it had got her engaged in “the cause.”
On Mar 18, 2017, at 04:01 PM <[address]@[domain].com> wrote:

Tonight is the final copwatch night of […] 2017!! We have had a remarkably successful campaign this year, keeping many of the most aggressive cops in check. In particular, we have seen numerous occasions over the past two nights where cops held back from assaulting or arresting people and instead let them go home. This is unprecedented over our five years of cop watching. Let’s wrap this campaign up with a fabulous final night. The crowds are heavy so the more cop watchers we have the more likely we will have copwatchers stationed near a critical area where the people need us. […] #FilmThePolice

23-03-17 – New York, NY

I met with [Sandy], the around 60-years old, white male director of [the counter-surveillance organization], at 100 Centre St, which is outside the Manhattan Criminal Court Building. While we waited for his colleague [Elsa] – a twenty-five year old non-binary black woman – he cracked some jokes about Swedes in a typical Jewish-New Yorker kind of way (think: a politically radical Woody Allen). We were also joined by a black woman from Washington Heights who were a reporter for the Village Voice, working the local crime/court beat.

We went into the Court Building and went through an airport type security check. Then we sat down outside a courtroom to have a briefing. We introduced ourselves and [Sandy] told us about the work [the organization] does. We were also handed a flyer:

We work to expose and end abusive police tactics that routinely and disproportionately do harm to our city’s low-income communities and people of color.

[THE ORGANIZATION] VISITS COURTS IN NYC TO MONITOR:

● The most common arrests made by the NYPD
● Patterns in who is being arrested
● Collateral consequences of low-level charges.

Then we were handed a paper with a copy of the matrix they fill out during their Court Monitoring. It contained boxes for age, gender, charge(s), verdict, if released, other notes, and duration. And also for race:

B = Black/African American
H = Hispanic/Latino
W = White - Caucasian
A = Asian
ME = Middle Eastern
U = Undecided
We were told race were the most important characteristic to find out, because they were interested in the “systemic racism of NYPD” which they seemed to postulate from the outset.

[Sandy] said it could be hard to see the race sometimes. “Latinos and Asians could pass as Caucasians” he said – he also pointed out that it’s especially hard because you only see the back of the defendant when you’re in the audience section of the courtroom. You have to wait until they turn around, if they do.

We sat down on the bench fourth from the witness stand and observed a vast number of cases being handled in a fast pace (3-4 minutes each). [Sandy]: “It’s like an industry.” He ran after some of the people who were free to go and approach them outside the courtroom – often to ask a few questions about their arrests and distribute flyers. I observed at a distance or remained in the courtroom, but asked [Sandy] what they had discussed.

I also asked about the organization’s “video narratives.” I had seen on their website they had interviewed people in different communities of NYC arrested for petty crimes – but they said it was “on hold,” because the videographer who previously volunteered had moved from NYC.

24-03-17 – Meeting “Carlos”

I met with [Carlos] at a busy diner in Bronx. In fact, the same diner where he had been arrested for filming a “stop-and-frisk”-like situation in 2016. I instantly recognized him, with his distinct mustache and his trademark copwatch jacket – with a gopro camera on the chest, a walkie-talkie hanging on the side, an earpiece sticking out of the collar and a large “COPWATCH” print on the back.

We sat down at a table and I introduced myself again while he had an omelette (we had only emailed prior to that). I tried to show that I had some sympathies for citizen journalism to find common ground, but I also tried to signal that I didn’t want to get too involved in what he did, just observe and follow around. It seemed to do the trick, because we had a very relaxed conversation after just a couple of minutes. My curious questions seemed to spark [somewhat] of a performer and entertainer in [Carlos]. He told me in great detail about stories of his arrests [see interview section for some of it, which he repeated].

[Carlos] also showed me a scanned document on his cell phone. It was an intelligence file, showing his picture. He told me, and I could read in the document, that the Metropolitan Transit Authority [MTA] and the NYPD had an undercover police officer who had surveilled [Carlos], noting his location, tracked his individual movement during protests, and taking photos of him in secret. It was clear that [Carlos] was both scared by this and a bit thrilled to be considered “public enemy number one,” as he said.
On the TV hanging over the diner bar we could see the news of a murder, or what we a few hours later understood was more of a terrorist attack: a white man from Maryland had apparently travelled to New York to “kill black men” and had in fact murdered a 66-years old black man.\footnote{Berman, Mark. "White man traveled to New York to kill black men and ‘make a statement,’ police say". \textit{Washington Post website}. Published 23 March 2017. Accessed 4 May 2017: https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-nation/wp/2017/03/22/white-man-traveled-to-new-york-to-kill-black-men-and-make-a-statement-police-say/?utm_term=.87b6c7e8c00b} We learned that there were a rally held on short notice later that afternoon, at Union Square, for the man and for black lives (matter). [Carlos] said he wanted to go and I asked if I could follow him there, which I could.

We took his car, an older Jeep, which was parked right outside the diner. He had a dashboard camera, which he put on rec, “to refute whatever they’re trying to falsify against me.”

I was early and let into the room to sit in on an ongoing meeting while I waited. It was a large conference room on the seventh floor: the whole coalition of leaders from different activist groups throughout New York City had gathered for a monthly meeting. Among them were two well-known copwatchers I knew well from my research (apart from [Carlos] who hadn’t arrived yet). Around 15 people: mostly people of color in the room – black and hispanic women dominated – with a few black and hispanic males, one Irish guy, two white women and me. They talked about a group which wanted to join the coalition and wanted to make events about protest art and performance in general – and not tied to any specific political cause. A woman joined in over a loudspeaker phone: “We ain't performing shit. Like our banners are just for show, to look nice? Are those white folks from Brooklyn? It’s really white supremacy through the artsy thing. Nah nah, that shit ain’t right, white folks will screw you over, we are not getting pacified like that. It will take out everything political of what we do. They can’t just twitter a bit, and get a logo – and think that what they’re doing is activism. They gotta get some work done from their own shop.” Some other people agreed: “Our work will get watered down, apolitical, it will just mix up with other protests and the issues themselves will get away.” But a black woman disagreed: “You can’t just generalize like that, it’s important we build alliances too. Even outside our own community.” They eventually voted with majority rule against the group joining. Later [Carlos] poked fun at me and the other white people in the room, to ease what I think he perceived as a tension after the woman had spoken over the phone. [Carlos] also felt obliged to say she didn’t mean it literally.

When we arrived at the rally, a lot of [Carlos’s] activist friends were there. I think I came off as a kind of naïve Scandinavian outsider – but they asked curiously about current developments, romanticizing Swedish welfare, and asked how cold it was during winter time. And [Carlos] kept forgetting and said to his friends I was from Switzerland.
[Carlos] even knew the local TV journalists, which he greeted. He took one of them aside. Since I had a wireless mic to record [Carlos’s] voice, I could hear them talking: [Carlos] told the TV journalist that he had a story for him, and because he owed him one he could have an exclusive interview.

25-03-17

I had been invited by [Carlos] to attend a meeting to plan his press conference releasing secret audio recordings of the NYPD. It was taking place at Coalition to End Broken Windows Policing, at the Defend Brooklyn offices, at 177 Livingston Ave.

I was early and let into the room to sit in on an ongoing meeting while I waited. It was a large conference room on the seventh floor: the whole coalition of leaders from different activist groups throughout New York City had gathered for a monthly meeting. Among them were two well-known copwatchers I knew well from my research (apart from [Carlos] who hadn’t arrived yet). Around 15 people: mostly people of color in the room – black and hispanic women dominated – with a few black and hispanic males, one Irish guy, two white women and me. They talked about a group which wanted to join the coalition and wanted to make events about protest art and performance in general – and not tied to any specific political cause. A woman joined in over a loudspeaker phone: “We ain't performing shit. Like our banners are just for show, to look nice? Are those white folks from Brooklyn? It’s really white supremacy through the artsy thing. Nah nah, that shit ain’t right, white folks will screw you over, we are not getting pacified like that. It will take out everything political of what we do. They can’t just twitter a bit, and get a logo – and think that what they’re doing is activism. They gotta get some work done from their own shop.” Some other people agreed: “Our work will get watered down, apolitical, it will just mix up with other protests and the issues themselves will get away.” But a black woman disagreed: “You can’t just generalize like that, it’s important we build alliances too. Even outside our own community.” They eventually voted with majority rule against the group joining. Later [Carlos] poked fun at me and the other white people in the room, to ease what I think he perceived as a tension after the woman had spoken over the phone. [Carlos] also felt obliged to say she didn’t mean it literally.

After an hour, the meeting concluded and we were about five people left in the room to discuss tactics for [Carlos] press conference: The Irish guy [Greg] and a black man [Andrew] from the previous meeting – both very verbal and sort of “natural leaders.” Three people came in when the previous meeting was over: [Carlos], his lawyer [Marta] and [Clarissa], an Occupy Wall Street organizer and “media savvy” person who had direct contacts to TV channels and organizations such as Democracy Now! I introduced myself and said that they shouldn’t mind me – that I was just there to observe and that I followed [Carlos] around. Some of the people were a bit suspicious at first, because they discussed sensitive data which should “by no means leave the room” – but [Carlos] vouched for me: “he’s a good guy, no worries.”
[Andrew], 30 years old or so, started to draw on a whiteboard: press contacts, dates, plans for rallies, sections of the audio to play. They all discussed intensively if they should give exclusive rights to one channel, or if they should just “throw it all out there.” In the end, they all voted for the latter. [Clarissa] said [Carlos] should prepare if there were any critical questions from the media.

[Carlos]: “We are in fucking charge. We don't have to answer any questions. We should get a loudspeaker to play the audio. I want it to echo in the whole police building.”

[Andrew]: “There is nothing else happening that day which could take away the media focus? No election, no nothing? A’ight let’s do it!”
Appendix 2 – Interviews

In the interviews below, some passages deemed irrelevant have been omitted, and clearly marked as such with “[…]” to facilitate an easier reading. When timecodes appear, they refer to original audio recordings of the interviews. The questions have been omitted for several sections due to the fact that many of the interviews were semi-structured and often turned into conversations. In such cases, only sections deemed relevant have been transcribed from the original recording.

14-03-17: Simone Browne
Associate Professor, Department of African and African Diaspora Studies at University of Texas at Austin. Conducted at University of Texas at Austin, TX.

[00:03:20]: How did you come about making the FOIA-request for Frantz Fanon files in the U.S. intelligence archives?
Ideally, I wanted put surveillance studies in conversation with studies of the black diaspora – and particularly the archive of slavery and its technologies and its afterlife. And as another project: I wanted to tell the story of surveillance studies through the life of Frantz Fanon and so I tried to access some of his files from the CIA and from the FBI and came up with not very much. I asked [CIA and FBI] for any data or information they had about Fanon […]. It was a lot of redacted pages; those black or white boxes that block out much of the information you think might be there […]. So there’s a problem with trying to access or narrate someone’s biography through this state, through the intelligence agencies of this state – but that was one aspect of what I tried to do. Coming up with basically nothing on Frantz Fanon, I took that as a sort of metaphor for the role of redaction, for these agencies; what do they not tell us about a person’s biography, about a person’s actions. And there was something about Fanon – even though he was dead – he was that unnamable matter that matters to how we think about surveillance. Interestingly, with Fanon, while he was in exile he gave a number of lectures on surveillance at the University of Tunis – and the notes from them […] they were in French and I was able to translate them. It’s quite short, but he talks about some of those key things we think about when we think about surveillance – CCTV, wiretapping, listening in to phone operators… so there was a sort of absenting of black theorizing when it comes to surveillance.

[00:39:18] Would you say copwatching is a form of dark sousveillance?
I guess it could be anti- or counter-surveillance, yes sousveillance. But we would have to ask what is productive, and of use for these people who are making use of these technologies as they film police interaction […]. There are repercussions for many who take it upon themselves or feel compelled to film these police interactions. They themselves might be the subject of police violence from that very filming […]. You have things like copwatch, which have specific practices, specific training. People who are
part of those organizations, are those we talked about. [But some] are those who are just accidental witnesses, grabbing their cell phones like an eyewitness: I’m here, I see you, even though the state might not be at this moment. With copwatching, they are not only filming the police, they are filming themselves filming the police as a record as well too […] as a kind of security measure for how those interactions get told, or narrated, through those visual texts later […]. There are these calls, that if we just have more cameras on police, then we will be able to tell a different story of what is happening. But it doesn’t change the racial framing, the anti-black framing in which that story is told, in which those moments are recorded, and in which they are told again in cases of court, or in the press. So you have calls for police bodycameras, you have calls for citizen based, or the public, taking up their cell phones recording their own interactions. And then you also have the organized copwatch groups.

18-03-17: “Eric”
Founder of a copwatch organization in the Southwest of USA.

[00:00:45] How did your activism start?
I personally was never involved in any copwatching prior to my initial incident with the police, which happened on New Year’s day 2012. I was the designated driver taking a buddy home from a party. And… I pulled into a gas station, late that night, just to fill up with gas […] And we observed a DWI [driving while intoxicated] stop in progress. We didn’t plan to film it, we were just watching it out of curiosity from our position at the gas pump. And ultimately one of the officers ending up ripping one of the passengers out of the vehicle. The other cop came and joined in. She was screaming and crying. I had recognized that she had not committed any crime, so therefore there was no reason for her to be pulled out. So I started questioning the police officers. I started yelling at them “stop hurting her!” and I tried to take some pictures. And because of that, one of the cops came after me, arresting me and then claimed that I spit in his face – which is a felony and carries a 2 to 10-year prison sentence. After that, fortunately, I found witnesses who were willing to come forward, including one who took video with his cell phone. And then all of the sudden people came out rallying around me, and I was able to fight back in a way lots of people aren’t able to. Over the following months that became more apparent, because a lot of people told me how they had been abused by the police and that they’d never been able to get justice. And so I realized I had a huge community of people supporting me, in the visual circumstance, but that a lot of people are harmed more than I was and that they didn’t have a voice. So we decided to leverage the support I had to start the [organization]. And about midyear that year we started copwatching as our primary form of direct action.
To back up a bit, how were you freed of the charges in the initial arrest?

I knew that I was wrongfully arrested and I immediately went out to see if there were any witnesses. Once I had video I realized this might be something the media might wanna cover, and I figured that was my best way to get this all cleared up. I thought that the cops would actually say: “Hey, that’s messed up, that cop is a bad cop. Let’s drop the charges and let this guy go and apologize. But that’s not what happened. Instead they doubled down, and it took 15 months for my case to go before a grand jury, at which time I was no-billed which means that they threw out all the charges against me. But then they came back with new charges for petty misdemeanors: they said I interfered with public duties or failed to obey. So it took another year and a half before I got my day in court. That was when I was finally cleared of the charge.

And the video that surfaced showed that the cop was in the wrong?

Yeah, so every single video that we filmed were the police have arrested us has shown that the police story doesn’t match up with what the actual video says. So, what we demonstrate is that the police lie all the time in their affidavits. But yeah, so in that initial arrest of mine the guy across the street clearly showed I wasn’t the aggressor. I was pinned against the truck, my hands were up and I was yelling at the cop to get out of my face. But their narrative was that I got in the cop’s face and that I approached the cop. And that he had to do that because I was assaulting him basically. The dashcam-video that the police had didn’t show the actual event, but it had the audio. And it also affirmed that the cops lied and that I was in truth. But they refused to give us that [the recording] in nearly three years’ time. And then the same thing with the surveillance video. They violated standard procedure by never giving me the surveillance video until my lawyer demanded to know why they didn’t give us the video. They said they didn’t think it was relevant, even though it showed the entire episode.

What kind of reaction do you get when you film the police?

The reactions I get is a mixed bag. Primarily depending on who the police officer is and what the general guidance in the department is. There are a lot of police officers who don’t mess with me because they see me filming and they have no desire to be on, like, YouTube. There are other officers who dislike me. They think I am anti-cop or anti-them or that I want to see cops dead. So these guys go out of their way to give me trouble […]. I’ve been arrested six times now and each time I’ve been cleared of the charges, but that doesn’t prevent me from going to jail for the night and having to pay the bills and the fees that are associated with that.

What’s the general aim, the end goal?

As far as the [organization] we are pretty open ideologically. We welcome all sorts of people from all backgrounds to participate. So we don’t necessarily communicate a defined ideological outcome. Uhmm… some people just wanna make the police state more honest. Some people think they just need
to stick to certain aspects of policing. For me, personally, I want to see the police state abolished. That means getting rid of police, getting rid of jails, and getting rid of prisons. And I think that’s completely possible in a civilized society. The only question is: Are we civilized?

[00:10:40] How do you know where to copwatch?

We are similar to other cities in that the police focus on people of color, black and brown communities, migrant communities, homeless people, and people who are pretty poor.

[…] Because we tend to copwatch were people of color live and the poorer parts of the city, we get a lot of support. People love what we do. When we tell them, they get really excited and thank us for it. Uhmm… there are times when we go into the more affluent parts of the city or downtown, and there we will get a lot more pushback when people wonder why we don’t support the police.

[00:13:25] What has the most impact, the video itself or actually showing up with cameras?

When we do our briefings, our trainings, we talk about the benefits of copwatching. The number one benefit is that it de-escalates the situation. So when a police officer knows someone is watching, they are much less likely to engage in aggressive or criminal behavior. So that’s really the primary focus of copwatching. But there are other benefits. One is that we are showing solidarity with the people who are being oppressed. Another one is that we are showing people that they can film the police, and that they can have that ability. And another one is that we can document police activity for use in criminal defense or civil suits against the police. So I think they all have value, but the biggest thing that we want to do is to make the police know, and the people, that the police don’t have all the power. They have the guns and they have the law on their side, but we outnumber them vastly […]

We want the police to know we are there so that it changes their behavior. And then we film until the end. If they don’t mess with us, we don’t mess with them. Maybe at the end we would ask: “What happened? Names and badge numbers?”

19-03-17: “Said”

Activist for the Jacqueline Craig case, conducted in a Southwestern city in the USA.

I came across an incident through the initial Facebook live video, when it was released. I kept updating about what had occurred. Then after a while I realized nothing was going to be done. And then the bodycam videos were released, and they were shared by Shaun King [the New York Daily journalist] – viewed over eight million times on Facebook. It went viral almost instantly […]. I decided I wanted to do something about it – I just felt justice was not going to be served. The police officer was only suspended for ten days […]. It’s just a complete miscarriage of justice, that’s what it is. So I came back
in town […] and at that same time the airport protest began, against the Muslim ban. That’s when I started to feel a sense of community, because at the protest there were people from all over there, from all over the country, all over the world. All sorts of “races”, colors, skins… So I realized then, that this is what this new era is about. This is what I like to call the Second Civil Rights Movement […]. So the momentum from the [airport] protest, I carried it on to my own protest. I organized a rally that following weekend. I needed to provide a voice for Jacqueline Craig.

Then I realized it [the rally] had gone a bit viral… A lot of people had done speeches at city hall, to the mayor himself, to address the case. My speech, along with a few other people’s speeches, started to circulate on the Internet. And that brought a lot more attention to the rally itself and we got a significant number of people to show up. We had a representative of Jacqueline Craig’s family speak. And herself, and the lawyer representing her. They both showed up.

The police chief […] only punished Officer Martin with a ten-day suspension. It was just a slap on the wrist. But the video itself [bodycam] was actually “illegally” leaked to the public by two police officers, as we’ve come to find. Police chief Fitzgerald released a statement saying “we will expose the leaker and enforce the law.” It’s absurd he would ignore the actual police brutality itself… and the two police officers who released the video are actually black… and that might have been a factor. I believe [the two officers] are the real heroes of this case.

What we need is transparency, and accountability from police officers. And we’re not gonna get that from police officers’ own videos. It’s going to have to be from a third party agency […]. Maybe if we had another agency monitoring these videos and there’s like a citizen board which reviews these videos, I think much more justice would come out of that. In this case it’s: who polices the police. The most important change is this [picks up cell phone]. Now everyone is a journalist. Everybody can record these videos and expose police officers. These are issues that oppressed people, minorities, and the black community, have been speaking about for centuries, really. But nobody listened because there’s no evidence […]. I think every citizen has an obligation to record any instances of police abuse […]. We are essentially living in what I think is the black genocide. So we have to do every single thing we can to fight this.

Said was interviewed on national television. He was also highlighted by Shaun King, who has millions of followers on Facebook. Said also started the hashtag #countthedays, taking photos of rallies with signs showing how many days the officer who brutalized Jacqueline Craig had still been working on the streets.
22-03-17: Jackie Zammuto

Program Manager, WITNESS.

Conducted at the WITNESS offices in Brooklyn NYC, NY.

[01:40] Witness is an international human rights organization which has been around for about twenty-five years. And we make it possible for anyone, anywhere, to defend human rights – basically, we live in a world in which video is near, you can just pull out your phone out of your pocket and document an abuse, if you see something happening, and share that immediately. But a lot of times, those videos doesn’t contain the right information, or they are not verifiable to be used as evidence in court. Sometimes they are confiscated or lost. So we are working really hard to ensure that more video equals more rights and more justice.

[03:00] If everybody has a cell phone with a camera, why is your organization needed?

It’s a good question… just to start from the beginning. We were started twenty-five years ago, by activist and musician Peter Gabriel, and the catalyst behind the foundation was the Rodney King beating in L.A. in 1991. And it was at that moment that an eyewitness filmed from his balcony and shared it with the news, that the video really became a catalyzer for people coming out in the streets, a lot of national and international conversations about systemic racism and policing in the U.S. and it led to a lot of movements and actions around that. So the idea was really, “what can happen if we give people cameras?” So twenty-five years ago we were actually sending people cameras and training them how to strategically use video for advocacy purposes. And in 2011, with the Arab Spring, Occupy, and a lot of resistance movements around the world – we shifted our tactics, recognizing that people will have access to video [equipment] and won’t spend two weeks to go through a methodology or training. So we started to make easy-to-share tips for documenting […] trying to make it easier and accessible. Because even if we saw tons and tons of video material, not all of that reached the right places, actually leading to justice and accountability. Sometimes it’s just a matter of not being able to tell where the video was shot, rendering it unusable in a courtroom […]. So we would provide tips like, “document a street” or “document a landmark.”
24-03-17: Meeting “Carlos”

Founder of a copwatch organization in New York.
Conducted in the Bronx, NYC.

I see three plainclothes males running out of a car real fast, so I was like, they have to be police. They started to proceed towards a male standing… and I pulled out my video recording camera and started recording quick. And I started walking towards the Pattison housing, which is in Bronx. I documented everything […]. The officers then approached me, we exchanged words. I put away my video cameras so that they’d think, like you know, that there’s nothing recording – sometimes when they see you do that, they would act like who they really are. One of them gave me a direct order to “get out of here.” I replied: “Did I break the law? I ain’t going nowhere if I ain’t break no law.” And so he said: “Ok, motherfucker, now you’re going to jail.” And they locked me up […]. As soon as I entered the precinct, I heard officers calling my name. Like a big celebration, like a prize party for me […]. They searched me and got to my two-way receiver radio, my walkie-talkie which I use to communicate with other copwatchers. So he said: “Oh, this is a scanner and a transmit. My man, you’re going down, you’re a felon now.” Then they all started clapping and yelling again, like “we got this motherfucker.”

Now I know I got a target in my back. They want to remove me from the streets. They see me as a threat to their way of operating, their broken windows policing, and the aggressiveness they bring to communities of colors.

How did it, copwatching, start out for you?
The beginning was really scary. I was afraid, I didn’t wanna get locked up. After doing it awhile, I became more aggressive and ended up locked-up a few times – they falsified charges against me. And I ended up better and better, more savvy with technology to a point when now I can protect myself. So if police try to do something, there will be something that could tell the story of what really happened.

We also gather a lot of intel on police. And the police know that when we’re at the rallies, we are there gathering intel, documenting police – recording their faces into a database we are creating, in case something happens, someone gets assaulted, we have over 200 officers working the precinct – their name, their badge, and the image of how they look like. So if somebody doesn’t know the name, but knows how they look like, they can pick them out.

So we have become a rivalry to the police, it’s like they have competition. It’s only, we don’t have the budget they have. But they know one thing that they don’t have, and that is the community.
We have the community behind us, and the police sees that, and it makes them feel like “what the hell? we are supposed to be the ones, not them.” So it shows them that whatever they think they’re doing right, they’re not doing right [...].

Police are seeing that many of us are getting really technology savvy and very well in tune with technology to protect ourselves with. So now, after I’ve released this audio, police officers now will probably think “this guy right here, he’s like a walking technology device.” That’s what it’s all about; let’em know that if they come for us, we’re gonna be prepared too. We’re gonna fight back. Not fight back physically, but fight back with technology.

[The organization “Carlos” is part of] models their approach on what the Black Panthers did in the seventies – and the Young Lords [a Puerto Rican nationalist group]. The Black Panthers did go ‘round with shotguns and guns, but today we can’t do that, so what we do, we use video cameras just as they had shotguns and we point it at them as threatening as they did back then. Back then you could’ve shot bullets out, or projectiles, now we shoot images.
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