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<center>*Black Luminosity in the Age of Social Media*: Artist's Statement</center>

This zine was inspired by an interaction I had on Facebook last spring in the days following the murder of George Floyd. In my experience, every time a Black person is murdered and there is video evidence of it, it blows up all over every social media platform imaginable. A year ago, I was somewhat familiar with concepts like "trauma porn" and was aware enough to know that something didn't sit right with me when I saw my Facebook friends sharing the video of Floyd gasping his last words, but the times that I did attempt to intervene and ask people to reconsider their posts, it didn't amount to much (other than me getting chewed out then blocked).

I started this project before the one-year anniversary of COVID-19 lockdowns and the shootings in Atlanta, which was my first experience witnessing the Internet react to racialized violence for my racialized category. It was a very sobering experience to be on the side of the traumatized. This recent experience, while exhausting, has given me more personal insight into the topic of "violence and representation in a digital era". I created this zine as a sort of public service announcement/ guide to posting images or videos of graphic, racialized violence on social media. Telling people what to do on social media typically does not go over well, so my approach to this project was not to tell people what to think or to do (other than use content warnings), but rather to give them something to think about. My goal is to share this zine on my social media accounts, maybe even make physical copies, and to have it circulate perhaps even more widely than my immediate social network. Ultimately, I hope that this zine gets those who

encounter it to reconsider the ways in which they engage with violent and racist content on social media.

Methods and Methodology

I attempted to construct *Black Luminosity in the Age of Social Media* following Zimmerman and De Michiel's discussion of open space. While the text itself may be complete, it asks questions of its readers; it is finished but it is not closed. It leaves room for "dialogue about contentious issues" (36). I would like to think that it also "confronts specific social issues" without "asserting a position dogmatically" (39), as I specifically write that "I don't have a straight answer for this topic". If this project does end up in some far-off reaches of the Internet, it is my hope that it can generate discussions on threads, comments sections, and in real life encounters among friends.

I followed the standard folded 8.5 x 11 paper zine format for *Black Luminosity in the Age of Social Media*. Despite being a fairly technologically savvy person, I find that using physical paper, scissors, a glue stick, pencils, pens, highlighter, and pencil crayons allows me to be very deliberate and precise in my artmaking. I also chose a physical medium for this zine to stand in contrast to the virtual context that it discusses. I chose to invoke familiar social media and digital communication aesthetics in my illustrations to draw attention to them and put a kitschy spin on what has become quotidian. For example, the cover page of this project mimics an iMessage chat, I use a Tweet as a footnote, and I use the format of an Instagram post in a flowchart.

Alienating the familiar to provide room for understanding and social critique in this way is a Brechtian, postmodern move on my part, especially considering the subject matter of social narratives and fragmentation. *Black Luminosity in the Age of Social Media* asks its readers to consider how social media posts about instances of structural violence fragment and obscure

something that is really "a piece of history" (Brecht 363). This zine is aligned with epic theatre as Brecht explains it, as its primary concern is a practical one of getting people to alter their behaviors on social media (363). My hope is that readers of my zine are faced with the revelations that "I'd never have thought it… it's got to stop…" (363).

Black Luminosity in the Age of Social Media is postmodern in that it is not aligned with any master narrative (Jameson 367). As mentioned earlier, it does not even come to a final conclusion. It recognizes the contradictory importance of both the value of bystander video of police violence, and the problems that such videos raise. At the same time, it problematizes the postmodern and capitalistic trend of social media's compartmentalization events that do not exist in vacuums of reality (Jameson 370-71).

The imperfect qualities of this zine serve to remind readers that while I am making informed suggestions, I am not the final authority on violence and representations on social media. This artistic choice is in line with performative documentary's tenet of honesty (Bruzzi 155). Similarly to how performative documentary directors play a persona in their films, I adopt my social media aliases to point to myself as the author of this work (Bruzzi 171). The unpolished aesthetic (including pencil marks, uneven penmanship, and smudges) of *Black Luminosity in the Age of Social Media* is a way for me to ensure that the human behind the project is still visible in the final product – something that is often missing in the digital era. I recognize that this zine does a fair bit of editing and fragmentation, but I at least attempted to do this in an obvious way, for example on the page about content warnings where I have cut out part of a Facebook comment that I made that was not relevant to this zine. The aesthetic choices in *Black Luminosity in the Age of Social Media* serve to remind my readers that this zine is ultimately something that someone (Melissa Plisic) put together.

Discussion

Black Luminosity in the Age of Social Media is my critical intervention into routinized social media use that perpetuates the objectification of Black bodies; it calls into question taken-for-granted and (what I hope are) well-intentioned practices of sharing graphic imagery of anti-Black violence and police brutality. For the purposes of this discussion and for the sake of clarity, I will go through my zine in chronological order. Admittedly, disentangling my academic sources from each other is quite difficult because I had to condense and consolidate so much to fit on to an 8.5 x 11-inch paper. The main through-lines of *Black Luminosity in the Age of Social Media*, however, come from Mirzoeff's "hooded archive" and Browne's "black luminosity", which complement each other in a way that problematizes the ubiquity of anti-Black violence on the Internet.

First Spread: Introduction/ Empty Empathy and Secondary Trauma

I begin this zine by directly addressing my readers. I give them the benefit of the doubt by assuming that they are oriented towards social justice and care about issues of race (given that they were interested enough to pick up or click on the zine, I think that this is a justified assumption). Critiquing the term "BIPOC" is not central to *Black Luminosity in the Age of Social Media*, however, I included it because I think that it is another concept that has been largely taken up in the digital world without enough reflection. This critique is based on Khan's article "The South Matters – for the South", which points out that beyond the West, "[people] are all coloured". It is important for me to acknowledge this limitation and the positionality of this zine because I do not have the authority to make claims beyond the context that I am situated in, and I actively try to work against universalisms (à la postmodernism).

The postmodern aesthetic of my zine has political value, as seen on my first spread. I will briefly return to Jameson's contentions about fragmentation under late-stage capitalism, for in this context they are related to Kaplan's discussion of empty empathy and secondary trauma. The graph I have illustrated on this page is my visualization of her argument that for the Iraq war, "media coverage aroused only 'empty' empathy… through its practice of providing fragmented images of individual pain" (94). While the context of my zine is different than her chapter's, her argument still holds true. My flow chart has two results: empty empathy and secondary trauma. I have attempted to illustrate that on one hand, secondary trauma and empty empathy stand in opposition to each other. On the other, the interplay of these concepts is mediated by news and social media. I put images of Facebook's care reaction around "empty empathy" to signify the superficial affects that are aroused by "images of suffering provided without any context or background knowledge" (93). I chose not to use Kaplan's definition of secondary or vicarious trauma, as hers are grounded in psychology. I wanted to give my own interpretation of the term as it pertains to the context of violent representations on social media; my explanation is based on my own experiences of exposure to the news cycle being flooded with anti-Asian violence, debates, and excuses for perpetrators of said violence. Before I move on from this section, I want to note that I use the words "fragments" and "obscures" in their verb form rather than as adjectives because I want to bring attention to how people's actions, even digitally, have consequences.

Second Spread: Photography, Archives, and Surveillance

In the second spread of *Black Luminosity in the Age of Social Media* I bring together Mirzoeff, Browne, and Stalcup and Hahn to provide context and build up to my question for readers: Do bystander videos induce the gaze of the lynch mob? I admit that this spread is fairly

wordy, which I typically try to avoid in visual media, but I could not find a way around it in this case. While I assume the good intentions of my audience, I cannot assume that they have read critical theory or scholarly articles about power and knowledge and representational practices, so more definitions and elaborations are included here. I start by including Mirzoeff's main contention in "The Shadow and the Substance" that photography, as a form of technology, has been used to mediate racial boundaries throughout American history (111). He argues that the "indexical" nature of the photograph informs ideas about race, and that a "shadow archive" of representations influences how viewers perceive photographic subjects (111-12). The "hooded archive" of lynching photography is of utmost importance to my point that viral spectacularization of anti-Black violence on social media is problematic.

Next, I categorize bystander cell phone videos as a type of "sousveillance" based on Stalcup and Hahn's article (487). I do not want to discount the value that these videos have when they have the power to verify that injustice has indeed been done, so here I acknowledge their importance. This, I believe, is the point where many social media users act on their feelings of outrage towards the situation, embodying empty empathy, and share or re-share violent representations without critical thought. In an attempt to get my readers to engage with this subject meaningfully, and because I do not have a clear answer to this issue, I restate the context of the "historical-photographic continuum" that the hooded archive is part of then ask my question (the language of which I have borrowed from Browne). There is no conclusion to this section, as the matter is inconclusive.

Spread Three: Black Luminosity/ Content Warnings

Citations do not work the same ways in zines as they do in more academic texts, so I opted to go with speech bubbles here to make it clear that I am directly quoting Simone Browne

(546, 545). This spread and the previous one are backwards in the sense that the evidence that would support the question I ended the previous section with comes after it. I did this on purpose so that if my readers did not entertain the possibility that representations of anti-Black violence are harmful, this section would hopefully push them towards that speculation. Even if my readers to not end up putting the puzzle pieces that I have given them together, I think that Black luminosity is something that they should still be aware of. I included a picture of Simone Browne on this spread because it is important for my readers to know that I am drawing off of a Black scholar to speak on issues that pertain to Black experiences and history. Her question at the bottom of the page serves as a follow-up to the one I posed on the previous spread; I am once again asking my readers to reflect on how things that they have shared operate within a context that reaches back into the past, and to make those connections for themselves.

The second page of this spread is another place where I attempt to look at multiple sides of this situation. I admit that there are times when posting images or videos of anti-Black violence may be important for bearing witness to the realities of the world that we live in, but again, that does not necessitate posting with reckless abandon. Despite this being a small section of *Black Luminosity in the Age of Social Media*, I hope that if my readers take anything away from this zine it is the importance of content warnings. The comment of mine that I cut and glued into this section is from a thread on Facebook where my content warning for anti-Asian violence was taken to mean something else and I had to explain the purpose of content/ trigger warnings – this instance also served to cement my position that social media is not the best place for activism for me. That being said, I recognize that digital activism is important in some contexts. I think (and hope) that my ambivalence towards digital activism comes through in my zine.

Back Cover: Counter-Archives

As I do in real life discussions, I like to end my zines on a lighter note. There is already enough going on for people to feel bad about, so I do not want *Black Luminosity in the Age of Social Media* to leave people feeling hopeless or helpless – especially given the lack of conclusion that I offer. I return to Mirzoeff here to present an alternative to violent representations that still get at issues such as anti-Black racism (123). I included a rather cheesy quote that was included in Zimmerman and De Michiel's chapter because, honestly, I am not above including cheesy quotes in my zines (40). I provided the Instagram handles of two accounts that I think do an excellent job of conveying information about racially motivated violence without doing the damage that Browne is concerned with. While these artists may not consider themselves "counter-archivists", I label them as such because they do fit Mirzoeff's description of counter-archival work (123-126).

Final Thoughts

This is normally where the conclusion of a paper would come, but as I have explained, I do not have one. From the beginning, this zine was meant to be both argumentative and exploratory. The arguments that I include in *Black Luminosity in the Age of Social Media* are brief and specific. Ultimately it is up to my readers to come to their own in/conclusions about questions of violent representations on social media, and all I can hope for is that my zine gives them something to think about.

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