



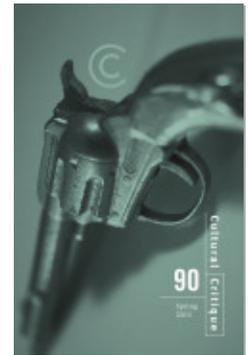
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Street/Crime: From Rodney King's Beating to Michael
Brown's Shooting

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STREET/CRIME

FROM RODNEY KING'S BEATING TO MICHAEL BROWN'S SHOOTING

Paula Rabinowitz

The deadline for this essay came a few days before the decision of the grand jury convened to determine whether Ferguson, Missouri, police officer Darren Wilson would be charged in the August 9, 2014, killing of Michael Brown, the unarmed teenager stopped in midday while walking in the street with a friend. My comments cannot address what happened during the confrontation that left another young African American man dead in a pool of his blood on a street. It is the fact of his place, his placement lying on a street, brought down by police, and the subsequent images, not of this scene, but of highly militarized police out in force to quell violence from the ensuing street protest demonstrations that prompt my remarks.

Twenty years ago, I published my book *They Must Be Represented: The Politics of Documentary* with a concluding chapter on the eighty-one-second home videotape made by George Holliday on March 3, 1991, of the beating Rodney King endured by four Los Angeles policemen. This visual document of police brutality by white officers against an unarmed black man, played over and over on television news stations after Mr. Holliday released the tape to CNN and NBC, was considered the primary piece of evidence against the defendants in the criminal trial against the officers, *California v. Powell, Wind, Briseno and Koons*. Its prima facie reality—fifty-two baton swings hitting a prone man in full view along the side of a street—seemed self-evident: the cops were guilty, this being only the latest in the long history of the militarized racial violence perpetrated by the LAPD against the city's black and Latino citizens. However, this slice of video vérité ultimately served to acquit the officers, sparking the 1992 L.A. uprising, after defense attorneys surgically dissected the tape, frame by frame, reinscribing each instant with a narrative judging Mr. King as the perpetrator



Figure 1. Still from George Holliday video of Rodney King's beating by five police officers (March 3, 1991). Copyright George Holliday, courtesy of Roby Massarotto.

of violence—his “leg is cocked” and his “arm is triggered”—while the officers, fearing for their lives, benignly administer “strokes” to his “bear-like” body.¹

In use since the 1960s, by 1991 portable video cameras were affordable enough to alter the public's relationship to cinema and power; anyone could arrive on the scene with a videotape recorder (as in Steven Soderbergh's 1989 *Sex, Lies, and Videotape*) and disrupt relations—be they sexual or racial. All of this is prehistoric compared to the endless recording made possible by smart phones and the easy upload and dissemination of images onto the Internet. So it is somewhat surprising to learn that no reliable eyewitness—much less documentary record—of the encounter between Darren Wilson and Michael Brown has appeared. What we do have, thanks to the immersive photojournalism of the *New York Times's* Whitney Clinton and many others, are images of the confrontations that occurred regularly between demonstrators and police beginning on the day of Mr. Brown's death. With his body left in plain view on the street for hours in the hot summer sun, and word of his shooting spreading widely throughout Ferguson, demonstrators gathered on West Florissant Avenue. The nightly protests propelled the police force of fifty-four officers (of whom fifty are white) to deploy armed vehicles circled by officers outfitted in military-style

desert fatigues, complete with automatic rifles, helmets, and combat boots, presenting a vision of a St. Louis suburb as an outpost of Baghdad. In one of these page-one Associated Press photographs, a young woman, in white T-shirt and jeans, stands with her back to the line formed by police guarding their local MRAP (mine-resistant ambush-protected) vehicle (acquired through the grants from the Departments of Homeland Security and Justice or perhaps given free directly from the Pentagon). In one hand, she holds her pink sunglasses and a sign reading, "Excuse me. We need answers for Michael Brown Jr." Her mouth is open, caught in the middle of chanting, facing away from the police into the camera. Her other arm is outstretched, torquing behind her; she's got her white iPhone out, turned toward the police lined up behind her.

Within days of these scenes, reminiscent (with the exception of cell phones) of decades of militarized police challenging African Americans protesting racism (from New York City Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia calling out the National Guard to Harlem in 1943; to Police Commissioner Eugene "Bull" Connor's German shepherd dogs and water hoses attacking civil rights marchers in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1963; to the burning of Detroit and Newark in 1968 after Martin Luther King's



Figure 2. A protester shouts as she moves away from a line of riot police in Ferguson, Missouri, on Wednesday, August 13, 2014 (AP Photo / St. Louis Post-Dispatch, J. B. Forbes).

assassination; to the 1992 Los Angeles “riots” after the acquittal of Michael Powell and his co-defendants), the Ferguson Police Department did release videotaped images of Michael Brown . . . again part of the now almost scripted response since George Holliday grabbed his camera in 1991. What was shown was the grainy surveillance images of a security camera, a ubiquitous televised feed since the 1970s bank robbery footage of Patty Hearst with beret and weapon, from the doorway of the Ferguson Market and Liquor Store, where, minutes before his killing, Michael Brown—wearing a St. Louis Cardinals’ baseball cap, white T-shirt, shorts, and sneakers—appears to loom over the shopkeeper, confronting him about the handful of candy or chips or cigars he has obviously grabbed. Someone else is already exiting the store, appearing behind Mr. Brown, who seems to linger in a dispute with the store clerk. The teenager’s size menaces; like Rodney King, one might describe him as “buffed out.” He’s a black man, enough said.

A young man, African American, deemed criminal (Rodney King was an ex-con; Michael Brown allegedly a thief) after the fact, ends up face down on a street—put there by the violence of police, in full view of those who happen to live nearby. This placement of the brutalized black male body in public view, streetside, is an unbearable trace of racism’s dehumanization and its visual record. Rodney King’s beating occurred after police chased his car through L.A.; Michael Brown’s death happened when a police officer riding in his car stopped two boys walking in the middle of a suburban cul-de-sac. These events sparked militarized confrontations between mostly white police forces and mostly black citizens resisting the failures of police to serve and protect. They inevitably lead to surprise by a complacent nation at this resistance to the criminalization of blackness. More confrontations will surely occur; Ferguson was thus poised for the grand jury’s verdict. More images will sear themselves onto our collective memory; more answers will be sought. Excuse me.

CODA

To read the testimony of Darren Wilson to the grand jury is to see how the methods of the defense in *California v. Powell et al.* may have served as a template for how to exonerate a white police officer when he is

accused of violence against a black man. Darren Wilson described Michael Brown as looking “like a demon” and commented that he “felt like a five-year-old holding on to Hulk Hogan.”² An armed officer, vulnerable. An angry teenager, dead. America.

Paula Rabinowitz is professor of English at the University of Minnesota. Her recent books include *American Pulp: How Paperbacks Brought Modernism to Main Street* (2014) and the four-volume co-edited series *Habits of Being* (Minnesota, 2011–15). She is editor-in-chief of the *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Literature*.

Notes

1. See the author’s “Video *Vérité*: Rodney King in the City of Angels of History,” in *They Must Be Represented: The Politics of Documentary* (New York: Verso, 1994), 21.

2. “Ferguson Documents: Officer Darren Wilson’s Testimony,” <http://www.npr.org/blogs/thetwo-way/2014/11/25/366519644/ferguson-docs-officer-darren-wilsons-testimony>.