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2020

# Black Resistance: Interpretive Agency Enacted Against Mutable Violence

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**BLACK RESISTANCE:  
INTERPRETIVE AGENCY ENACTED AGAINST MUTABLE VIOLENCE**

by  
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**SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE  
DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS**

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**DECEMBER 13, 2019**

*For Amma, Nana, and Maya*

## INTRODUCTION

This paper begins with the foundational understanding that the atrocity of slavery solidified a hierarchical understanding of power and surveillance in American race relations. Enslaved black bodies were seen and used as literal tools to sustain the white economy through forced labour and coerced white-centered productivity. For example, the prosperity of the rapidly growing American economy heavily constituted of slaves picking and processing cotton. White economy was also boosted through the implementation of taxes in the transatlantic slave trade, creating a market by attaching monetary value to the projected productivity of an enslaved person. Black bodies were subjected to extreme violence as a consequence of demanded physical and emotional labour. This cemented a derogatory value to black bodies in a white-mandated society. Labour that was not completed at the level and rate of a white master's mandate was consequently punished at the master's judgement. Therefore, slave labor, slave ownership, and the slave's being perpetuated a calculated white supremacist ideal as black existence was demanded to produce the foundation for white 'American' success. Methods of claimed 'correctional punishment' were applied through spectacles of abhorrent violence to reaffirm white power and control over black livelihood. The preservation of white access to the right of performing acts of violence instigated the white psyche to define their being within the consciousness of anti-blackness. The narrative around racial hierarchy is then understood as a twofold agency disparity between an active aggressor and a passive victim. As the violence of slavery was so extreme and totalizing as to be influential in the race-making institution of slavery, it is commonly understood that black victimhood lies in the casing of passivity. However, this paper aims to reveal the mediums and methods of black agency that persisted against the violence and brutality of an anti-black society.

Agency is created through interpretation. Spaces of abuse, trauma, and torture commonly hold interactions between a perpetrator and a victim. The severity of the violence of slavery mandated a racial hierarchy that seemingly stripped black bodies of autonomy. However, this text aims to address how black resistance formulated and persisted under such cruel circumstance. Originating in the institution of slavery, Frederick Douglass, in *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, describes the experience and observation of racial violence. The physical and mental brutality slaves faced enforced a regulation of blackness by whiteness. Douglass however, emphasizes that his agency was not entirely stripped due to his recategorization of white action. Such reevaluation creates space for black agency to reformulate and claim language that creates black autonomy. The act of reinterpretation is a form of resistance in Douglass' eyes. I agree with his framework of definance; however, I believe Douglass' text is limited in addressing the white-derived meaning of racial violence. I encourage a perspective that frames black agency persisting under trauma. However, I insist on a maintaining a multi-faceted interperetation of such violence. This lens not only acknowledges the mutating forms and various facets of violence, but also the correlated morphing attacks on black agency. Physical violence, for example, was not only used as a physical threat, but also for identity formation, agency re-evaluation, and pleasure as surplus aspects of cruelty. White pleasure, as hinted in Douglass' narration of identity comprehension, can be more holistically understood as a facet and outcome of violence through spectacle lynchings. I turn to Grace Hale's *Deadly Amusements* to further develop the aspect of white pleasure in anti-black brutality as it encourages a new form of violence that inherently supports a new realm of black agency.

Douglass' text presents a foundation of blackness as a tool for white America, therefore I include Hale to persevere the claim of black commodification for white pleasure as a category of violence. Hale's text categorizes spectacle lynching as a blatant form of entertainment and business for white communities nationwide. Black resistance is therefore nearly stripped as the visual symbol of a lifeless black body cements the infatuation of an anti-black society. Hale explores white pleasure motivating, executing, and savoring black destruction. Black pain is therefore a commodity to quench the white craving of racial dominance. I include the severity of spectacle lynching as the inclusion of surveillance is fundamental in prescribing agency for black folks. Hale presents an undeniable integration between white pleasure, black commodification, and totalizing surveillance. These renovated facets of violence step beyond of the insitution of slavery, yet hold no reduction in brutality; the white visual engagement of black identity, particularly in the inherent lens of anti blackness, can therefore be categorized as violence.

As the application and categorization of violence began morphing, I assert black resistance remained accessible through modernized forms of agency. The extreme violence that spectacle lynching asserted against blackness ambushed black agency mercilessly. However, as the excitement of financial gain steered a marketing model around black suffering, surveillance as a tool of whiteness was inherently inclusive of the black experience. Ranging from the physical observation of a tortured black body, lynching advertisement media, or a keepsake of the brutality (such as a body part or a grotesque visual postcard), depictions of blackness through these lenses became a consistent system of subjection. Surveillance created a platform for black autonomy under any unknowing white radar. The medium of agency was interwoven in the medium of violence. Imagery presented by Martin Berger in his text *Seeing Through Race: A Reinterpretation of Civil Rights Photography* rediscovers black agency under this blatant, yet

renovated, practice of anti-blackness. I determine that as the liberal fallacies of progressive action for black rights take shape, Douglass' interpretive agency is combined with Sontag's pleasure and surveillance critique to maintain black resistance. Black beings utilized surveillance as a tool and reshaped the understanding of passivity and victimhood in relation to white-mandated violence. Visual texts that depict horror, protest, and citizenship all provide a platform of black agency under this text's claim. This restructuring exercises black agency.

This text proceeds to examine political, carceral, and Afro-pessimist narratives to display the resilience of black agency under reincarnated forms of violence. Interpretive agency as a tool of resilience persists over time and coordinates under the medium of violence perpetrated. Mark Golub's *Human Cartoons: White Supremacist Visual Strategies in Mississippi Citizens' Council Propaganda* elaborates on the reading of visual texts of blackness and how perception impacted political power. Golub's text acts a response to Berger and encourages clarity on black passivity. The narrative around racial innocence creates an ideal foundation to display how a white-centered society created political, judicial and carceral systems cemented in anti-blackness. Naomi Murakawa's *The First Civil Right* elaborates a system of carceral violence and how surveillance, law and power operate to maintain a racial hierarchy. Her work elucidates an assumption of stripped black autonomy alongside assumed white morality in liberal progressive efforts. The combination of Golub and Murakawa's claim broadens the categorization of violence and therefore encourage renovated paths for black interpretive agency. I conclude by addressing the counter claim to black agency through Frank Wilderson's application of Afro-pessimism. I agree with his initial claim of a global structure of anti-blackness; however, I assert a space for black agency through the endurance of racism. My framework disagrees with the lack of humanity Afro-pessimism imposes upon black existence, yet I include Wilderson's counter to

provide an alternate perspective on totalizing black subjectivity. This text aims to redefine forms of racial violence to elucidate the accessibility and application of black agency as black resistance.

## I.

In the 1845 text *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, Douglass presents his lived narrative as a slave alongside his ambition to gain freedom. His suffering and endurance of physical and emotional violence is persistent throughout the text. He describes the implementation of cruelty to teach and shape his understanding of his being. Through the daily assignments mandated by slave owners, the enforcement of regulation accredited to the white voice was as powerful as formal law to the black being. Enforcement of true slave value, purpose, and productivity was then superficially controlled by white mandate, though the attached punishment was excessively severe. The threat and eventual acts of violence against black bodies, if not subjectively considered obedient to white regulation, solidified white dominance. This created a formal classification of white ownership over black agency. Acts of aggression against black bodies were utilized for blatant punishment in consequence to dissatisfaction, white sexual taunting or pleasure, and confirmation in a racial hierarchy. White induced violence was essentially used to teach a slave what it meant to be a slave.

White-instigated violence at the expense of the brutalization of blackness shaped Douglass' overall understanding of violence and himself. Meaning assigned to violence was established and necessary for Douglass as it molded the comprehension of his identity. The meaning could come from the master's commands, as it was understood as the equivalent of law,

which in fact shaped the understanding of oneself in relation to their counterpart. He learned through experiencing and watching applications of such brutality, that identity formation is the intended instrument of the master. Violence was applied, therefore, in seeking race regulation and white pleasure. In fact, Douglass' first impression of slavery occurred through watching the whipping of Aunt Hester as he hid in a closet. Douglass noted the whipping as a "bloody transaction" as he recognized the systemic nature of the violence. Observation of this transactional regulation of cruelty presents the white-intended meaning of a slave for Douglass.

And yet, Douglass is able to process this violence through the recategorization of such brutality in an attempt to formulate some inclusion of justice. Slave deaths, therefore are defined as 'murders' over 'killings' in Douglass' eyes. This form of active categorization is an effort to create a new meaning and mandate regulation for accountability and exposure of white wrongdoings. The late Robert Cover defines this process as "jurisgenesis", or the creation of legal meaning, to speak such regulation (or in this case categorization) into existence. Defining violence with a vocabulary that demands white accountability centers attention around the lived black reality of persistent abuse and trauma. Through the creation of the memoir text itself, Douglass creates an alternative and accessible form of narration that depicts and classifies a wrongness in and around the experiences of slavery. This active engagement around classification centered around black suffering gives a space for Douglass to recognize that he is a slave in form and not a slave in fact.

This distinction of body and consciousness is key to reevaluate the relationship anti-blackness has with violence. Physical violence against black bodies is perpetually categorized as the prominent 'wrong' under slavery. I encourage the inclusion of attack on the psychological

and mental being as it is the black psyche reinterpreting trauma to maintain agency. Labour is not only based in physicality. The emotional, spiritual, and mental labour demanded of slaves only increased the potential excuse for white masters to act in violently when their expectations were not met. Punishments of all violent degrees were assigned to work that demanded differing forms of labour. This created a 'justification' to varying forms of violence against many identities of black bodies, as all forms of black labour and black being were accessible to white scrutiny. For example, assigned stereotypical gendered labour, such as the child care demanded of black women in particular, was met with equal or increased intensity of punishment as black men working in the fields. In Douglass's text, he narrates the killing of a young black girl by her 'master' Mrs. Hicks. The nameless girl was instructed to tend to Mrs. Hicks' baby in the night, but fell asleep and reacted slowly when the child cried. Mrs. Hicks was also in the room and took it upon herself to apply the self-deemed necessary punishment before caring for the crying baby. She proceeded to use an oak stick to break the young enslaved girl's nose and breastbone, ending her life. Care labour was, therefore, an additional form of demanded work black women in particular had to perform with the overlying threat of physical violence. I will take this space to additionally recognize that black women were additionally working in the fields alongside black men and children. Black women, however, were also assigned the female-associated role of white childcare in which horrid punishments were still applicable. This example emphasizes that all forms of labour received punishment to excruciating degrees. Therefore, the true wrongness of the act was cemented in the black identity, as the 'job poorly done' reasoning was merely a mask to perpetuate hierarchical structures of race.

The expansion of subcategories of violence therefore increases, as the black identity is vulnerable to attack by sheer existence. White mandate of black action can therefore be classified

as violence. I aim to restructure the definition of violence throughout this text to present mediums of black interpretive agency existing under such brutality. The psyche toll that ownership, torture, and limited autonomy slaves faced shaped an immense impact in the understanding of blackness in contrast to whiteness. Douglass speaks to this when watching Aunt Hester suffer. Her beating not only distinguished the 'punisher' and the 'punished', but also who those titles adhered to and his immediate allocation under the latter. Witnessing that level of abuse allowed the definition of slavehood, and therefore the self, to formulate. In the latter chapters of his text, Douglass speaks of his education. As he increased engagement with literature, the action of reading becomes his tool of resistance. The physicality of resistive violence is not to be ignored, yet the mental development of self-identity and being is essential for such tangible forms of resistance to occur. Understanding violence to define a variety of sub-realms benefits the holistic application in the maintenance of racial hierarchies. The term violence defines a brutality that is simultaneously a form of control by an actor and a teaching mechanism of oneself for a survivor. This reevaluates violence to be a larger being of influence than a mere twofold injustice.

The use of violence, particularly in the context of slavery, allowed the cementation of a racial hierarchy to be created, practiced, and monitored. The white access to violence in the was the token that shaped the understanding of blackness to the slave. The being that adopts the narrative of dominance, therefore, supposedly has the power to create some form of intended meaning of the interaction. Meaning, however, was formed on both ends as discussed by Douglass, through the respective narratives of a master and a slave. It is commonly understood that violence against black bodies was for the sole intention of regulating other black beings. Observing the violent punishments endured by other slaves was understood as an example and

warning for those performing similarly. This created a spectacle of violence against black bodies regulated by white-deemed punishment. The meaning of violence, therefore, not only worked in relation to blackness, but additionally created a realm of moralistic whiteness. Application of punishment was followed out by those who came up with the punishment. Therefore, in the understanding of Cover's jurisgenesis, white-deemed regulation of black folks became the equivalent of law, and henceforth order. White creation of justice was applied through the policing and punishing of black bodies. The social narrative around blackness is additionally crucial to incorporate in this claim. The application and justification of repulsive slave treatment is reliant on severely racist beliefs against black people. The association of blackness to be the opposition of moral, pure, and rightful whiteness was formulated as a result of these systems. Criminalization of blackness was therefore rooted in the assumed morality of whiteness. This foundation of trust in white reasoning to assess the productivity and safety of society became the primary justification for the surveillance and monitoring of black people. Systems of power, mandated by white thought and productivity, reinforced systems that once again utilized blackness to the appeal of white America. The ramifications of creating such a stark 'other' continued to seep through social and political change.

In fact, the Emancipation Proclamation, a historically esteemed document known to represent strides toward equality, has a historically racially charged context that commonly is overlooked. Lincoln produced the Emancipation Proclamation as a military measure through his presidential powers as Congress did not vote on it. Without a doubt, the proclamation benefitted military effort, as some free slaves helped the Union forces. Additionally, as the South lost its slaves, the economies of the southern states were undermined. A common misconception of the emancipation of slavery is rather reliant on the morality of the situation. But in fact, the

disapproval of slavery was for the support of the Union rather than access to equality for black folks. Recognizing the celebrated Emancipation Proclamation as another effort to utilize black lives and bodies as tools for white American pleasure clarified the morphing shield progressive America molded around black agency as it continued to be shaped by white mandate. Such political scheming can be classified as a facet of abuse of black value and livelihood. This action set an institutional precedent for black bodies to be tools for a white America that was ironically being celebrated for moralistic advancement. This lens creates an understanding that trust in white morality inherently accepts white surveillance, policing, and punishment.

## II.

Following emancipation of slaves and the American Civil War in the late 1800s, lynchings in the United States rose as a method of extrajudicial action. This predominantly fatal form of taunting and torture were justified to white crowds on the mere basis of a victim's blackness. As analysed through Douglass' text, white understanding and being shaped the application of law and order particularly against black folks. This contrasts the claim that white morality and good intention created the gradual shift to equality for black rights. I encourage the perspective that reveals white indulgence in violence against black bodies to classify surveillance as a form of violence. After slavery, white observation of brutality against black bodies came in the form of spectacle lynchings. The justification of such atrocious behaviour came through the racist social analysis of the freed slave. The black being, to the white American population, was not one worthy of gaining or achieving a level of equal authority. Emancipation from slavery was a disruption to the white narrative of blackness as it contrasted the malicious monitoring and

punishing of black bodies as practiced in the institution of slavery. Lynching spread this beyond a master-slave dynamic.

Though a slave's labour was utilized by a communal white population, the punishment and violence faced by a black body was commonly in a concentrated interaction with a minimal white audience. I want to clarify that private enactments of white justice did not halt. It was common, in fact, for small groups of white men to go out at night to capture, torture, and kill black victims. Their justification would range from sending a threatening warning sign to enacting punishment for fabricated crimes encouraged through a social declaration of black criminality. Black women were additionally raped and assaulted in private settings by white men as a method of imposing social hierarchy and agency control. This was not new. What reeked of modernity was the power lynching had to transform racial violence in structuring an impact on southern economy and culture. This form of "ritualized violence" became embedded in white economics and identity (Hale). In the early 1890s lynchings, as a method of violence, began to spread with the nation's technological advances. Lynchers had access to nationwide transportation, observers came equipped with cameras, and established radio and/or newspaper offices profited by publicizing the time and location of such events. This created a celebratory culture that legitimized a surveillance system around the torture of black bodies. Increasing white spectator populations validated not only the action, but additionally the power dynamic it encouraged. What once was a private form of 'teaching' or 'justice' against black slaves, morphed into a modern spectacle to enforce and reinforce a racial hierarchy. Spectacle lynchings created a system of communal white engagement through brutality against black autonomy, simultaneously solidifying productivity in whiteness.

In the text *Deadly Amusements*, Grace Elizabeth Hale speaks to the level of surveillance that existed around the lynching of black victims. Justification of such horrid behavior reveals roots from the dehumanization of black bodies from slavery. White voices and demands shaped the understanding of law and order especially in regard to associating blackness with criminality. Therefore, white populations found limited guilt in taking such violent alternatives to formal law when deeming black men, in particular, worthy of punishment. I additionally stress that formal law was not necessarily reflective of equal standing or procedure to black folks at the time. I encourage the perspective that punishment in the form of lynching was not only used as a threat to other black people, but also an example that white morality for black equality was fundamentally lacking. Hale credits the New South in modernizing and perfecting violence as a form of leisure in twentieth-century America through spectacle lynching. Black lynchings were, therefore, a scene of white amusement, celebration, and entertainment.

Hale speaks to the 1899 lynching of Sam Hose as the initial step of creating a horrifying pattern away from isolated events of brutality. Hose's lynching was an event advertised across newspapers and other local and regional media. This method of garnering attention around his murder established a sensationalized pattern which would gain validity throughout the early 1900s. Marketing, publicizing, and reporting spectacle lynchings became a predominant tasks of the news and communication fields in the United States. These systems were dedicated to creating a spectacle. Observation had become violence. However, the mob of white men dedicated to catching Hose were rarely categorized as villains in their interactions. The publications on lynching deemed the desire of white crowds to be motivating and moral as the criminality of black men was rarely unchallenged to the masses. When present, the effort to disrupt such narratives came from other black folks and a few brave radical and liberal whites.

Anti-lynching activists aimed to expose false narratives and justifications of the violence with confrontation of blatant immorality. However, once a lynching had occurred and their efforts to expose had been shared, this back and forth dialogue became an adopted part of spectacle lynchings. This created a space of disagreement with limited action as the culture of segregation and racial hierarchy was further solidified. Black men in particular were victims of white crowds assigning descriptors of blackness with beasts, savagery, and uncontrollable terror. These descriptors were additional tools to justify the taunting and increasing forms of surveillance black folks endured as a threat to lynching or other forms of racialized torture. Racially charged language of criminalization became acceptable to justify the monitoring and murders of black people with little to no evidence of a legitimate crime. The use of the papers in publicizing 'black crime' against white bodies, business, and power, transformed white populations as passive victims confirming the socially-assumed black aggressor. The racial symbolism each lynching produced was much larger than the single white individual who claimed to suffer injustice.

The systems which created white success from black suffering created heightened meaning behind each spectacle lynching that occurred. The inclusion and prioritization of the crowd in the process of unjustified yet demanded murders, is a key indication. This factor of observation enforces the necessity of white pleasure in the endurance of black pain. Each brutalized black body represented and further cemented white success in systems of racial power, social creation of law and order, and economic growth. The pattern of spectacle lynching not only indicated past success and promise on such horrid newspaper headlines promising black blood, but also demanded a narrative of white control over black agency. Whether the murders were a threat to other black people or a mere exercise of assumed white morality in opposition to black 'beasts', there was limited power in anti-lynching activists' efforts to expose the reality as

white racial power was not critiqued or undermined like blackness. This form of extrajudicial action transfers from the slavery-old understanding that the white voice can be treated as law and whiteness can be assumed to be order. In fact, regardless of how barbaric their actions got, white spectators were actively civilized by local and regional publications. The crowds were intentionally not categorized as ‘mobs’ and were consistently congratulated for maintaining order and decorum throughout the process. Public figures, such as governors, who were interviewed about the festival of it all, considered success in such vulgarity in relation to its distance from women and children. This feeds the assumption that: one, the black victim deserved such treatment, two, the protection of white women and children justify such horrid treatment, and finally, black men were the ultimate predator and threat against white communities.

The publications of lynchings utilized dehumanizing descriptors of blackness, rarely acknowledging the humanity of the victim. In fact, journalists went to an extreme of creating a superhuman aura around Hose, for example, as his courage and ability to endure such horror simultaneously categorized him as more and less than a man (Hale, 213). This claim additionally worked to the benefit of the mob determined to kill, as the stronger and more resistant the victim, the greater the glory of the crowd that participated in his murder. Regardless of extreme, this mimics the pattern of separation of blackness from whiteness. Whiteness held the power of morality, law, and agency, while blackness remained under hierarchical oppression as tools of labour, beasts, and economic gain for white America. Monetary value associated with spectacle lynching additionally created a market out of black suffering. The finances behind each lynching drew from transportation, shelter, sustenance, and even souvenirs. Hose’s lynching, for example, sold 1000 tickets on the Atlanta and West Point Railroad system, not including the 500 plus

stowaways eager to arrive as well. The fear of denial of fun encouraged crowds across the region and nationally to interaction with their coin in some way, shape, or form (Hale, 212). Souvenirs for example, came in the shape of postcards, images, and even keepsakes from the actual scene of murder. The inclusion of spectacle lynchings in this text is to track black commodification as an ongoing exercise for white success, as capitalist society demands such a transaction of human autonomy and agency.

White agency in spaces of brutality against black bodies is violence, as the application of whiteness in such interactions cements social and economic hierarchies of dominance. This is emphasized in the form of keepsakes taken from sites of spectacle lynchings. Souvenirs from such ‘days of glory’, as categorized by papers, did not halt at firewood, ropes, or even the clothing worn by the victim. Very few publications acknowledged the “barbarism of trophy-gathering” as black body parts were considered prized possessions (Hale, 213). The timeline of death for the black man was never concrete as the cause of death could have been a consequence of the initial hanging, burning, beating, severing, or removal of internal organs as souvenirs. No part of the body or scene of the murder was left unclaimed. From ashes to fragments of a skull, a market of such keepsakes was developed to encourage their selling for monetary gain. Inflated prices were presented and met by those across the nation or those simply too physically far from the body at the lynching itself. Journals reporting on this market were known to “blur, if not obliterate the fine distinction between a ritual of civilization taming ‘savagery’ and actual savagery itself” (Hale, 214). This form of ownership of severed parts of a black body highlights the reduction in humanity black bodies were assigned. Therefore, the level of pride, celebration, and perceived justice accompanied the terrorization of blackness in the mental, social, and physical capacity.

The mementos kept from spectacle lynchings were not symbols of an individual identity, but symbols of power, hierarchy, and surveillance which whiteness wholly controlled. Severed knuckles, for example, shown off at a store keeper's windowsill, as described by W.E.B. Du Bois, can be categorized as a simultaneous societal trophy of accomplishment and a threat against blackness, rather than an indication of an individual vendetta. These visual trophies were intended to symbolize the dominance of whiteness by perpetuating a status of surveillance of blackness—even after death. White surveillance of black identity has existed since slavery. This white lens is the tool of a societal understanding of blackness as white power and control influenced the media, news and publications.

### III.

*The Scourged Back* (1863), for example, is an iconic image of a slave (known as Gordon today) who's back is turned to the camera to display horrid welts (Appendix, i). As his skin had not healed from past whippings, the image centers his blistering wounds beneath the side profile of his face overlooking his shoulder. Slave subjects in photographs and prints from that era center the brutality and abuse each being endured as the prominent factor of their identity. Ignoring black individuality to promote narratives of the 'black condition' with single subjects erases the understanding and acceptance of black agency. Individual identification of story, experience, and being, however, can allow white viewers to attach a level of humanity back to a historically presented tool in slavery. The naive and superficialities liberal understanding of the 'moral progression' is to believe white confrontation of black reality through photography or other visual mediums instigated efforts of change. However, as the market and interest for such

keepsakes existed, it is clear that exposing the severity of violence was not the sole protection or production of equality. Such tokens and symbols indicated that surveillance during and after death can act as a system of violence against blackness.

Susan Sontag is credited with the argument that though visual media is taught to be a tool of realization or education, the medium in fact “fostered an attitude of anti-intervention”. She declared Westerners to be curious about what they dread and the privilege that their distance afforded them. I raise the separation of physical distance from mental or psychological distance from tangible violence, as the masses of the white American psyche shaped their cherished whiteness through the social and psychological assault on blackness and therefore black beings. Sontag continues to expose the narratives taken from images to let northern whites formulate their own politics and claim a moral high as progressives, in comparison to the South, while simultaneously benefitting from racially oppressive systems. She credits images as creating superficial sympathy and minimal reform without touching underlying social inequalities that instigate and perpetuate anti-black violence. Additionally, the conceptualization of change to be the equal of white action overlooks black action and agency formulating at the time. Passivity was consistently assigned to blackness in the lens of white understandings of race relations. I utilize Sontag’s argument in this text to propose the relationship of blackness and surveillance to strengthen in this period. The Western fascination, as she puts it, encouraged a level of surveillance of blackness that insisted on a near totalizing subjectivity. I present this opportunity of black observance to formulate a space of black interpretive agency. White America’s ease of surveiling black livelihood created a stage, I argue, for black resistance.

Martin Berger's text, *Seeing Through Race: A Reinterpretation of Civil Rights Photography*, treats photographs equal to the original documents that shaped history. His claim encourages history to be read from images as they produce visual notations of violence in forms, moments, and spaces. It also attempts to understand them separate and in comparison with mainstream models, procedures, and tools. Visual understanding bolsters opportunity to analyze photographs in situations of violence and question it as well. This freedom enables the viewer to not merely see the subjects photographed as they are governed or categorized by the state, but also their role in interacting with violence. I present this interaction as black interpretive agency. Truth in aggression and truth in passivity can be revealed as such. Agents of violence, those who accept violence, and those who portray it as something else, are additionally revealed. Berger's text addresses violence that occurs in blatant and obvious forms in public, documentation, and broadcasting, and yet prevailed without being categorized as assault by most. To be specific, Berger presents the press with the responsibility of reproducing the division of labor between black and whites to cement whites as the 'active' participant and blacks as 'passive'.

He draws attention to the formulation of news and imagery by the white press in which differing race relations and roles were simply erased. Language is presented as a key indication of the limited scope editors, photographers, and reporters held, as the press rarely portrayed black people outside a criminal context. Berger is intentional about the distinction of Northern press and Southern press as the identity surrounding whiteness begins to cave on itself. Southern press was undoubtedly known for its historic opposition of black rights. Northern press were therefore assumed to be progressive in view of their historic reputation as supportive of the struggle. However, Berger presents the claim that the North and the South were in fact presenting a message of support on one hand, and maintaining a certain measure of the status

quo on the other. Reliance on some form of history was to cautiously and slowly nudge the South for change while actively denying the Northern white's interest in preservation and an embedded collaboration with the South. Deemed as a sort of Northern betrayal, Berger emphasizes the necessity of press to appropriately utilize their platform to create an honest dialogue about race relations, rather than defending black brutality with declarations of humanity. Berger aims to highlight black humanity. His faith in the media and in the power of seeing allows him to critique those who believe placing the gaze on violent images will have the power to heal American race relations. Instead, he encourages viewers to engage with images of black agency and power as a source of radical change. This is to combat the naivety I classify earlier in this paper, that revealing black horror to white people will instigate change for the better. The recognition of a black person as an active agent combats the passive, victim trope. This allows blackness to equate showing concern and well intention for their world, without being the subject of white mandate. As Berger claims, this will create a space for resolution in American race relations.

Berger speaks to the necessity of a civil partnership between whites and blacks to achieve change through the development of a civil language. By civil partnership, Berger indicates a missed opportunity with a new kind of white viewer to interact with photographs that depict black agency and to accurately view the subject as doing so. The civil language, therefore is shaped once the gaze of the image reveals that the subject of the photograph is not constrained to the government boundaries, labels, and constraints they are usually assigned. Instead, articulation of history is then formulated by those previously subject to such categorization *and* those reevaluating the same systems. Berger's text analyzes three forms of photographs. First are examples of horror seen in images of slave brutality and lynching. The second type depicts black

people as agents of protest and organizing. The third presents black citizenship, a category usually left out of civil rights movement photography—yet Berger insists holds instrumental effort to disrupting stigma around black subjects in white press. I categorize visual texts on black citizenship as the key stepping stone and example of agency coming from the system of surveillance created under spectacle lynchings. The reason for this array is to expose the allowance of belonging to be credited to those who create the boundaries, versus those who are criticized for not belonging.

The third type of image is represented by the photograph of Evans, James, and Freeman on the victory stand of the 400-meter race at the Olympics in 1968 (Appendix, ii), taken by Bill Eppridge, as well as the photograph of Carlos and Smith by John Dominis performing the Black Power salute after winning the 200-meter race in the same Olympic Games (Appendix, iii). Berger explains the importance between a lowered gaze and raised fists during the national anthem for the 200-meter runners, in comparison to the removal of berets with raised fists for the 400-meter runners. However, respect towards the anthem, a topic still widely discussed today, was only applied when the berets were removed by the 400-meter runners, regardless of their raised fists. The common understanding of the photos at the time goes like this: The 200-meter runners were disrespectful of the nations anthem on the podium with their lowered heads and deserved expulsion from the Olympic Village. Though the 400-meter runners additionally held raised fists, they stood with their ‘chins held high’ and celebrated in a “graceful” or even “exemplary” manner. Berger rejects this reading and provides an analysis that suggests that the runners who respected the anthem and in fact voluntarily removed their berets, are the ones who symbolize a threat to white ‘Americanness’ in comparison to those thrown out of the Olympic Village. The 400-meter runners, in their seeming compliance, created an equation of

Americanness equals blackness. In their behavior of celebrating in addition to raising their fists, they integrated the identity of blackness with the identity of an 'American' (Berger, 149). Their celebration was not for the nation, but for themselves as part of the nation. Berger prods at this overlook by white media as the 400-meter runners were celebrated in comparison to the 200-meter runners. He deciphers that the temporary acceptance exposes the power of black people to perform a level of belonging from which they only benefit in a limited manner. Americanness could momentarily align with blackness when approved or even overlooked by white America. Thus, blackness was never associated with the American identity, as black equality historically was marketed in the violation of white rights (Golub). The black Olympians respecting *their* American national anthem, portrays black citizenship as a two-fold concept never understood as one. Black men dressed in the American team jackets displaying "USA" across their backs contested the historic alignment of American and whiteness. By combining and adopting the symbols, the runners confronted whites with the recognition that citizenship is a form of togetherness and sharing, rather than a private possession which whites could grant minimal access to blackness in scenarios that satisfy them. This is the performance of interpretive black agency that surveillance of black bodies allowed access to.

Berger insists on revealing the truth of white action as capable of solving the active-white/passive-black power relation assumption, as he analyzes the variation of photographs produced in both the Northern and Southern white and black press. He speaks to the visible passivity of black protestors to be reevaluated as trained tactics of engaged black activists. He reminds his audience the influence of 'passive resistance' on black organizing, and to not confuse liberal white investment in black passivity with the reality of historic black trauma. Depicting organizing and active blacks as passive was convenient to the psychological needs of

liberal whites as it built off a concrete separation regime (Berger, 39). One could not be active or hold agency without the other lacking it. To combat this, Berger encourages the publicization of photos that did not survive the cut that fed the white psyche, as the action of displaying or consuming imagery that blatantly displays black agency reveals the truth of white action. Berger additionally clarifies the difference between the construction of blackness in the North and the Southern press. While the Northern white press seemingly bolstered black civil rights organizing, the black man was still portrayed as passive and unthreatening. In comparison, the Southern white press eagerly portrayed the same being as a threat to public safety and inherently criminal (Berger, 112). Framing of blackness in criminality and non-American (white) values has roots in historic race relations. Northern press' ability to create a realm of passivity around blackness yet again removed agency in black organizing and even catered to the Southern palate as images of 'threatening' blackness were avoided. Therefore, white discourse was locked into itself as black centered action and images did not exemplify immediate agents of change.

#### IV.

As asserted by Mark Golub in *Human Cartoons: White Supremacist Visual Strategies in Mississippi Citizens' Council Propaganda*, in reaction to Berger's text, Southern Segregations and Northern liberals did not share an understanding of black civil rights efforts. They did, however, agree that "passivity was the hallmark black virtue". Golub additionally speaks to the newspaper converted magazine, *The Citizen*, as it presented "realist parallels" between racist comics and falsely categorized 'news' photography to "transform representations of actual black bodies into human cartoons". To support his claim, Golub includes an analysis of Berger to credit visual representation of the civil rights struggle to both be preserving and limiting in

nature. Golub redirects Berger's critique through addressing visuals circulated by white southerners who opposed desegregation. As liberal Northerners perpetuated anti-black violence under a mask of solidarity, Golub's attention to Southern propaganda proves significantly beneficial as black rights were framed as an offense to white livelihood. North opposition to South action, therefore, was established in a "myth of southern exceptionalism" in which the narrative of a moralized history of American progressives separates the North from the labels of "backwards racist thugs, stuck in the past, and out of step with core American values". Regional categorization of racial innocence assigned responsibility for overt racism as a southern problem. This seemingly distanced Northern responsibility of advancing or morphing anti-black sentiment to continue on, as the South had systemic and organized racial exclusion open to identify. Golub clarifies the importance of visual strategies that Southern publications rely on to "present itself upholding the law against civil rights violence and the illegitimate use of state power that protected it". Golub defines a dual attempt by the South in which blackness and desegregation as crime and preventable disorder are attached to "an investment in white innocence [and] legality." A double standard is revealed in the process however, as their point is presented through revealing northern racism, questioning the relationship between violence and law, and "comparing state violence to enforce integration in the South while refusing to do so in the North". Southern effort to expose Northern race conflict is considered a success through utilizing technological advances to replace drawing with photographs. *The Citizen's* use of photography depicted the moral North to be quite similar to the shunned 'Old South'. Snaps from civil rights protests in Detroit depicted the North utilizing troops and weapons, making them no different than Southern segregationists. Therefore, what previously was categorized as "violence by racist white Southerners against innocent black protestors" could now be categorized under 'law and order', as per the North's documented participation (Golub). This innovation of masking

violence through formality distinguishes race as an assertion to power, dominance, and punishment within and around the law. As the scope of the violence transforms, access to black agency actively converts alongside it. Blackness aligning with the American identity publicized through the preexisting white market of surveillance, is a prime example of black resilience under totalizing subjectivity.

Understanding whiteness as a norm or order that blackness disrupts when practicing agency, links racial relations beginning from slavery to our current carceral state. Law and order have historically been linked to the norms of white regulation of black agency as shown through slavery, lynching, and comprehension of civil rights protests. Justified upkeep of racial regulations in society fall in the form of punishment through the carceral system. It is no shock to conservatives or liberals alike that our prison system is a consequence to race-sensitive policy and policing. Though conservative reflection would predominantly justify the American carceral state with approving and commending racist regulation, liberal responses tend to acknowledge a failing system and encourage efforts to alter administrative action. However, in the text *The First Civil Right*, Naomi Murakawa categorizes liberal reformation as contributing to already discriminatory policing and imprisonments practices. The text serves to take away the moral high of criticism against mass incarceration from liberals. As shown through historic and obvious forms of racial conflict, Murakawa asserts that liberals and conservative have both perpetuated constructions of black criminality to further forms of mass incarceration through the state mandate of ‘maintaining order’. This adhering to ‘respect for law’ is based in generations of racial, social, political, and economic influence on black agency. The liberal push for neutrality in the state turns a blind eye to this history as it becomes concealed with the assumption of objectivity. Murakawa encourages action that removes roots in the existing state, as the addition

of laws, particularly procedural neutrality, only pulls back to old expectations of law application and not new. Black agency is therefore determined through the medium of carceral violence embedded in surveillance, law, and racial hierarchies.

Though Murakawa does not use the language of abolition, she is determined to expose efforts to professionalize the U.S. justice system as a liberal bluff of a solution against our incredibly racist policing and punishing state. The title of her text, *The First Civil Right*, in fact, was used by the Truman administration to particularly refer to the right for black communities to be protected from white supremacist attacks. However, the phrase was later popularized by Nixon to define a freedom of fear for white people from black people. Murakawa explains liberal understandings of racism to believe the *application* of laws to not treat people of color and marginalized folks fairly, not the *existence* of laws. Therefore, their ‘solution’ usually calls for a ‘fair process.’ However, as historic judicial record has shown, this simply hasn’t proven effective. According to Murakawa, Democratic efforts to reform the carceral process range from the Boggs Act of 1952 which created mandatory sentencing, to Bill Clinton’s Omnibus Crime Bill of 1994, which expanded the federal death penalty and minimal sentencing that has been disproportionately applied to racial minorities and increased incarceration rates for nonviolent offenders. I assert the ‘fair process’ evaluation relies on an assumption that reevaluating the judicial procedure will return some level of control and autonomy to blackness. This implies black autonomy does not exist in the first place.

Murakawa counters such a claim and declares liberal law and order to be criticized for striving for procedural neutrality, as sympathy for a system that doesn’t work only looks at removing bias from a system. This, Murakawa argues, holds three issues. First, it entrenches

black notions of criminality as the law that goes untouched was created on anti-black sentiment and history. It is only the application of the law that is criticized, and therefore does not act against systematic understandings of racial hierarchy. Black agency is therefore stripped and cased in victimhood, ignoring Douglass' foundation of interpretive agency. Second, it fuels neutral state-building by both conservative and liberals. The carceral state is in fact built by both efforts, though liberals are commonly assumed innocent in the matter. Body cameras, for example, add to the procedural process and increase a modern carceral desire. They not only increase monitoring and surveillance of communities, but additionally create a perspective of violence that, as seen through lynching marketing and civil rights movement photography, cement a correlation between blackness and passivity. Increased surveillance, as presented by Hale and Berger, shapes a platform of black performance and resistance. Black agency is once again ignored and black resistance against white violence is undermined. Finally, liberal policy that encourages training for police officers only makes them more efficient in their execution and application of the law, and does not address the formation of the 'order' they serve. Liberal effort, instead, to accurately reject systems of anti-black sentiment and history, should address the "demilitarization of schools, revitalization of education at all levels, a health system that provides free physical and mental care to all, and a justice system based on reparation and reconciliation" (Murakawa). This effort is to actively "crowd out" prisons so that the application of punishment is no longer reliant on biased and racist "areas of our social and psychic landscape" (Murakawa). Murakawa's goal in organizing her claim in such a manner is to emphasize the influence of history in the adaptation of anti-black sentiment by white liberals. The credit white morality receives in reformation of the justice system only bolsters systems of white supremacy. Murakawa therefore provides the framework to categorize implied white morality as a classification of violence, in which I assert black agency can thrive.

## V.

Afro-pessimism is the understanding that due to such inherently racist systems of societal functioning and understanding, the counter to organizing and coalition-building is recognizing the impossibility of black life in the world. Frank B. Wilderson, in an interview titled “*We’re trying to destroy the world*” *Anti Blackness & Police Violence After Ferguson*, speaks to the anti-black psyche in America. He makes the claim that the world, in fact, can function without colonization, capitalism, and even patriarchy, yet cannot exist without anti-blackness. The global reach of his argument mimics the “destroy the world” claim in his title, as he explains it to mean to ‘destroy anti-blackness’. Wilderson speaks to the seeking of violence against black bodies to be a form of “psychic health and well being” for non-black communities. America, in particular, is declared to be “kept sane” through policing blackness. He mocks efforts of reform as it simply is not possible in his eyes through political projects. As these programs have historically further oppressed and marginalized black folks, their framework and theoretical backing stem in a consciousness that separate blackness from humanity. Wilderson clarifies that it is not that black people do not get to be human, however it *is* that this world has assigned an understanding that not being human is the equivalent to blackness. In the global scale of his argument, he emphasizes that other communities that have or are enduring failed rights hold “spatial and temporal coordinates of their existing demands”. Effectively, their existence of past rights shapes a level of integrity in a demand to achieve what they have been robbed of. Wilderson makes the claim that the black body, in this global understanding, is a mere “mass of flesh” incorporated with space and time of absence as it owns no history of formal rights. Society is therefore “perfectly fit” for the death of black bodies, and responses that occur to black agency are in

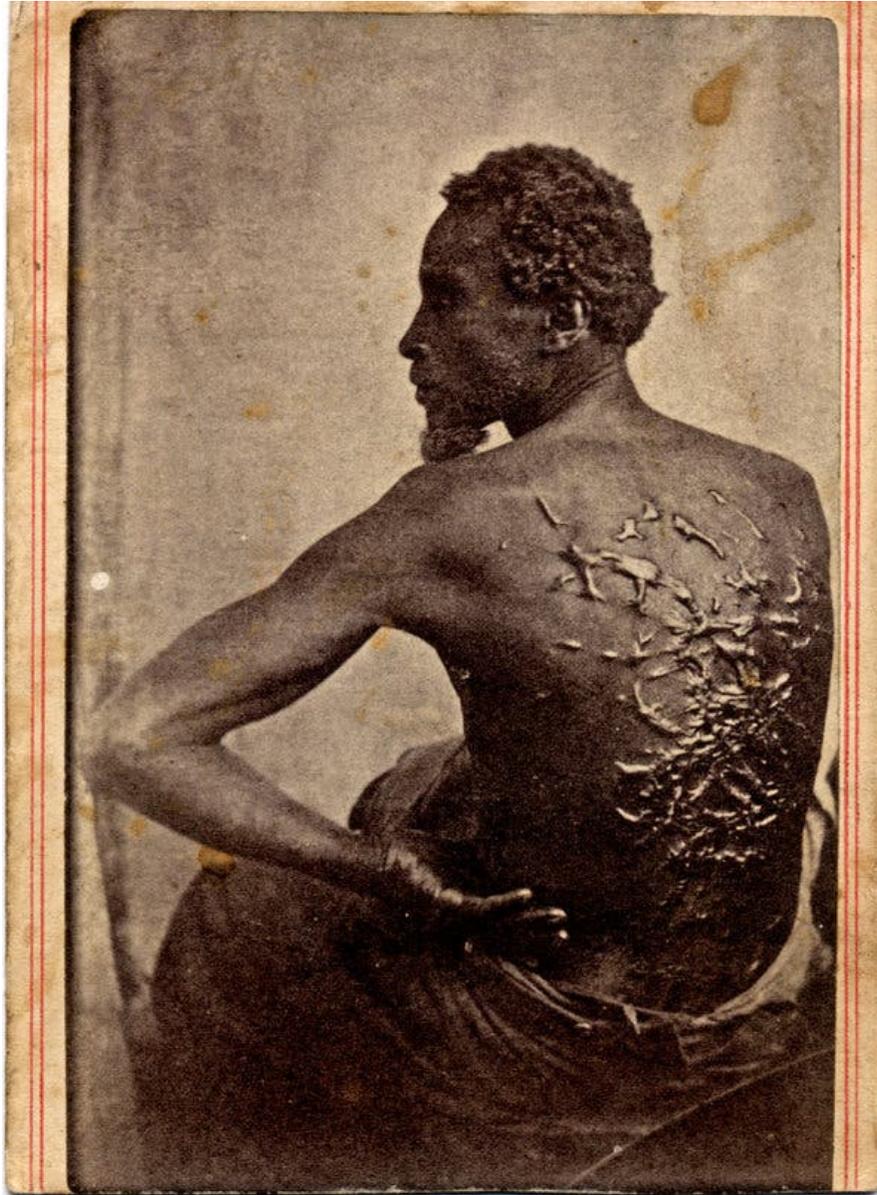
reaction to the associated threat against whiteness, not productive discourse. I agree with Wilderson that societal categorization of blackness places black existence at the bottom of a global racial hierarchy. This aligns with the abrasive systemic treatment, commodification, and sociopolitical mobility accessible to black communities. However, I assert that black agency can exist and endure against the totalizing violence that is the regulation and punishment of the black identity.

### CONCLUSION

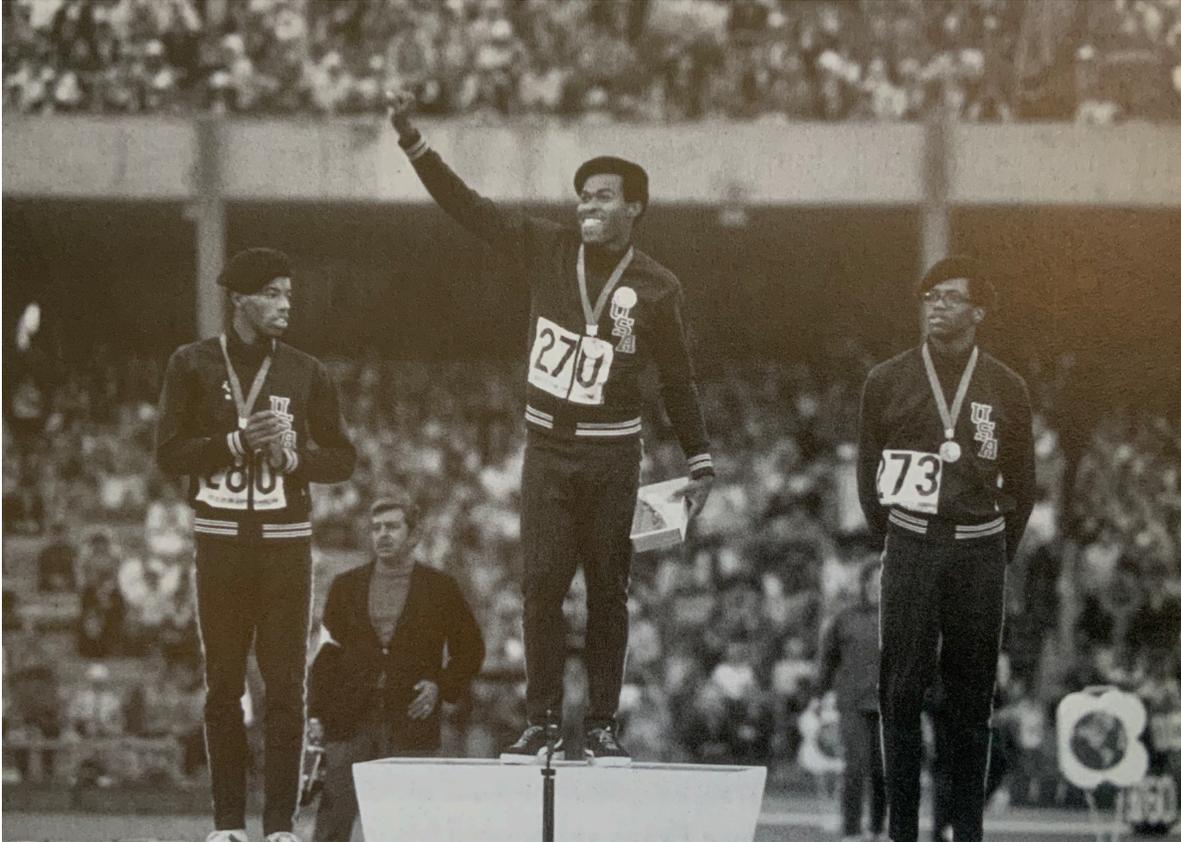
Agency is created through the formulation of new interpretations and meanings of a perpetrator's intentions when engaging in violence. The Afro-pessimist lens gives no space for reinterpretation of black trauma and cements violence as purely destructive to the black experience. I want to clarify that my aim is not to concurrently imply violence as inherently productive. I strive to reveal the power of interpretive agency as a catalyst of black resistance when facing radical anti-black violence. Originating with the coerced racial hierarchy that formed under the institution of slavery, whiteness has taken a contrived level of agency and power over blackness. Black bodies became the literal tools, spectacles, and indicators of white economic, political, social, and psyche. This is not an issue of the past. Reform at each step was enacted with interest of convergence within white success. Therefore, I aim to remove the assumptions of black passivity and the crediting of white morality to be influential in racial reform. This is shown through the progression of 'rights' black lives gained access to over time. This text outlines how the vulgar violence performed in slavery took innovative forms and continued to oppress black livelihood over time. I aim to shape a narrative around the endurance of black agency amidst totalizing physical, mental, and sociopolitical violence. Embedded facets

of black agency expose white yearning for pleasure and commodification at the expense of black endured trauma. The preservation of space for interpretation of violent interactions assigns power to the black experience to extract reformatory agency. Such power combats the idea of passive victimhood in blackness and reevaluates the notion of control, identity, and hierarchy. The global experience of anti-blackness should therefore be understood as a simultaneous space of trauma and resistance as black agency has persisted through decades of relentless targeted violence.

APPENDIX



- i. William D. McPherson and Mr. Oliver, *The Scourged Back*, 1863. Digital Public Library of America.



- ii. Bill Eppridge, Lee Evans, Larry James, and Ronald Freeman on the Victory Stand for the 400-Meter Race at the Summer Olympics, Mexico City, Mexico, October 18, 1968. Time & Life Pictures/Getty Images, Los Angeles, California.



iii. John Dominis, *Black Power Salute at Olympic Games*, Mexico City, October 16, 1968. Time & Life Pictures/Getty Images, Los Angeles, California.

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