EVERYTHING IS A STORY

Editor
Maria Antónia Lima

EVERYTHING IS A STORY: CREATIVE INTERACTIONS IN ANGLO-AMERICAN STUDIES

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CONTENTS

7 Introduction

PART I – Short Stories in English

17 "It might be better not to talk": Reflections on the short story as a form suited to the exploration of grief
Éilís Ní Dhuibhne

27 Beyond Boundaries: The Stories of Bharati Mukherjee
Teresa F. A. Alves

34 The Identity of a Dying Self in Tolstoy's The Death of Ivan Ilych and in Barnes's The Story of Mats Israelson
Elena Bollinger

43 And They Lived Unhappily Ever After: A. S. Byatt's Uncanny Wonder Tales
Alexandra Chieira

52 (Re)imagining Contemporary Short Stories
Ana Raquel Fernandes

59 "All writers are translators of the human experience": Intimacy, tradition and change in Samrat Upadhyay's imaginary
Margarida Pereira Martins

67 Literariness and Sausages in Lydia Davis
Bernardo Manzoni Palmeirim

PART II – AMERICAN CREATIVE IMAGINATIONS

77 Schoolhouse Gothic: Unsafe Spaces in American Fiction
Sherry R. Truffin

96 Slow time and tragedy in Gus Van Sant's Gerry
Ana Barroso

106 American Pastoralism: Between Utopia and Reality
Alice Carleto

115 Kiki Smith or Kiki Frankenstein: The artist as monster maker
Maria Antónia Lima

125 Edgar Allan Poe's Gothic Revisited in André Øvredal's The Autopsy of Jane Do
Elisabete Lopes

137 Transcendental intuition after 11/9: Jonathan Safran Foer's Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close
Jesús Bolaño Quintero

145 Beat memoirs: the Subversive prose of Diane di Prima
Maria Clara Dunck Santos

III – CIVIL RIGHTS AND BLACK LIVES MATTER

159 Spectacles of violence: Passivity and agency in photographs of the Civil Rights and Black Lives Matter movements
Maria José Canelo

171 Perspectives on Black Lives Matter: Ta-Nehisi Coates and Wesley Lowery
Gonçalo Cholant

180 The Role of Protest Music in the Civil Rights and the Black Lives Matter Movements
Liliana Santos

191 Black Self-Representation and the Struggle for Citizenship: Claudia Rankine's Citizen: An American Lyric
Maria Eduarda Gil Vicente

PART IV – POETRY, THE ARTS, AND OTHER STORIES

207 "Challenging the Silence on the Walls": Ekphrasis and the Museum
Mário Avelar

217 "A Dilettante's Lie"? Poetry, Visual Culture, and the World Out There
Rui Carvalho Homem

236 "Nothing was real but torture": A Corpus-Based Interpretation of Denton Welch's A Voice Through a Cloud
Guilherme da Silva Braga

248 Turning Pain, Loss and Trauma into Art: David Bowie's BlackStar and Lazarus and Nick Cave's Skeleton Tree and One More Time with Feeling
Carla Ferreira de Castro

256 Exploring the Surreal in Alice's Adventures in Wonderland: Visual Representations by Lewis Carroll, John Tenniel and Salvador Dalí
Teresa Gibert

267 The Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew and the London Schools of Art and Design: a blooming partnership in Victorian times
Sandra Santos

PART V – TEXTS, INTERVIEWS, OLD AND NEW

279 Revisiting the Maze: Diasporic Views of Home in James McAuley's "The Hero and the Hydra" (1947-48) and Mohsin Hamid's Exit West (2017)
Jean Page

290 Revisiting the Spirit of Prometheus and the "Velho do Restelo" in David Oliveira's As Everyone Goes
Reinaldo Francisco Silva

302 The eccentric children of "famous Albion": stereotyping of the English in the humorous writing of Camilo Mariano Fróis
Maria Zulmira Castanheira

314 "Proverbs are the horses of speech": The Creative Word in Soyinka's Theatre
Rosa Figueiredo

324 The translation of forms of address in Roald Dahl's *Matilda* and *Danny* the Champion of the World
Rita Faria

338 Personalised Histories Censored in Estado Novo Portugal and Socialist Hungary
Zsófia Gombár

349 Stories, slices of life and identity (re)presentations in multimodal ad campaigns for Nespresso: "What Else?"
Elsa Simões Lucas Freitas

358 (Sero)Positive Textual Terrorism: HIV, Discourse, and Humor in Brontez Purnell's Work
Toni R. Juncosa

367 Rethinking the Crisis of Humanities through Martha Nussbaum
Maria Teresa Santos

379 Notes on Contributors

Spectacles of violence: passivity and agency in photographs of the Civil Rights and Black Lives Matter movements

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“We have plenty of demonstrators. What we need are photographers”
MARTIN LUTHER KING JR[1]

1. The Civil Rights Movement

Emmet Till’s open casket funeral[2]

1 Qtd. in Ian Caldwell, “The Movement: Bob Adelman and Civil Rights Photography.” Ian the Architect. http://www.ianthearchitect.org/the-movement-bob-adelman-and-civil-rights-photography/.

2 Credit photo: Bettman/Corbis. https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smithsonian-institution/emmett-tills-open-casket-funeral-reignited-the-civil-rights-movement-180956483/.

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It is well known that visuality was a powerful component of the CRM. The murder of 14-year-old Emmet Till at the hands of white supremacists in the Deep South because of allegedly daring looking across the colorline, or making eyes to a white woman, is best remembered because Till's mother, Mamie Bradley, insisted on having an open casket funeral and that the newspapers published photographs of her son's brutally disfigured face. She perceived that her son's dead body rendered visible the meaning of racism. It is also established that Emmet Till's murder in 1955 was the trigger to the Civil Rights Movement (CRM).

Rosa Parks mug shot[3]

Rosa Parks's trespassing of the black-white segregation line in the Montgomery bus that day in 1956, just a year after the crime, and the publicity it received, is now known to have been carefully orchestrated. For over a decade, Congress had debated but continually failed to pass civil rights legislation in response to NAACP's claims against racism and segregation. Parks refusal to give her seat, and its registering in photographs, were meant to keep the attention of the American public alive; it came directly in line with Emmet Till's murder

3 Photo credit: photographer unknown http://www.openculture.com/2014/12/arrest-report-of-rosa-parks.html

and it showed a deliberate intent to push the civil rights into the public sphere through the press headlines. As the photo of Till's body, Parks' mug shot circulated widely in the media, becoming itself one of the icons of the CRM history. Even though Parks looks from within the frame of the mug shot, her look is firm, determined, re-enacting in those first moments in prison her act of resistance in the bus. Both Mamie Bradley and the NAACP, in Rosa Parks case, appropriated what is usually a form of social control – the media's spreading of images of crimes and the police mug shot – to turn them into places of appearance for the civil rights agenda.

Making the struggle visible through photographs – discrimination and violence going hand-in-hand – was as fundamental to gather support for African-American civil rights claims in the twentieth century, as the ex-slave bodies and public testimonies in the nineteenth-century abolitionist platforms had been. These two springboards for the CRM – Till's and Parks' photographs – were used in the tradition of social documentary, even if they were not originally made by social documentarists. Yet, they do bear evidence to the fact that people can claim the photograph "to send a message to present and future audiences," as noted by visual studies critic Nicholas Mirzoeff (34) and thereby claim what he calls "a place to appear" (19-21). This visual rendering actively engages those who are represented, who have a say in the ways they will be seen; for the public, the practice involves the development of new ways of seeing.

Yet, the terms in which the appearance of the CRM evolved in the US media were negotiated differently along time. Applying Michel Foucault's theory of the regimes of truth to visual matters, American Studies scholar Robyn Wiegman has argued that each regime creates particular economies of visibility to produce, reproduce, and establish a set of meanings as true. The argument might apply to the "official" narratives of the CRM, in the case in point, the visual narrative. American Studies scholar Martin A. Berger (2011), for example, has highlighted the way the photographers and editors' selection and choices of CRM images determined the narratives and the meanings that dominated the audiences' reading of the CRM. Notwithstanding the fact that violent images are typically more attention getting, Berger pointed out that the white owned press tended to favour images in which photographic details such as pose and movement suggested the passivity of the Black protesters who were facing ostensive white violence, hence normalizing a particular way of seeing

the African American community: it was ultimately non-threatening to the white establishment.

Several critics have claimed a connection between the recent Black Lives Matter movement (BLM) – some call it "the Third Civil Rights Movement" (Mirzoeff 29) – while many BLM activists themselves tend however to downplay that direct legacy. This paper attempts to trace where those narratives diverge in terms of visual representation, especially in as far as photography is concerned.

The following analysis takes into account these two views, Berger's critique of a normalizing representation of the CRM that curtails Black agency, and Mirzoeff's theory of the BLM as proposing new ways of seeing in crafting a new place to appear in the social scene. While I compare the photographs of both social movements, taking Berger's narrative of passivity as the referential framework, I am interested in detailing how the BLM is crafting its own space of appearance; that is, identifying its new forms of seeing and being seen in the representation of the movement currently underway. My readings are also informed by views on the social documentary aesthetics: one of the first critics of the genre, William Scott, downplayed its capacity to provide information and highlighted instead its power to infuse the image with feeling in order to make it speak to the observer or the reader's emotions (12). According to this perspective, the documentary develops a particular form of memory that mingles subjectivity and the imagination (132). But of course, images alone are powerless to make all the cultural conversation, or the meaning making process that turns them into representations; the observer's active role is what extracts and composes meaning. So, I resort to Mirzoeff's instructions for seeing (not watching, but *seeing*) an image: he argues that the act of "seeing" itself "should be understood to mean that point of intersection between what we know, what we perceive, and what we feel, using all our senses unlike the traditional one-sense visual perspective" (85). The act of seeing is, therefore "a collective way to look, visualize and imagine" (85).

I will first draw upon a few iconic images of the CRM to be compared to those of the BLM movement which I will address later. The questions leading my analysis is how have we been engaging with these images that shape our collective memory of that historical period, both visually and in terms of meaning making? How do the meanings they suggest evince Martin Berger's contention that these photographs tended to reduce the "complex social dynamics of

the civil rights movement to easily digested narratives" that typically deprived Blacks of their agency (4)?

Little Rock Central High School, Ark., 1957[4]

This is an image that has endured as an icon of the racial hatred against which the CRM developed. The young white woman screaming (Hazel Bryan) is what propels forward the main figure, in the center foreground (African American, Elizabeth Eckford). We do not hear the sound nor see the movement, yet the violence which the photo silences is central to shape our way of seeing it. Both young women were only 15 years old at the time and both were full-right students at Little Rock Central High School, by the autumn of 1957. Hazel Bryan knew the place better, as Elizabeth Eckford had only recently been entitled to integrate the school. After the 1954 landmark case "Brown vs Board of Education of Topeka"[5] outlawed school segregation, the NAACP had registered top grade students in several educational institutions that had agreed to apply

4 Photo credit: photographer Will Counts Collection / Indiana University Archives https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hazel_Massery

5 In 1954, the Supreme Court declared the unconstitutionality of segregated schools as a violation of the Equal Protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment, thereby overruling a previous landmark case (Plessy versus Ferguson, 1896) which had upheld state segregation in public facilities.

desegregation measures. Eckford was part of the group of students selected to attend Little Rock Central High, the so-called Little Rock Nine.

Elizabeth Eckford was not walking to school but rushing back home. Having arrived on her own, she was returning from the school gate, after finding it locked and monitored by soldiers from the Arkansas National Guard who had been deployed there by Governor Orval Faubus, in support of the segregationists' protests and objections at the schools' decision to desegregate. Eckford was making her way, fearfully but determinately, toward what she hoped would be the safety of a nearby bus stop.

The violence of the white girl's words is contained in her hateful facial expression: what words have just been shouted in-between her clenched teeth? Yet, Elizabeth Eckford passes by, peacefully; there seems to be no intention to talk back. Given its expressivity, the white girl's attack is more powerful than the black girl's rushing out of the picture, so the violence of the gesture tends to impress more the reader than the black girl's reaction. As in other prominent representations of the CRM, agency was typically on the side of the policemen or, in this case, the white onlookers, who cheerfully attended and often contributed to the spectacle of violence contained in the images.

Police violence I: dogs against peaceful Black protesters in Birmingham, Ala., 1963[6]

6 Credit photo: photographer Bill Hudson for the Associated Press. http://warhistorian.org/blog1/index.php?entry=entry051117-070016

Police charges against peaceful protesters were common, one of the consequences of the non-violent protest itself. They tended to expose the gulf between the police officers' brutality and the protesters' helplessness, mirroring the power inequality that structured the whole society. They evinced how injustice was the backbone of the celebrated American democracy. In this first image, a police dog attacks a 17-year-old Parker High School student, Walter Gadsden, who faces the attack, apparently showing no fear, and no violence either.

The difference between this photograph and the next one, both depicting the protests in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1963, was that they exhibited unparalleled levels of violence against the protestants to that point, when Police Chief Bull Connor, the face of institutional racism in the South, ordered the use of dogs and fire hoses. The circulation of the images led to social reform: seeing them persuaded John F. Kennedy of the absolute need to pursue what later became the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

Police violence II: fire hoses against peaceful black protesters in Birmingham, Ala., 1963[7]

In a similar fashion to the previous image, it is more difficult to let go of the act of violence at center stage – the dog's attack or the water discharge, in this case

7 Photo credit: photographer Bob Adelman. Bob Adelman Archive & Library of Congress http://www.bobadelman.net/32-2/civil-rights-movement-1962-1968/

– than to retain the stoic resistance of the Black protesters. In their mobilization of emotions and the imagination, these photographs allowed for empathy with African Americans, who did not retribute the violence they were suffering, and thus bolstered white privilege. In other words, to a certain extent and despite the indignation and revolt they did cause amongst Northers audiences, the photographs still accomplished the Debordian effect of the spectacle: pacifying the spectatorship. Yet, the cost of this narrative was, along with the victimization of Blacks, the isolation of racism as a Southern phenomenon. This effect reassured the white audiences in the North, as well as the US government, as Martin Berger has noted. In addition, the end result of this narrative that portrayed Blacks in roles of limited power was that it also limited the reach of the social and political reforms that ensued, instead of solving the historically rooted social inequalities that have defined US society (Berger 7).

Another consequence of the regime of visibility of the CRM was the subalternization of the narrative of Black violent agency. For instance, images of the Black Panthers do not share the stage with Selma's, or Birmingham's, or Little Rock's representations of police violence or intimidation. Indeed, it is far harder to find photographs of Black protesters that challenge or somehow stray from the dominant narrative. When they exist, they are usually attributed to unknown photographers, those who did not become the "official" photographers of the CRM (even though those who did take up that title were not there for stardom in the first place, and most likely did have the best intentions in their commitment to and engagement in the struggle, such as Bob Adelman or Bill Hudson).

An exception is the photograph showing athletes Tommie Smith and John Carlos in the worldwide arena of the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City, performing the Black Panther salute to protest racism in the US, while listening to the national anthem.

Photos of protesters deliberately attacking the police or resisting arrest with violence are virtually unknown. So much so that it was not possible to provide a link to such images – even nowadays, they are not available in that endless archive that is the Internet. Yet, they do exist and they did circulate during this period of unrest. However, they were published mainly in African American newspapers and, although not only for that reason, they did not reach the wider media. Martin A. Berger has of late recovered many of these photographs from marginal archives, in his study *Freedom Now! Forgotten Photographs of the Civil Rights Struggle* (2014), whose cover shows an African

American woman resisting arrest by biting the policeman's arm, in Alabama, 1963. This photo would, as Berger argues, never make the headlines because it was the complete opposite of the dominant narrative sustaining the Civil Rights Movement. One of the aspects that immediately catches the eye of the observer is gender – women were barely ever represented in photos of police violence, in general. Yet, here is an anonymous woman who is not only refusing the dominant representation of passive arrest, but who is also resisting to police violence.

Militant students at Cornell University, 1969[8]

This photo, by a – strangely – little known Pulitzer Awardee, Steve Starr, is another case in point regarding the visibility of violent resistance. The photo shows members of the Afro-American Society (Eric Evans in center stage) as they are leaving Willard Straight Hall, at Cornell University, in 1969. It signals the end of the student occupation aimed at denouncing racism in the University, its judicial system and its slow progress in establishing a Black Studies program (Lowery). The moment captured by the camera follows negotiations with the University officials, which were successful on the students' part and the occupation, too, was dismantled peacefully since no arrests were made. But the sight of heavy guns suggests not only violence but, maybe more menacing, the Black students' agency. It is most likely this sight that explains why this is not an iconic photograph of the CRM.

8 Photo credit: photographer Steve Starr / AP Images. https://stevestarr.com/pulitzer-prize

II. Black Lives Matter

When, on August 9, 2014, Michael Brown was shot and killed by white officer Darren Wilson in Ferguson, Missouri, it prompted a similar reaction to that of Emmet Till in the 1950s. It is true that, regretfully, neither Till's nor Brown's deaths inaugurated the pattern of violence and impunity against the Black community. But both generated reactions that relied on the power of the images to further the protest. It was precisely after the death of Michael Brown that ignited activism on part of the BLM movement. It had been created two years before, in the aftermath of the murder of Trayvon Martin and the acquittal of the police officer responsible for the shooting. At the time, BLM members organized a freedom ride to Ferguson, a gesture that reclaimed those of the CRM – while the police apparently tracked down that same history by using dogs to disperse those who were protesting racism.

Nicholas Mirzoeff has argued that the BLM claims a new space of appearance through the images of its demonstrations both in the traditional and the social media, and that the images reflect not just the action and the events, but the way the demonstrators are engaging with the events. In other words, the process of representation in this new context requires new forms of vision, both of seeing and of being seen, that challenges what has been in US culture, he argues, the "absolute visual dominance" of whiteness (Mirzoeff 87). This is a practice of visuality that Mirzoeff traces back to the surveillance of the overseer over the black body in the plantation, through the "reckless eyeballing" of men who faced the same fate as Emmet Till (88), up to present practices such as racial profiling. In all instances, skin difference created an excess of visibility of race that contributed to the objectification of the Black body.

From inside the BLM movement itself, we read statements such as Patrisse Cullors' – one of the movement leaders, who praises the use of photographs of the movement by activists in the social media because they are shaping our ways of seeing it: "the images have provided hope and strength" (*ABC News online*). Following this idea, I will now analyse images that capture this change in the modes of representation. I am interested in seeing how new forms of vision, both of seeing and of being seen, are under way: are Black subjects gaining the ability to counter the white look? Are they engaging in a different politics of visibility that allows for agency and displaces the narratives of passivity that controlled the regime of visibility of the CRM? To what extent do the representations of the BLM movement offer us new symbols of protest imag-

ery? Do they manage to do away with race or do they resignify race? Finally, along the documental tradition lines, how do they captivate our imagination, beyond our feelings?

The demonstrator's persistent look, Chicago, 2015[9]

I take this picture as one of the most effective regarding the BLM claim to a new politics of visibility. The young protestor is 16-year-old Lamon Reccord, an accidental hero created by this photo. He decided to join the protests when he heard about yet another police shooting – Laquan McDonald, in Chicago – and chose his own tactics: not just to face the police, but to give them a persistent look. Following Reccord's own account, he meant to raise their consciousness about killing innocent youngsters, like himself, so he forced them to see him. The fact that the policeman here is also African American, does not deter him because the agent is on the other side of the power divide.

9 Photo credit: John J. Kim / Getty images. https://www.dnainfo.com/chicago/20151203/chatham/whos-protester-who-stares-down-police-meet-16-year-old-lamon-reccord/.

Bishop Derrick Robinson's arrest, Ferguson, 2014[10]

This is perhaps the closest picture to some of the classical CRM's photographs I came across. It catches the moment when a prominent leader of the movement, Bishop Derrick Robinson, who was demonstrating peacefully, was suddenly arrested and brought to the ground by heavily armed policemen. Were we to apply a black and white filter to this photograph, the similarity to the CRM protests and police action would be even more evident – if it were not for the fact, though, that the police outfit is notoriously different. What I interpret as a new form of seeing in this photo relates to the stark contrast between the power of the police now and in the 1960s. In this picture, we see a militarized contingent arresting Bishop Robinson. The police are a part of, and therefore bring into the picture, the military industrial complex, in which African Americans make the largest inmate population.

In a similar vein, we may take a look at these two other pictures:

10 Photo credit: photographer Natalie Keyssar. http://nataliekeyssar.com/red-and-blue-the-black-lives-matter-protests.

A sanitation workers' strike, Memphis, 1968,[11] and Black Lives Matter leaders and fellow activists.[12]

I believe they offer a particular change in the way the protesters want to be seen because they also see themselves in a particular way. Whereas the Memphis strikers, in another CRM iconic photograph, recovered eighteenth-century anti-slavery civil rights rhetoric, "Am I Not a Man and a Brother?" (Harris), the current founders and many of the movement's most prominent members are women and often make use of a more inclusive claim for human rights framed as Black humanity. The gender contrast is not accidental either; the fact that the new social movement emerged from a group of LGBT African American women shows how the claims of the BLM enlarge those of the CRM: "Its rec-

11 Photo credit: photographer Ernest Withers https://www.thewitherscollection.com/.
12 Photo credit: Black Lives Matter. https://blacklivesmatter.com/.

ognition that all black lives deserve humanity, regardless of their gender, class, or sexual orientation, has breathed new life into the legacy of the black freedom struggle," as remarked by critic Fredrick Harris, while its female and multi-ethnic leadership also deploys new ways of seeing and of being seen. Fredrick Harris also remarks that this inclusiveness symbolises a refusal of the charismatic leaders that personified the Civil Rights struggle such as MLK Jr.: "instead, core activists [...] have insisted on a group-centered model of leadership, rooted in ideas of participatory democracy."

Instead of a conclusion, I would like to comment on an image that I consider to be unique in the regime of visibility of the CRM. It allows us to perceive how BLM activism engages with new ways of seeing, namely how US racism is now being perceived as a transnational phenomenon.

Solidarity with Palestine (video)[13]

The internationalization of the BLM cause is not new in the context of civil rights struggles, bearing in mind Martin Luther King's Nobel Peace Prize, as well as Malcolm X's trips to Africa and the Middle East in search of international condemnation for racism in the US. X attempted to move from a definition of civil to one of human rights in the hope that it would empower the struggle, giving it a less domestic outlook (Harris).

But 2015 witnessed something different: the creation of an international coalition that sought solidarity with territories and communities outside the US that experience similar – perhaps interconnected – forms of injustice. Along with the organization Dream Defenders and some Ferguson leaders, the BLM movement sent a delegation to Occupied West Bank, in Israel, aiming at sharing experiences with Palestinians by linking legacies of colonialism and imperialism in the US and Israel.

Trusting accounts, while Gaza was being bombed by US financed armament, protests and militarized police repression erupted in the streets of Ferguson. The media visualised both, making the images of segregation, militarization of everyday life and police violence in the US ring a bell in Palestine: here, practices related to the military occupation – curfews, racial profiling, segregation, police violence – were routine for its inhabitants. As a result, activists in Gaza contacted BLM activists and a powerful transnational alli-

13 https://www.colorlines.com/articles/video-black-lives-matter-delegation-visits-palestine.

ance began to be sketched out in recognition of the need to fight injustice and oppression on a global scale.

Eventually, BLM and Palestine activists found out that they had a lot in common, as not only does Israel's widespread use of detention and imprisonment against Palestinians evokes the mass incarceration of Black people in the US, but both governments rely on the same firm for security equipment. In line with this, the BLM movement put forth a proposal for the US government to stop financing Israel's killings of Palestinians in Gaza, through its economic aid to the Israeli government, and rather invest the money in social programs to end poverty and racism back home. The video reports the Dream defenders' trip to Gaza and its encounters with Palestinian fellows of struggle. Its title is revealing: "From Ferguson to Palestine, Resist to exist!"

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