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Rationale
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From Body to Byte: Corporeal Justice in the Digital Age

“All our phrasing—race relations, racial chasm, racial justice, racial profiling, white privilege, even white supremacy—serves to obscure that racism is a visceral experience, that it dislodges brains, blocks airways, rips muscle, extracts organs, cracks bones, breaks teeth [...] the sociology, the history, the economics, the graphs, the charts, the regressions all land, with great violence, upon the body.”

- Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me*

In my time at Gallatin, I have studied the world of media and theories about justice to discover how they intersect. Media has become one of the most accessible, influential, and equalizing information streams of our time. It encompasses the ways in which our world is communicated to us, through television, radio, music, journalism, news, advertisements, and social media spheres. A somewhat undefinable term by nature, justice essentially refers to all people having access to basic needs, equal opportunity, freedom, and safety, regardless of their appearance, skin color, race, country of origin, gender, or ability. Academics from Butler to Fanon have reached this consensus across feminist, queer, and of color liberation movements, as well as their intersections. By covering elements of journalism, music, visual art and photography, human rights, race, gender, and sexuality, I focus on the digital sphere as the site

upon which these concepts interact, sometimes clashing, other times strengthening each other. How can media, particularly the increasingly relevant and widespread realm of digital media, influence how we understand justice? Can it interact with and potentially improve upon more formal systems of justice? Can it function as an equalizing form of public education, which leads directly into how people understand, enact, and claim justice? For example, the rise of social media has made a more immediate demand for justice by the likes of Shaun King and Black Lives Matter possible. In the aftermath of the neo Nazi march on Charlottesville, King used Twitter and other forms of social media to [publicly identify some Nazis using photos taken from the march](#). King specifically Tweeted photos identifying those who assaulted Deandre Harris at the rally, acting via Twitter due to gross police inaction on the matter. Regardless of what action the law did or did not take as a result, many of the identified were affected by public opinion, facing social consequences or losing their jobs. Recent public discussion surrounding perpetrators of workplace sexual harassment has had similar effects. Digital media allows oppressed groups to take justice into their own hands, even if that course of action is never formally recognized by the justice system. Is there greater potential in this explicitly digital, somewhat guerrilla approach to justice and freedom?

In its essential form, justice is about the body. While the reality of the body may at first seem commonplace or obvious, humanity has been fixated on it for as long as we have existed. Everyone has a body; the literal and abstract nature of this physical being we all possess is a common point of theory, discussion, confusion, regulation, repression, and violence. Speaking from within a world shaped by Eurocentric, hegemonic, patriarchal, colonial, and capitalist forces, different bodies experience different measures of justice, or a lack thereof. Metaphors

about the body and language that refers to the body are often used to crystallize justice arguments (Moraga/Anzaldúa, *This Bridge Called My Back*). In Europe and the U.S., during the late 18th century and into much of the 19th century, opinions and structures of justice were built upon the physical body and perceptions of difference. The pseudo-scientific movements of phrenology, eugenics, and social Darwinism derived judgments about the ability and intelligence of different peoples that were made based on the body, specifically the human skull, for the purposes of classifying those bodies within a social hierarchy. These ideologies were then harnessed by European and/or American agents of empire, for the purpose of validating the colonizing missions they were engaged in at the time. As Barbara Jeanne Fields points out in her article *Slavery, Race and Ideology in the United States of America*, these ideas form “the circular logic of first defining certain characteristics as ‘racial’, then offering differences in those same characteristics as proof that the ‘races’ differ,” (Fields, *Slavery, Race, and Ideology*). These judgments were used to justify the subjugation of othered bodies; if these darker bodies could be determined to have less mental capacity with which to improve society, then their exploitation as laborers could be rationalized as scientific, and therefore not morally flawed. Invented ideas of race were used to rationalize a hierarchical, capitalist order, thus freeing the colonizers, or profiteers of said structure, from guilt and condemnation. Given that the influences of this history are still felt acutely today, as illustrated by texts like Michelle Alexander’s *The New Jim Crow*, colonized bodies, disabled bodies, queer bodies, and the like function as marked bodies in society, and their visibility as non-normative determines the justice, or lack thereof, that is acted upon them. As American racial relations progressed out of literal slavery, the ramifications of bodily-determined justice remained visible. Throughout the 19th century and into the 20th

century, black men, regardless of their free or enslaved status, were lynched by white mobs, often simply for existing as black bodies. Lynchings were commemorated on postcards, photos of smiling white crowds and hanging corpses portrayed as triumphant moments of justice done, the ever-present threat of the black male quelled (Allen, [Without Sanctuary](#)). Franz Fanon emphasizes the confusing, arbitrary nature of that fear in *Black Skin, White Masks*, describing being noticed by a white child in public: “‘Mama, see the Negro! I’m frightened!’ Frightened! Frightened! Now they were beginning to be afraid of me” (Fanon, 112). The “justice” carried out against these lynched men was intended to police, limit, and extinguish those black bodies as a way of maintaining “order.”

This notion of order as being conducted through and onto bodies is also present in debates over reproductive justice, which focus on the right to self-determine one’s reproductive life. Slogans like “My Body, My Choice” directly address this, especially in terms of abortion access. Reproductive autonomy is held up by two pillars: the right to reproduce and the right to refrain from reproducing. On the one hand, colonized bodies over the past two centuries have often suffered forced sterilization as a means of maintaining order and control. On the other, these bodies are not given the resources or freedom to refuse a pregnancy. Restricting services in ways that disempower a subject’s bodily autonomy exerts “order” on those subjects and their communities by denying them freedoms that are distinctly bodily in nature - they are denied a choice. They must carry pregnancies to term, oppressing both the carrier and the community that baby is born into. This denial affects these communities in the moment and in the future; they either severely dwindle from sterilization, or are overwhelmed with children their infrastructure cannot support. Within even that are the specifics of reproductive life, such as choosing when,

where, and how to reproduce. These are also part of reproductive justice. Contemporary debates over the rights of trans people, which bathrooms they can or cannot use, and roadblocks to gender-affirming surgeries are also examples of the restrictive policing the othered body undergoes. Again, services are controlled here in ways that cause the oppressed subject to lose autonomy over what is theirs alone; how their body looks and feels to them is not only their right to control, but crucial to their mental health and survival. In even more abstracted terms, we can look to the [Tuskegee Syphilis Experiments](#), in which hundreds of black bodies were rendered disposable for the purposes of research. These are denials of justice that are rationalized based on an arbitrary, imagined bodily difference, one that is constructed into hierarchies of morality and human value. As Michel Foucault states in *Discipline and Punish*, “all the mechanisms of power which, even today, are disposed around the abnormal individual, to brand him and to alter him,” noting the policing efforts of the state to imagine and mark the ‘abnormal’ subject (Foucault 199).

Beyond the individual level, these denials of body autonomy are expanded into larger definitions of control and labor roles - if an othered body can be controlled at all, that form of discipline has no limit. A related part of this body justice system is the street harassment projected at othered bodies (bodies of color, women’s bodies, queer bodies) due to their clothing, skin color, or haircuts, marks of their visible or perceived difference. When a trans woman is attacked in public, that attack can often be attributed to her bodily presence, and how it presented as a problem in need of solving. When an othered body is harassed, followed, beaten, intimidated, raped, or killed, it is being disciplined, put in its place, so to speak, by a system of justice that acts primarily upon body difference; again, one that is visible in some aspects, but the

importance of which is imagined. Foucault investigates forms of intimidation and punishment as political methods of control through fear, citing a line from page 119 of Beccaria's *Traité des délits et des peines*: "Let the idea of torture and execution be ever present in the heart of the weak man and dominate the feeling that drives him to crime" (Foucault 104). Here, fear functions as political and social control for the purposes of limiting crime. How can the definition of what crime is be interpreted in our society? How is it conflated with difference? He continues, connecting fear and control to binaries of difference through the symbol of the leper:

The constant division between the normal and the abnormal, to which every individual is subjected, brings us back to our own time, by applying the binary branding and exile of the leper to quite different objects; the existence of a whole set of techniques and institutions for measuring, supervising and correcting the abnormal brings into play the disciplinary mechanisms to which the fear of the plague gave rise. (Foucault, 199).

In short, how far one's body measures from the heterosexual, cisgender, white, male standard determines the justice one has access to. This system of order is intended to preserve the capitalist structure that depends on it. If more than only a certain normative subject were able to reach positions of power, our economic structure would crumble, given that it functions by rewarding a few while disenfranchising many. Racism, sexism, ableism, and ageism are derived from the oppression of the physical being; seeking to override these structures means seeking justice for bodies, and for bodies, in their arbitrary existence, to no longer be the grounds upon which justice is decided. The effects of this system also trickle down in more private ways, such as self harm. The oppressed subject turns the violence of normative society inward onto their own body, in response to the aggressive and strict dissemination of a singular normativity, which

predominantly occurs today through media. Fanon broadly discusses this concept in feeling imprisoned and belittled within the white man's gaze: "I took myself far off from my own presence, far indeed, and made myself an object. What else could it be for me but an amputation, an excision, a hemorrhage that spattered my whole body with black blood?" (Fanon, 112). Given the mental state Fanon describes here, the jump to self harm is not far off.

If justice is about the body, then having justice means having the freedom and ability to do whatever one wants to with their body without fear of punishment, injury, or death. Justice movements today seek to reclaim this autonomy - elements of fourth wave feminism, for example, hone in on sex positivity and embrace the "slut" narrative while fighting for reproductive rights. These elements are not new, but when contextualized in an amorphous digital age, their juxtaposition is visible and fascinating. In many ways, the body is all we have; it is where our justice is infringed upon, and it is often the medium with which we endeavor to reclaim justice. From the political funerals of the AIDS epidemic to protesting in the streets to simply existing in certain spaces, the body is used for the pursuit of justice. The digital world abstracts the body; as our online identities become translatable into marketable, sellable algorithms, how is the intersection of justice and identity negotiated (Cheney-Lippold, *We Are Data*)? How does the transition from body to voice, text, avatar, and data in digital media complicate the relationship between body and justice? How essential is the prioritization of the physical body to justice movements, and how is that prioritization complicated by media? Are we losing our bodily autonomy more than we believe through media? Does justice need tangible bodies to be realized? Does our digitization undermine the immediacy of our justice needs?

In some cases, the role of the body and how to use it in digital media appears simple. By now, the effects of media on the mental health of young women, for example, has been widely studied (Becker, Burwell, Herzog, Hamburg, Gilman, [Eating Behaviors](#)). Wider representation of women's bodies in media is an intuitive and effective remedy for the social concerns of depression, eating disorders, and self harm. Here, we see the impact of the body appearing visible in media as increasingly achieving a form of justice. [Refinery29's 67% Project](#) aims to improve media representation of women by spotlighting the 67 percent of women in the U.S. who are considered plus size. 67 percent of the images on the site therefore represent plus-size bodies, in an effort to address and change unconscious bias and make visible an existing population. Working inside the company, I saw feedback from readers about the groundbreaking effect Refinery's body positivity campaigns have on them. In this instance, representation of the body made perfect sense in a digital world grasping for change. But what complications arise in other questions of justice? The video of a black man being shot by police, for example, has become a highly circulated staple expectation of social media. The impetus to bring the reality of police brutality to the vast digital sphere for the purposes of justice makes sense: it centers undeniable video evidence of the ruthless, senseless, repetitive act of violence on the othered body to a wide audience, one that can watch, rewatch, become enraged, and share with others. The experience of these videos auto-playing in a Facebook user's newsfeed makes them even more visceral and immediate. On the other hand, the digital medium also creates a barrier between viewer and violence. The platform of the Internet allows these videos to amass, form a pattern, and gain viral attention, but the screen between murdered body and viewer creates a sense of distance, and the ability of the viewer to scroll past remains unproblematized. The

downside of autoplay is that, in excess, it can overwhelm and paralyze the viewer. These are depictions of actual violence - how does this negotiation change in TV and other fictional media? Representation in entertainment has been on the rise as the industry progresses, giving rise to more queer storylines, for example. However, the lives of those queer female characters are still being systematically extinguished, illustrated by tropes like [Bury Your Gays and Dead Lesbian Syndrome](#), which abound on television. Though these killings are not real, we can connect these depictions of violence with actual violence. In the media we can control, do we need to prioritize depicting the othered body as, at the very least, surviving? Towards the other extreme, the use and presence of othered bodies for the happy appearance of diversity can lead to the commodification of those bodies as props and appear ignorant of their lived experiences. The infamously tone deaf [Pepsi ad](#) featuring vaguely non-white looking people while also white-washing the justice movements of the moment articulates just this.

Furthermore, we must look at how digital media can function as escapism or freedom for oppressed people, like the queer community found on sites like Tumblr. It is easy to view these revolutionary, real, important communities as progress towards organizing, but how is this complicated by the fact that many users' bodies cannot be protected or empowered by that community offline? How do notions of "slacktivism" ring true or untrue in relation to this? Are we successfully transcending our circumstances with digital media realms, or are we becoming distracted? What are the actual ramifications for justice work that is done online, for identities that can only exist online? Can the online world become a tool or a crutch for oppressed groups? How do oppressions translate online?

Media can be a catalyst for repairing justice and act as an educating, uniting force that helps people learn that they and others deserve justice, as well as organize. How do we keep the subject of justice, namely the body, at the forefront of a digital discussion? Essentially, how do justice movements proceed into the digital era when justice ties so deeply to the body, and what kinds of compromises lie ahead?

Works Cited

Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Grove/Atlantic, Inc.. Kindle Edition.

Fields, Barbara Jeanne. *Slavery, Race and Ideology in the United States of America*. New Left Review I/181, May-June 1990." [New Left Review](#).

Booklist

A Note on the Booklist

Given that some foundational themes in my rationale concern violence and colonialism, specifically the subjugation of the body in ways that negatively shape entire histories, I have moved the Darwin, Osborn, and Broussais texts to the Ancient section to make room in my booklist for Othered voices. My decision to do this comes from a desire to move away from the white, male, Eurocentric canon, one that, in this case, very deliberately and violently put into motion a system in which certain bodies and lives are considered expendable and lesser. While there are non-European texts from this time period that are relevant to my rationale, I aim to emphasize that those texts are not seen in the canon, and that that canon is yet another enforcement of hegemony. I chose these texts for their relevance in shaping harmful ideologies, but would like to position them where they belong: in a section to be considered, but improved upon, added to, modernized, and contextualized with the suppressed voices of black, brown, queer, female writers, and the lived experiences of their bodies, many of which are only recently being allowed to flourish.

Ancient, Medieval and Renaissance Classics

- 1) The Valladolid Debate
- 2) *The Arabian Nights*
- 3) Rene Descartes, Mind Body Dualism
- 4) Aristotle, *Politics - Natural Slavery*
- 5) Broussais, Lectures on Phrenology, 1835-1836
- 6) Charles Darwin, *The Origin of Species*
- 7) Frederick Osborn, *Development of a Eugenic Philosophy*
- 8) Giambologna, The Rape of the Sabine Women (statue) -

Modernity - The Humanities

- 1) Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*
- 2) Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*
- 3) Cherríe Moraga and Gloria E. Anzaldúa, *This Bridge Called My Back*
- 4) Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*
- 5) Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*

Modernity - The Social and Natural Sciences

- 1) Sheila Jeffreys, *Beauty and Misogyny: Harmful Culture Practices in the West*
- 2) Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow*
- 3) Susan Bordo, *Reading the Slender Body*
- 4) Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*
- 5) Iris M. Young, *On Female Body Experience: "Throwing Like A Girl" and Other Essays*
- 6) Nathan Jurgenson, Digital Dualism vs. Augmented Reality

Area of Concentration

- 1) Anne Elizabeth Moore, *Body Horror: Capitalism, Fear, Misogyny, Jokes*
- 2) John Cheney-Lippold, *We Are Data*
- 3) Dorothy Roberts, *Killing the Black Body*
- 4) Edward Said, *Orientalism*
- 5) J. Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*
- 6) The Brandon Teena Story (1998)
- 7) Khalid Koser, *International Migration*
- 8) Kathryn Babayan and Afsaneh Najmabadi, *Islamicate Sexualities*