

We Already Know How Fucked Up the World Is

When we participate in social movements, we're often trying to expose the state. Or sometimes we're exposing corporations: big pharma, the agricultural-industrial complex, union-busting efforts by Whole Foods, and so on.

This tactic of exposure can be effective when it's done politically and with a high level of organization. The civil rights movement, for instance, forced to the surface the threats of extreme violence that underlay day-to-day life in the Jim Crow South. The point was, in part, to elevate quotidian violences to a spectacle—the violence of knowing that you had to sit in a certain section of the bus, for instance, and that to do otherwise would come with legal, physical, and material consequences needed to be played out, and played out in a political and visible way.

When we post information on social media, we often try to expose and to educate, though this exposing does not do much without political organization.

The mode of exposing the state, corporations, and other powers that be is still often an effective one. But right now many of us are intensely frustrated with exposure. We have more access to various versions of “the public” than ever before, and information circulates more easily than it did when, say, the Black Panther Party covered police violence in a newspaper they wrote and produced themselves or when ACT UP celebrated Bob Rafsky's getting on the news heckling then-presidential candidate Bill Clinton about the lack of response to the AIDS crisis. The Black Panther Party was trying to get in touch with other poor and working-class African Americans facing similar oppression, while ACT UP wanted coverage from the mainstream media—but in both cases there was a desire for more information to circulate. Because of both social media and the nitty-gritty work that activists have already done, *a lot* of information is

already in circulation about how fucked up our current world is. The state and the ruling class have already been exposed.

Now, we still want information to circulate—but *so much* information is circulating all the time, and so many people both recognize the problems and already know there are others out there who *also* recognize the problems. Educating people about injustices is a way of building collectivity and creating the conditions for social movements. But education and exposure have already done their work. Social movements exist but so far come together only sporadically, in little bursts of activism that are quashed almost immediately. Occupy was crushed after two months. In New York, after a police killing, the police either have a directive to let us run around and blow off some steam, and we can march in the streets and take the Westside Highway and feel a sense of something building, or they have a directive to not let anything happen, and there is an automated order to disperse playing from the time we arrive and such a large number of cops we're never able to break away down a street.

The state is very effective at crushing resistance.

And there is a current of anger at both the state and people or organizations that want to continue to operate on an expose-and-educate model.

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The Dana Schutz controversy at the Whitney Biennial prompted a conversation that was largely not that great. While Schutz became the focus as a white person creating a representation of violence against a black child, the rage directed at her seems more properly to have to do with the gap between the initial representing of Emmett Till's body and what that representation means now. Till's mother chose an open casket and insisted that a picture of Till be published in *Jet* magazine because she wanted to "let the people see what I've seen."¹ She wanted to puncture public discourse. Now public discourse feels saturated by such news—but with an uptick in racist violence, many of us feel frustration and outrage both at the need to expose the state and at cultural productions like Schutz's. We already know what is happening—being told over and over as though that will make a difference only prompts anger.

When homemade videos of police murdering black people surface, some activists question their circulation. What does it mean for the mainstream media to play video of Walter Scott's death over and over? Does the video function as proof and effective agit-prop to spur people to action, or does it function as a lynching postcard?

Despite a large shift in register, a similar sentiment bubbles up in lefty meme culture. Facebook and Instagram users who, judging from the sensibility of "Weird Facebook," as *New York Magazine* describes it, most likely would have been (or perhaps still are) understandably too cynical for

political engagement a few years ago have developed a fairly distinct culture of left Facebook groups, meme pages, and Twitter accounts.² These are sometimes great and sometimes obnoxious: memes about wanting to die; appropriated stock photos; memes about making memes; memes about Žižek. But what this phenomenon has in common with the current discourse around racial violence and representation is that it expresses extreme frustration with the political rhetoric of exposing capitalism. The meme form is intrinsically reiterative. There can be no big reveal, as with a news story. The meme says that we know this, and we know it over and over, all of us know it, look how many people know it, we're going to say over and over again that we already know it. There is no position from which one shows something new. We're instead going to have the same form, and make the same joke, over and over, and we're going to mock liberals' sense of revelation about injustice.

One of the most interesting images from the Trump campaign was a video in which a young black woman stood directly behind Trump as he made a speech. She was, I would speculate, probably put right behind him to suggest that he had a black voter base. She stands silently reading a copy of Claudia Rankine's *Citizen*, flipping pages and ignoring everything going on around her. This image, too, suggests repetition. She doesn't need to hold a sign or shout that Trump is racist; these things are clear to everyone. If exposure still worked as a mode under Obama—at least some people always imagined him to be enacting as well as he could everything that he stood for in people's minds—it certainly doesn't work now.

Rankine's book, too, is a book about repetition. Rankine catalogues instances of racism that feel very much the same, in different iterations. One page simply lists African Americans killed in racist ways:

In Memory of Jordan Russell Davis
In Memory of Eric Garner
In Memory of John Crawford
In Memory of Michael Brown.

After Brown's name, the list becomes just instances of "In Memory" with a blank spot next to the phrase, for future names, we can assume.³ Each new printing of the book adds names, and the page always ends with "In memory of" fading out slowly in lighter ink. That is to say, this is a book about the reiteration of racism, structured around accumulation rather than revelation and narrative, and focused on the emotional difficulty of that reiteration—at points its tiresomeness more than anything else. The woman reading this book behind Trump says something similar: I know what this is, you know what this is, this is another iteration of the same, it's all documented already, and I'm also so bored by it—there is no need to

record it, to bear witness; instead I'm going to read and make the viewers witness instead how *much* we have seen this, how much this has already been seen. If video footage—which always has a buildup of tension, shock, horror attached to it—proliferates the same narrative over and over again, holding a book does something else: this is documented, it says; it's *already* documented and published.

And so in contrast to, say, a newspaper article or long-form piece in the *Atlantic*, both print and memes come to stand in for how much we *already* know things. We can repeat different iterations of the same dark jokes over and over, with the collective gesture of the meme form prefiguring the meat-world collectivity that we want and need. Or we can use print—and its slowness and the staggered release of new printings of books—to gesture toward how well established the violence of racial capitalism is.

In another video, a child participating in the protests in Baltimore after Freddie Gray's death waves Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow* in the air as he marches. The child isn't so much decrying the injustice of the legal system—he could do that more effectively by speaking to the camera or starting a chant, maybe—he's instead saying, we know all this, we already know all this, we know it so well it's in book form, we wrote the book on it.

Notes

This essay was written collaboratively as part of a book sprint. See “How This Text Was Written” (in this issue) for more information on the process.

1. Quoted in Allen, “Reflecting on the 2017 Biennial.”
2. Hongo, “Rise of Weird Facebook.”
3. Rankine, *Citizen*, 134.

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