

Twitter, Book, Riot: Post-Digital Publishing against Race

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Abstract

This article considers today's 'post-digital' political publishing through the material forms of an experimental book, *The 2015 Baltimore Uprising: A Teen Epistolary*. Anonymously published and devoid of all editorial text, the book is comprised entirely of some 650 screen-grabbed tweets, tweets posted by black Baltimore youth during the riots that ensued on the police killing of Freddie Gray. It is a crisis-ridden book, bearing the wrenching anti-black terror and rebellion of Baltimore 2015 into the horizon of publishing. Drawing on critical theories of books and digital media, and bringing Saidiya Hartman and Frank Wilderson to bear on issues of publishing, the article appraises seven aspects of this book's materiality: its epistolary structure and rupture with the book-as-closure; its undoing of the commodity form of books; the 'poor image' of its visual scene; its recourse to facial redaction and voiding of narrative progression; and its destabilization of readers' empathy.

Keywords

Afro-pessimism, books, materiality, publishing, race and racism, riots, Twitter

Introduction

How can a book be adequate to a riot against racial violence? I pose this not only as a problem of textual content, since many books have grappled with riots on the plane of writing and conceptualization. The original intervention I make here is to explore this problem in terms of a book's *materiality*, at a time when books are at once displaced and transformed by online digital media. To that end, this article is an analysis of an experimental, small-press book whose content consists entirely of some 650 screen-grabbed tweets. Titled *The 2015 Baltimore Uprising: A Teen Epistolary*, the book courses with crisis. For the tweets in question were posted amidst the riots that ensued on the police killing of Freddie

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Gray, a 25-year-old black man whose neck was broken while subject to a so-called 'rough ride', cuffed alone in the back of a police van careening through the streets of Baltimore.

These tweets – by turns horrified, enraged, elated, humorous, tactical, analytic, and mundane – fill out the book at the expense of almost every editorial convention by which its political credentials would otherwise be established. It lacks preface, afterword, promotional blurb, and identification by editor or publisher; neither does it contain chapters, page numbers, place and date of publication, or an ISBN (International Standard Book Number). Yet these omissions are integral to what is an extraordinary intervention in contemporary political publishing, as the wrenching anti-black terror and rebellion that is carried in the book's Twitter content are taken up as problems *internal to its published form*.

I hasten to add that the medium of the book here serves not to limit and enclose an otherwise dispersive communicative flux, neither in the formal strategies of *Baltimore Uprising* nor in my analysis. I focus *in* on this book in order to *open out* to what Rachel Malik (2008) calls the 'horizons of the publishable'. For Malik, a book is not best understood as a self-enclosed artefact or a node in a communicative channel relaying writing to readers. A book, rather, is a mesh of 'various publishing processes – writing, editing, design, marketing, production – [that] intersect and conflict', and that bear the textual, visual, genre, medial, epistemic, legal, and commercial conditions wherein the horizons of what can be published are governed in any given time and place (2008: 710). For shorthand, this is the *materiality* of books, which includes but is not limited to or determined by writing. While all books comprise such material forms, processes, and relations, they tend to be pushed aside from our conscious encounters with books by habitual functionalities and the overbearing social valuation of the immaterial textual 'work'. However, certain books draw their materiality into the frame of their critical and aesthetic interventions, and *Baltimore Uprising* is one of these, as it intervenes in today's horizon of political publishing.

To explore this intervention, I first indicate how today's publishing horizon is 'post-digital', from whence comes my methodology, before outlining the significance and fraught nature of encounters between publishing and racialization. Context set, the article turns to *Baltimore Uprising*, investigating seven features of its materiality, each bearing and interrogating different aspects of anti-black racialization and the Baltimore riots. In parts the analysis draws from an interview I conducted by email, in May 2017, with the book's anonymous publisher. I start with the 'epistolary' effects of the book's collection of tweets, before considering its rupture with the book-as-closure, its undoing of the commodity form of books, and the degraded 'poor image' of its visuality, utilizing Maurice Blanchot, Theodor Adorno, and Hito Steyerl. I then appraise the book's recourse to facial redaction, its voiding

of narrative progression, and its destabilization of readers' empathy, drawing on Saidiya Hartman and the Afro-pessimism of Frank Wilderson, and attentive to how its rupture in book form is a rupture also in civil society's self-consolidating routes to redress.

Post-Digital Publishing

Today's publishing horizon is 'post-digital', a term that 'describes the messy state of media, arts and design *after* their digitization' (Cramer, 2014). In this publishing environment, print media and books have been displaced from cultural centrality, consequent on the rise, reach, and functionalities of online digital media, with all the changes in the production, circulation, and reception of text and image that this entails. But too often we misunderstand the place of printed books here, viewing them as the losing party in *opposition* to digital media, rather than seeing how *print itself has become digital*. Print publishing is not determined today by a linear movement of obsolescence and succession, but is intrinsically constituted with digital technologies, be it through compositional means of word-processing and wikis, networked and on-demand manufacture and sale, algorithmic marketing, or debating and reviewing platforms. Far from signaling the 'death of the book', these changes actually open books to new futures, their forms, processes, and relations taking new shape in today's variegated media horizon.

The theory and practice of post-digital publishing seeks not merely to describe, however, but to push publishing *to become reflexively adequate* to this post-digital condition. Politically, this entails circumspection toward narratives of digital deliverance that are key to the capitalist conditions of (ever newer) new media, while challenging the medium of the book as a longstanding nexus of numerous mechanisms of power and authority (Ludovico, 2012). Central to my methodology here, post-digital publishing is also characterized by an experimental testing of disparate forms of textual media, the division between 'old' and 'new' media ceding to synchronic juxtaposition and interplay. Where post-digital publishing has made less headway is in engaging with the politics of class and racialization. I foregrounded class dimensions of post-digital publishing in my *Anti-Book* (Thoburn, 2016); in what follows, problems of racialization take the lead.

Race and Publishing

Approaching racial terror and riots through the lens of experimental publishing may look like a depoliticizing abstraction. Certainly, the structural and physical violence of racialization is immediately pressing in ways that issues in publishing will rarely be. Yet publishing has played a significant role in shaping the conditions, experiences, and forms of racism and struggles against white supremacy (Jackson, 2010;

Young, 2010). Take the terrifying example of lynching photographs, circulated in the United States as printed-postcard souvenirs for white filial bonding well into the early-20th century, or the Southern states' laws against teaching blacks to read and write, passed into new statute up to the 1840s. Switching the perspective to resistance, consider the role of Abolitionist tracts, the publishing genre of 'slave narratives', or anti-colonial works like Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* in galvanizing struggles against racial violence. This is not to suggest that resistance to racism has taken shape through publishing without complication. In slave narratives, for instance, enslaved people sought to 'represent themselves as "speaking subjects"' toward 'destroy[ing] their status as objects, as commodities, within Western culture' (Gates, 1988: 129). But these narratives succeeded, Ronald Judy (1993: 88, 97) argues, only insofar as they confirmed Western modernity's principle that 'writing [is] the sole avenue to humanity'. They hence fashioned 'Negro' subjectivity on the interdiction and invalidation of the 'African', voided of which the achieved subjectivity was 'nothing so much as an investment in the terms of philosophical reflection: writing'.

Publishing, then, is at once a significant terrain of black resistance to racial violence and one that is fraught and ill-fitting, such that Cornel West writes, 'the "ur-text" of black culture is neither a word nor a book, not an architectural monument or a legal brief. Instead, it is a guttural cry and a wrenching moan' (cited in Wilderson, 2010: 109). If we can understand this 'guttural cry' as operative *within* the materiality of publishing, it is also *shaped* through publishing. As the examples above indicate, the articulation of race and publishing is not the mediation of pre-given racial forms (whether as biological essences or guttural cries of resistance), but is *generative* of them. The same is true of social media, such as Twitter. The racially charged hashtags, vernaculars, and call-and-response linguistic play that constitute 'black Twitter', for instance, are a 'technosocial production of race', as Sanjay Sharma (2013: 47) argues. And Black Lives Matter (2013–), the social movement against police brutalization and murder with impunity, famously coalesced through a Twitter hashtag, '#BlackLivesMatter' (Mirzoeff, 2017).

As the reach and impact of these last two examples suggest, Twitter and other social media are the ascendant platforms in the medial production of race today, not print publishing and the codex book. Yet *Baltimore Uprising* is no less *contemporary* for this. Not only constructed through the post-digital juxtaposition and interplay of Twitter and the codex, it interrogates today's horizons of political publishing through an array of forms, processes, and relations, where the conditions of racialization and riots wreak havoc on the book. The first of these that I consider, the epistolary form, might seem anachronistic, but the appropriation of old forms in new contexts is a post-digital move that here has forceful effect.

An Epistolary of Tweets

To provide an image of the physical book to carry in mind as I unpack and complicate its materiality, *Baltimore Uprising* is a pocket-size codex, monochrome throughout, with a tape-covered spine, comprising 272 staple-bound pages, and has non-standard dimensions of 11 × 14 × 1 cm. On first encounter, it has recognizable genre features, the main title and riot-scene cover recalling social-movement books on urban uprisings (Figure 1). But the degraded quality of this cover image is less than typical, a point I return to, and the ‘epistolary’ of the subtitle throws us. The epistolary form, typically comprising a series of fictional private letters between intimates, has often been associated with scenes of

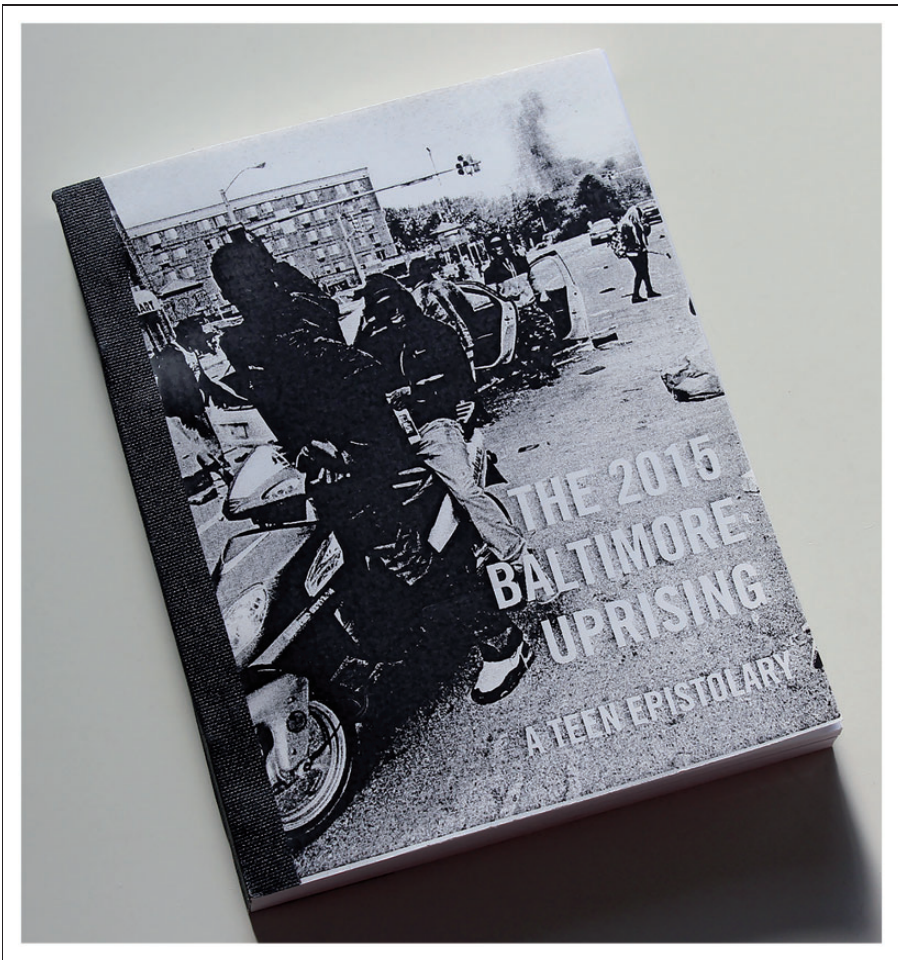


Figure 1. *The 2015 Baltimore Uprising: A Teen Epistolary*. First edition.

heightened emotion, even with social revolution. But it is a surprise indeed to see it naming a contemporary book on *uprising*, and, given its elevated cultural associations, to find it attached to the 'low', commercial term of the 'teen'. Evidently an estranging effect is intended, an effect that is in fact integral to the epistolary form, which 'by definition stages the production of writing' (Kauffman, 2000: 203).

The epistolary novel in its classical, 18th-century guise mobilizes two nested but competing connotations of the letter (Heckendorn Cook, 1996). On the one hand, letters were considered to be the most authentic, direct, and transparent mode of written communication, qualities secured in the epistolary novel's conceit that it presents direct access to private correspondence. On the other hand, 'the letter was simultaneously recognized as the most playful of and potentially deceptive of forms, as a stage for rhetorical trickery' (1996: 16). The staging of these intimate and estranging connotations would often inform an epistolary novel's editorial text – for example, the fictionalized editor's preface and publisher's note to *Dangerous Liaisons* serve to both assert and ironize the veracity of the book's 'real' letters. In *Baltimore Uprising*, both these intimate and estranging features of the epistolary form are mobilized, the book serving at once to heighten proximity to the communicative scene of the tweets and to focus critical and reflexive attention on its medial conditions and qualities. Here, however, these epistolary effects are facilitated by the *absence* of prefatory text.

Experientially, the most immediate effect of this absence is to pull the reader into a direct engagement with the tweets themselves, since on turning the cover one immediately tips into their flow, without a colophon of a pause, much less an introductory pre-fashioning of the content. Assembled here are some 650 tweets – or screen-grabbed copies of tweets, conveying a strong impression of their visual particularity – set out in chronological order, save for one out of sequence on the first page and some repositioning at the end. The first tweet is a brutally frank declaration in text and image of the facts of Freddie Gray's death (Figure 2). The sequential flow then commences the day Gray died (Figure 3) and covers the two-week period of the main swell of the riots. They present readers with a raw communicative scene of immediate response to Freddie Gray's killing, to the racialized terror of Baltimore policing, and to the ensuing riots, from young black inhabitants of the city caught up in the uprising, as participants and as observers of the events through social media and television.

I consider the particular content and qualities of the tweets as this article progresses, but I want to do so by according them proper specificity in the form by which they are encountered. For readers do not experience the tweets as such – streams of data, expression, affect, and association modulated by smartphones in real-time in the midst of riotous events – but screen-grabs of these, appropriated into the pages of a codex book.

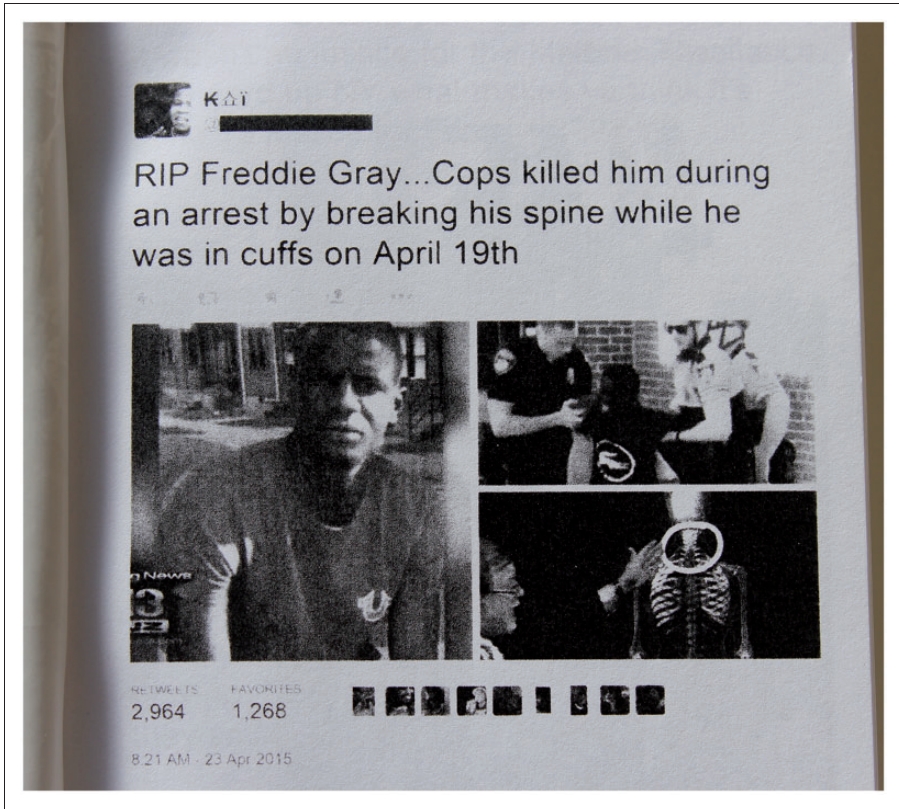


Figure 2. First page of *The 2015 Baltimore Uprising: A Teen Epistolary*. First edition.

Twitter is clearly an epistolary medium of a sort, but in its appropriation by other publishing media it easily cedes its epistolary qualities, sometimes with troubling political results. The search method employed in the making of *Baltimore Uprising* is revealing in this regard. Social-movement research on and with Twitter has tended to focus on the techno-social capacity of the hashtag, Twitter's 'inline metadata' function that aggregates and organizes the multiplicity of tweets in trend patterns and 'ambient affiliations' among users (Zappavigna, 2011). See, for example, the numerous articles on the 2014 Ferguson riots, that ensued on the police killing of Michael Brown, which are based on statistical analysis of the hashtag '#Ferguson' (Barnard, 2018). It is all the more striking, then, that the publishers of *Baltimore Uprising* proceeded in their Twitter search, conducted during the course of the riots, by *excluding* trending hashtags, instead homing in on local landmarks, malls, high-school proms, store names, and idiosyncrasies of the riots. They found that trending hashtags operated at a scale removed

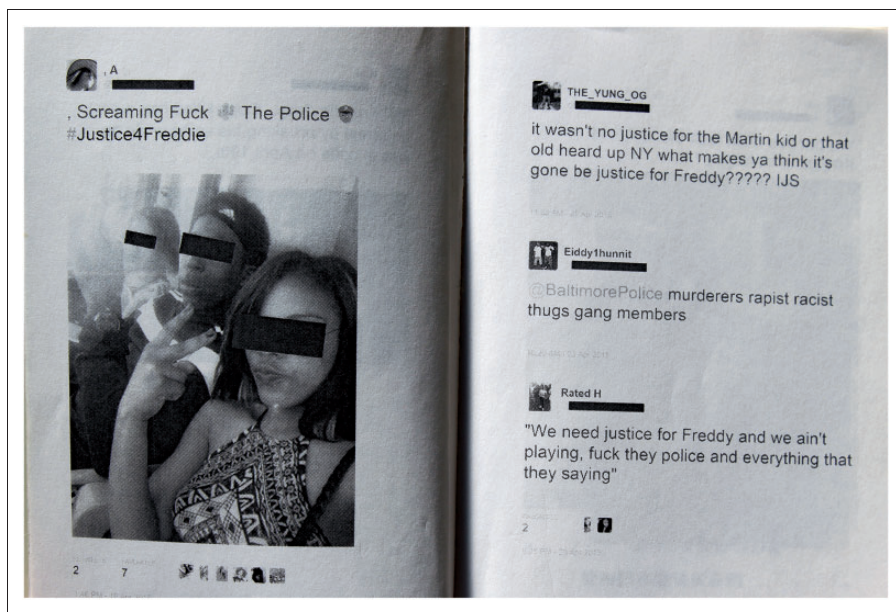


Figure 3. Pages of *The 2015 Baltimore Uprising: A Teen Epistolary*. Second edition.

from the communicative scene of the uprising, and that at this scale Twitter served those from outside Baltimore who would appropriate the riots to their own ends – journalists driven by corporate news agendas and sanctioned interpretative frames, but also ‘activists trying to boost their own social capital by “explaining” what everything meant and the motivations of all the kids on the ground’ (interview with the publisher, 2017). A variation of this point is well made by one of the book’s tweets: ‘White and non-black people literally capitalizing off of our experiences for a couple hundred retweets it really rubs me the wrong way’.

In contrast, *Baltimore Uprising*’s engagement with Twitter *draws out* Twitter’s epistolary intimacy, serving to keep readers close to ‘what the kids on the ground were actually saying and feeling’, to produce ‘a record of the uprising [from their] perspective’, a perspective systematically excluded from public discourse (interview with the publisher, 2017). Explanatory, this epistolary record is also *affective*, as racial terror and vertiginous uprising cleave through the words, emojis, and images, conveying the tremor of lived experience that is typically filtered out of political publishing and theoretical systematization. That is not to say *Baltimore Uprising* is a comprehensive record, clearly, or that it is without interpretation. Rather, interpretation is engendered by proximity to the tweets, in all their expressive complexity, as I first pursue through their articulation of the riots.

Book of Riots

Unstewarded by editorial narratives and schemas, the riots erupt through the book's content (as I briefly consider now) and its form. Two intertwined themes are paramount: attacks on the police – in language, as we have seen already, and in practice, with the trashing of police vehicles featuring prominently in the tweeted photographs; and collective looting. Looting provides the book's strongest pacing element, from a tweet calling to 'destroy' the Mondawmin Mall, where confrontation between young people and police proved to be the uprising's trigger event, through numerous images of looters, cleaned-out stores, and a panoply of looted shoes, hair weave, soft and alcoholic drinks, breakfast cereals, and so forth (Figure 4). Wrested from spatial and commercial order, this disrupted commodity scene conveys an imperfect constellation of appropriation and exuberance, needs met and excess, and defiance of the subjection to penury, debt, and police violence that are the social conditions of the commodity form.

It is the prominence and qualitative depth of these two themes that leads Joshua Clover (2016a) to extol *Baltimore Uprising* as 'the first great book to come from the last great riot in the United States', an acute expression of today's racialized class condition of 'surplus population'. In this thesis, workers' expulsion from formal labour markets by the secular decline in industrial labour sees struggles pivot from production

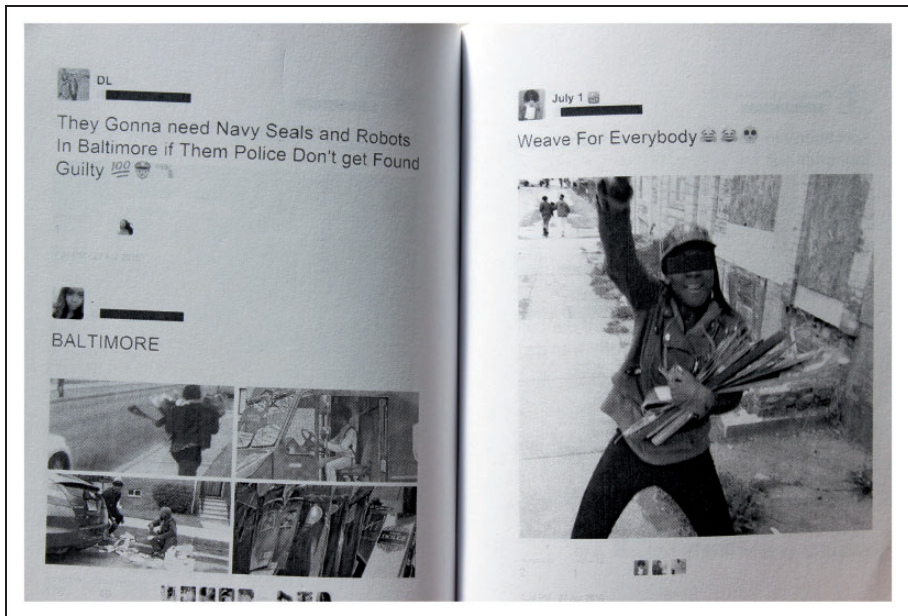


Figure 4. Pages of *The 2015 Baltimore Uprising: A Teen Epistolary*. Second edition.

(the 'strike') to social reproduction and commodity circulation (the 'riot'), taking shape against the nexus of policing, ghettoization, debt, and prison, whereby populations superfluous to production are racialized into abjection to the point of death (Clover, 2016b). Clover's broad historicization of the book is apt (though what follows implies its historicization also via the competing analytic of Afro-pessimism, anti-blackness indexed not to changes in *labour* but to the persistent ontological structure of the slave as *commodity object*). Yet in appraising *Baltimore Uprising* by the socio-political horizon of race and class evident in its tweets, Clover says little about its singular achievement *as a book*, how race and class irrupt in its *material forms*. It is to this that I now return, provoked by the second feature of epistolary form, as our intimate encounter with the book's tweets is jostled by an estranging unease at the absence of expected editorial marshalling.

Useful here is Blanchot's work on publishing in the wake of May '68. Renowned as a critic of the totalizing, encyclopaedic pretensions of the book form, it is seldom noticed that Blanchot advances this critique in relation to our specific problem of social uprising. I refer to his anonymous writing in *Comité*, the single-issue journal of the Student-Writer Action Committee, the May '68 coalition of Blanchot, Marguerite Duras, Dionys Mascolo (who later identified the texts authored by Blanchot), and some 20 others.

Like *Baltimore Uprising*, *Comité* was published shortly after the end of the uprising to which it pertains. Indeed, it was the plethora of books that ensued on the cessation of '68 that prompted Blanchot's inquiry here into the politics of publishing form. Whether as epitaph, commentary, analysis, panegyric, or condemnation, these books, he argues, all contributed to the same end: the summation and closure of the uprising, an effect consequent of the book's totalizing form. Political publishing required instead media that could *prolong* this 'arrest of history', that could bear and extend its rupture through their material forms:

everything that disturbs, calls, threatens, and finally questions without expecting an answer, without resting in certainty, never will we enclose it in a book, which, even when open, tends toward closure, a refined form of oppression. . . . No more books, never again a book, so long as we maintain our relation with the upheaval of the rupture. (Blanchot, 2010: 95)

Blanchot finds such ruptural media in tracts, posters, bulletins, and murals. Unlike the post-hoc books, these forms were produced within and circulated amidst the unfurling of '68, but their critical adequacy to the uprising resides above all in their fragmentary, fleeting, and incomplete nature, in their ruination of totalizing, encyclopaedic

enclosure: 'Tracts, posters, bulletins, words of the streets, infinite words... They do not say everything; on the contrary, they ruin everything' (2003: 95).

It is reasonable to ask if *Baltimore Uprising* is not a work of closure in Blanchot's terms. It is a book after all, and one that selects from and binds a surfeit of fleeting fragments of communication. Yet I want to argue that this book is precisely a work of fragmentation and rupture, engendering qualities of the riots in its ruination of the book-as-closure. The absence of interpretative text, editor's name, and publisher details again plays a role, for *Baltimore Uprising* in this way blocks the passage readers would otherwise be offered away from the uprising to an anchoring authority or interpretive summation external to its tumult. Readers are instead held to the fragmented and ruptural communicative milieu of the riots, a move compounded by the absence of chapters and page numbers, the visual, cognitive, and proprioceptive screens through which the tweets would be ordered and paced by a conventional book.

This has *temporal* qualities, the book a fragment of ruptural time. The fragmentary and incomplete nature of each tweet, and of readers' movement through the tweets, bears the rupture in continuous time that is an intrinsic quality of being caught up in a riot. The tweets occasionally follow short conversational streams and carry recurring motifs, but these appear in disjointed series, imperfectly indexed to specific features of the unfolding, lurching events, for which readers are unprepared. As a review in Baltimore's *City Paper* put it, the book's tweets 'send us back to those days when we didn't know what was happening or what was going to happen next' (Soderberg, 2015).

The *affective* qualities of ruptural time are also in ascendance. The tweets convey rushes and tipping points ('THEY ARE REALLY RUNNING THROUGH MONDAWMIN JUST STEALING SHIT'), eddies and lulls ('U gud?' 'Yeah you home?' 'Yea'). There is much awed disbelief ('When shit happened in ferguson, we ALL said this would happen if it came here. Still seems so surreal') and a groping effort to grasp the magnitude of events by recourse to the heightened affective scenes of video games ('Told Yall...GTA 6: Baltimore Trenches!'), movies ('This better than the actual Purge Movie'), and television ('This ain't the television stuff no more it's right here in Baltimore City').

The fragmentary and ruptural quality of *Baltimore Uprising* is carried too by its physical form. Its flimsy paper covers, staple-binding, tape-covered spine, and the degraded monochrome of its photocopied pages convey a feeling that its coherence as a complete and integrated artefact is barely achieved, that it is a momentary concrescence, a fragment among fragments. Even its status as a book is in doubt, seemingly existing in 'a gray area between book and nonbook', to borrow Kate Eichhorn's (2016: 44) characterization of unauthorized volumes of bound photocopies. There is more to the book's physical and visual

design, but I move now to consider this through its challenge to publishing's commodity forms.

Anti-Commodity Book

Unlike the commodities encountered in *Baltimore Uprising*, this book is not consumed as a looted commodity. Nonetheless, it is a significant interruption in the commodity form of books. Adorno (1992: 21), in his late essay 'Bibliographic Musings', argues that the book as commodity 'sidles up to the reader'. Through marketing mechanisms, exaggerated formats, and loud colours, commodity books come to exist not for themselves in their expressive uniqueness, but 'for something other' in their generality, units of exchange always 'ready to serve the customer' (1992: 21). His analysis recalls Marx's swipe at the debasement of material culture that is attendant on the commodity form: 'Private property', as it abstracts from the qualities of objects to turn them into carriers of exchangeable value, 'alienates the individuality not only of people *but also of things*' (Marx and Engels, 1974: 102; emphasis added). In contrast, *Baltimore Uprising* severs the formal means to universal exchangeability, allowing its particular material qualities to come forward unconstrained by the demands and circuits of marketing, which in our time of consumer-profiling algorithms have moved on apace. However, unlike the austere designs of books favoured by Adorno, where 'literary publishing houses with strict standards' hold vainly to a book-form supposedly prior to its commodity debasement (1992: 20), the particularity of *this* book makes no prelapsarian appeals. Its political materiality is wrought from the commodity conditions of contemporary publishing.

The lack of an ISBN cuts *Baltimore Uprising* from the global logistical mechanism of commodity books, and the absence of publisher details and editor name further limits its market visibility and orientation toward exchange. This anonymity also stymies a key means by which books turn language into property and profit. For it refuses the author-function, historically co-emergent with the function of publisher, which serves as a 'creator of scarcity', 'an interior space introduced into an exterior field of discourse to create privileged nodes of value' (Nealon, 2008: 76). Instead, we see the Twitter handles that are the text's source: The King, YoungestOfDaCamp, BL, and ItsTy2, to take a page-spread at random. They serve not as spaces of authorial limitation and ownership but as moments in a collective, impersonal, and abundant flow (the book's response to the monetization of this flow in *social media* is considered below).

As to the manufacture and distribution of *Baltimore Uprising*, there is no legitimate economic model here but a *parasitical* and *gift* relationship. The book is produced without payment, using a 'copy scam' when time

and inclination allow (its 'open edition' currently numbers 200 copies or so), and is distributed for free to friends and for a negligible price at book fairs, with some Baltimore distribution ensured by an anonymously-posted batch to Baltimore's radical bookshop, Red Emma's (interview with the publisher, 2017). Free but scarce. This is an extraordinary conjunction, where scarcity, normally the preserve of economic value, has a *communist* valence, increasing not the price the book commands but the allure of its breach with property forms.

I do not mean to suggest that these anti-commodity features of *Baltimore Uprising* realize a wholly extra-capitalist entity. Online search finds that it does in fact have a named publisher: Research and Destroy New York City. Moreover, it was reprinted shortly after publication by an established radical publisher, AK Press, in an edition that reintroduces features of commercial publishing (Figure 5). The reprint still lacks identification by editor and publisher, but is now perfect bound, sports a title on the spine, and has full-colour covers, an ISBN, cleaner and less exposed Print on Demand pages, and is commercially sold, including on Amazon (from whence any profits are donated to a youth-education scheme in Baltimore, the Algebra Project). At one level, this edition is the recapture of an anti-commodity book by capitalist forms, as is most stark in the visual appearance of the ISBN information

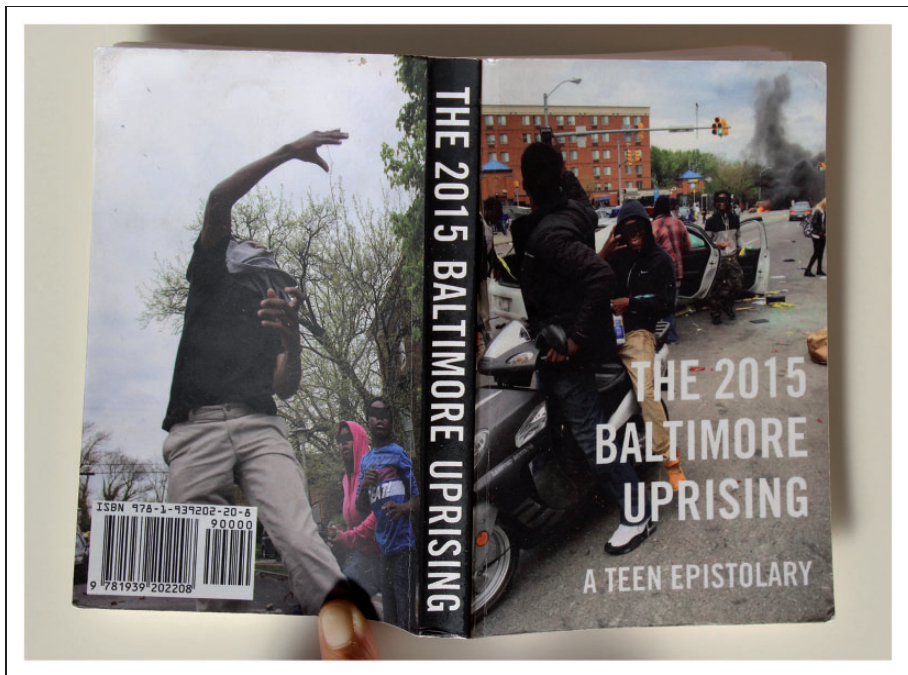


Figure 5. *The 2015 Baltimore Uprising: A Teen Epistolary*. Second edition.

on the back cover. With its bright-white box placed atop an image of rioting black youth, this coded commodity language visibly fashions the book into the order of uniform and value-bearing marketable commodities. Yet the reprint is not without merit. When the two editions are juxtaposed, the reprint serves less to dampen than to *amplify* the anti-commodity features of the original, while its commodity qualities remind readers that anti-commodities are produced only through persistent wrenching away from capitalist relations, not as islands of ever-liberated form. Juxtaposition also has the effect of confounding the notion of an 'original' at all, for the *first* edition, which continues to be produced, looks and feels like a *pirate copy* of the second, and celebrates this, in being the more desirable of the two objects. True of the book as a whole, this quality of the degraded copy has a particular expression in the visual scene of its tweets, to which I turn now.

Poor-Image Book

The degraded quality of xerox reproduction has long been celebrated in self-publishing (Eichhorn, 2016), though in *Baltimore Uprising* it is a specifically contemporary response to certain features of online digital media. One design approach would have been to lift the text of the Baltimore tweets and typeset them to the 'rich' typographic standards of commercial publishing, with book aesthetics thus dominating the medial encounter. This is common to the proto-genre of Twitter-books, such as Chindu Sreedharan's (2014) tweeted Mahabharata, *Epic Retold*, and is partially true of another book of tweets from a social uprising, *Tweets from Tahrir* (Idle and Nunns, 2011). But *Baltimore Uprising* takes a different path, where the original visual form is screen-grabbed from Twitter, then pasted, laser-printed, and photocopied into a codex book. The visual scene of Twitter is thus maintained and dominant, but in the manner of a *degraded copy* – an articulation in publishing of what Steyerl (2012) calls the 'poor image'.

'Perfect images', Steyerl writes, are the high-end visual products of commercial media, bearing infrastructures and evaluative paradigms that produce, broker, and protect them as image and commodity. *Poor* images, in contrast, are substandard copies of substandard copies, the massive superfluity of low-resolution digital files that flood through global media channels. They are 'distributed for free, squeezed through slow digital connections, compressed, reproduced, ripped, remixed, ... copied and pasted into other channels of distribution' (2012: 32). Such images are of course integral to the expansion and intensified capitalization of social media, conditioned by the velocity of circulation and compression of attention that are requisite for its psychosocial and economic forms. But in their violation of 'perfect' aesthetic values, their superfluity, and their impersonal, collective production and sharing,

poor images, Steyerl wagers, might recover some of the image's 'political punch'. This is the possibility of a 'new aura' of the image, 'no longer based on the permanence of the "original" but on the transience of the copy', a politics of the image that 'is no longer anchored within a classical public sphere mediated and supported by the frame of the nation-state or corporation, but floats on the surface of temporary and dubious data pools' (2012: 42).

It is clear already that *Baltimore Uprising* directs readers to such 'poor image' features of Twitter's use amidst the riots. Yet its own realization of the poor image is not in that scene as such, but in its ripped and remixed appropriation of tweets *in the book*, which is as much a rendering of the medium of the book to the impersonal, collective, and value-violating terrain of the degraded copy. The book's poor-image tweets have a mocking or menacing effect on the perfect image of Twitter's clean, unifying, and innocuous interface, that visual scene epitomized by the infantilizing baby-blue dove that is Twitter's corporate logo. They also trouble the value paradigm of Twitter. The tweets have been appropriated, without permission or license, and, in contrast to the ad-tech economy of social media, the attention they attract in this book has no payoff for commercial data-capture and audience brokerage. However, the politics of the poor image at play here is most acute in its dimensions of class and racialization.

'The poor image', Steyerl continues, 'is a rag or a rip; an AVI or a JPEG, a lumpen proletarian in the class society of appearances, ranked and valued according to its resolution.' 'Poor images', as she alludes to Fanon's figure of anti-colonial uprising, 'are the contemporary *Wretched of the Screen*' (2012: 32). It is a compelling association, where poor images, to recall Clover, share with racialized surplus populations the quality of wretched and nebulous superfluity. In Steyerl, this association remains gestural, but in *Baltimore Uprising* the racial and class politics of poor images take concrete form. For it is precisely as poor images that black populations in the United States and elsewhere have been rendered visible in the present moment, the myriad 'low-resolution photographs and videos that captured the particular set of appearances that can be called Black Lives Matter' (Mirzoeff, 2017: 21). It is a visual scene overwhelmingly comprised of the documentation of police assault and killing of black people. Yet it provides no means out of the abjection of racial terror. From the videotaped police beating of Rodney King in 1991 to the 2016 police shooting of Philando Castile, live-streamed as he died, there are no convictions for the identifiable perpetrators. And the routine circulation of these images through televisual news and social media not only normalizes black suffering, where 'terror resides within the limits of socially tolerable', to borrow Hartman's (1997: 63) characterization of the scene of slavery. It also, as she continues, generates prurience, voyeurism, and self-consolidating enjoyment in the spectacle of violence and

suffering, these images becoming what Wilderson (2016) calls ‘the modern lynching photograph’. What this suggests is that even as the poor image offers a new political aura of the image, and a terrain of appearance and struggle against racial terror, it remains a hostile terrain. The poor image of *Baltimore Uprising* takes shape, then, as a construction against the racial abjection that its degraded, impersonal, and collective quality does not in and of itself overcome.

Eye Service and Redaction

The abjection of police violence is in part countered in *Baltimore Uprising* by its clear-eyed focus on black rebellion, but not all its work against anti-blackness is performed this way. Its images also force one’s gaze upon this abjection. It is a gaze that is not returned. Readers cannot miss that in most of the faces included in the book’s tweeted photographs, the eyes have been redacted (as have key identifying features of the Twitter accounts). This was a provision on the part of the publishers to preserve anonymity, and to be seen to be doing so, given the number of tweets that feature or promote law-breaking activity. It is common to the visual culture of radical political media today, but the sheer accumulation here of redacted eyes on black faces makes for unsettling viewing, for in the historical and contemporary conditions of anti-blackness, vision is a highly racialized capacity.

Freddie Gray was first pursued because he returned a police officer’s gaze. He transgressed an informal code of domination and subservience in law enforcement and the prison system that dates back through the ‘reckless eyeballing’ of the Jim Crow period, when whites took black looks to be a ready prompt for lynching, to chattel slavery, where ‘eye service’ was a punishable act, deemed reckless and as such a sign of potential revolt (Mirzoeff, 2017: 88–9). Does *Baltimore Uprising* unwittingly *repeat* this violent prohibition of black capacity to look? Redacting eyes is certainly a different aesthetic procedure to that of a more prominent image associated with the moment of Black Lives Matter, where black eyes were instead *accentuated*. In December 2014, following the grand jury’s failure to indict the police officer responsible for strangling Eric Garner, the Millions March in New York City was fronted by eight large placards that assembled together a breath-taking image of Garner’s eyes, magnified to reach across the width of the march (Figure 6). Returning the gaze of a police-murdered black man, and at such scale and collectivity, is a powerful political move, but I venture that the effect of redaction in *Baltimore Uprising* is no less political. It works in a different way, though, with a different critical sensibility. Whereas the defiant return of the gaze conveys an emerging public protagonism against racial violence, facial redaction wards off the self-assuring feeling that protagonism has been achieved, even amidst uprising. It foregrounds



Figure 6. Placards of Eric Garner's eyes fronting the Millions March, New York City, December 2014. Photograph by The All-Nite Images. CC BY-SA 2.0.

instead the structural bar to black subjectivity that inheres in the monotonous persistence of racial violence, and hence the *ruptural*, root-and-branch transformation that will be necessary for its overcoming. It is a socio-aesthetic configuration manifest also in the narrative form of *Baltimore Uprising* and its mode of readership, the last two features of this book that I will consider.

Narrative Void

The narrative structure of *Baltimore Uprising* is usefully approached with the aid of Wilderson's (2014) reading of Assata Shakur's 'To My People', her 1973 radio communiqué from prison, where she was held under charges related to activity in the Black Liberation Army.

Communiqués aim to present revolutionary actions as legible and legitimate, typically proceeding by a narrative structure of equilibrium, a point prior to oppression, through its destruction by capitalism or colonization, and its reconstitution or reimagining as the result of struggle. It is a redemptive narrative structure facilitated by mediating objects like land, labour, and custom, mediating objects that are the dialogic terrain of struggle, whose uncertain outcome is the condition for narrative progression as such. (Communiqués by the Red Army Faction and

the Provisional IRA are Wilderson's examples, with the latter typical in its aim to restore Irish territorial integrity.) 'To My People' is recognizably working with the communiqué form, but Shakur can identify neither prior equilibrium nor plenitude restored. This is because the mediating object here – which is simultaneously social, personal, and psychic, as indicated in the second sentence by reference to her 'slave name joanne chesimard' – has no affirmable positivity but is, rather, the gratuitous and monotonous violence of anti-black racism (Shakur, 2014: 71). I will take a moment to sketch this Afro-pessimist thesis.

For Wilderson, anti-blackness is the structural dispossession of subjectivity, a crushing condition born of chattel slavery, of being owned, used, and traded as a replaceable and interchangeable commodity object. The place of violence is key. Unlike the worker, who experiences violence as *contingent* on some transgression, the slave is subject to *gratuitous* violence, 'for which there need be no rationale or limits and from which there is no sanctuary' (Wilderson, 2013: 184). It effectively dispossesses the slave of subjectivity, of positivity in their being, 'because it positions the Black in an infinite and indeterminately horrifying and open vulnerability'. The slave condition is hence 'a void of historical movement' (Wilderson, 2010: 38). At the same moment, slavery is the negative condition by which civil society defines and ever renews itself as positivity: '[t]he slave is the object or the ground that makes possible the existence of the bourgeois subject and, by negation or contradistinction, defines liberty, citizenship, and the enclosures of the social body' (Hartman, 1997: 62).

With emancipation, though the formal terms of slavery are abolished, the slave condition carries over (hence the 'pessimism'), embodied no longer in the master-slave relation but in the condition of anti-blackness, as 'the structural determinations of enslavement were "epidermalised"', in Fanon's formulation (R.L., 2013). It is a structural condition that finds concrete expression in police murder with impunity; in the accumulation and spatial containment of urban ghettos; and in the for-profit prison network, where one in every three African-American men born today can expect to be incarcerated at some point in their lifetimes and subsequently suffer debarment from work, welfare, education, and housing, a 'New Jim Crow' cloaked and fomented by the race-neutral discourse of felony (Alexander, 2012).

Returning to Shakur's communiqué, this is the ontological basis of its narrative failure, where attempts at historical movement and collective agency are crowded out by the relentless repetition of scenes of violence. The communiqué's 'textual heat... is dispersed throughout an array of bodily violations, horrifying images indexical of a structural rupture of her capacity to lay claim to transindividual concepts, to mediating objects' (Wilderson, 2014: 24). However, barred from and negated by the narrative structure of civil society and its leftist variants, the horror

of Shakur's impasse also reveals a textual method adequate to the struggle against anti-blackness.

Wilderson observes that political works, books in particular, are not usually permitted to be devoid in this way of narrative progression. For that would be antithetical to the narrative infrastructure of (white) historical movement, of which the book has historically been both agent and sanctifying form (Thoburn, 2016). Even the most relentlessly critical books hence find themselves compelled by the values and institutions of culture and publishing to provide an uplifting ending. Their writers 'consciously or unconsciously peel away from the strength and the terror of their evidence in order to propose some kind of coherent, hopeful solution to things', thus integrating their vertiginous critique back into the world as it is, bolstering civil society's self-consolidating parameters of legible, coherent, and reasonable action (Wilderson in Hartman, 2003: 183).

Baltimore Uprising, however, like Shakur's communiqué, is *not* this way structured. It refuses world-consolidating routes to redress and instead stays unflinchingly 'in the hold of the ship' (Wilderson, 2010: xi). The point is not to find here a subjectivity bolstered by trauma, but to '*heighten* [sensitivity to] social and political contradictions', the wrenching conditions of the imperfect rupture that was Baltimore 2015 (Wilderson, 2010). The book carries a repetitive loop of violence, a violence that 'bleeds out beyond the grasp of narration' (Wilderson, 2014: 7). This is the violence of one man's murder, but also the intrinsic violence of the police, gratuitous, monotonous, and inflicted with impunity: 'it wasn't no justice for the Martin kid [...] what makes ya think it's gone be justice for Freddy????' '@BaltimorePolice murderers rapist racist thugs gang members'. There is no preface or epilogue to plot progression out of this violence, and the content in numerous points voids the putative routes to resolution presented by civil society, such as democratic representation, legal process, or economic uplift: 'They tell us when we "vote" we are being heard. No THIS is an example of us young people being heard!!!!' 'Stephanie [Rawlings-Blake, the city's Mayor] keep calling yall thugs...she wanna be white so bihhhhh'. 'Downtown business revenue don't help our communities or our schools...I say fuck me burn everything'.

Toward the close of the book a sequence of tweets reflect with excitement the indictment of six officers for Freddie Gray's death, understood to be a consequence of the riots. But 'CHARGES DOESNT MEAN CONVICTED', as one of the tweets checks this anticipation of a positive resolution, to be proven founded the following summer when all the officers were acquitted or had their indictments dropped. The book then ends with a monotonous nine pages of tweets that register, without closure, the death of Freddie Gray, a comment stream prompted by a

tweet of his portrait and coffin which requests ‘Dont Scroll Down Without Typing “R.I.P”’.

Undoing Empathy

For all this book’s achievements in constructing its material forms through immersion in the communicative milieu of Baltimore youth, it was not published from within their scenes and no pretence is made that it might find there a sizeable readership. Who, then, is this book for, and how might they read it?

It is tempting to circumvent this question of readership by evoking the relative contingency of a book’s circulation, where *Baltimore Uprising* would be for anyone who chances upon it and is taken by its intervention. There is some truth in this formulation. But it draws explanatory weight from an ideological structure integral to the bourgeois form of books, where, as Leah Price (2012) argues, the autonomy of the possessive individual finds a complement to his freedom – supposedly determined only by his personal will and intellect – in the vaunted autonomy of books, their circulation equally undetermined by base social relations. Moreover, appealing to the contingency of this book’s readership would contribute to publishing’s ‘dissimulated universality of whiteness’, eliding confrontation with the patterns of racialization that structure white consumption of black expressive text (Young, 2010: 55, quoting Judith Butler). It is regarding this problem, of the white reader of black expressive text, that *Baltimore Uprising* takes issues of readership *into its form*, where it undoes the racializing structure of *empathy*.

The epistolary play of intimacy and estrangement that I noted at the outset is further complicated by the bar of racial difference. Blackness here unsettles white intimacy, as the white reader is drawn into the scene of the tweets at the same moment that they are interpolated as separate, not only as a party external to the communicative exchange, but also one who encounters the tweets in self-consolidating distinction from its scene of anti-black police terror. Given the ties of sentiment that are spun by the epistolary form, we might have expected this bar to have been ameliorated in these pages with empathy, the book provoking a ‘bodily effort to enter through “speech, gesture, tonality” into another’s way of being or life-world’ (Wilderson, 2013: 181). But there is a false universalization with the gesture of empathy, and hence a violence, that renders the encounter on *personal* and not *structural* terms. At the personal level, empathetic resolution for the reader can usually be achieved. But this is a liberal terrain of encounter, ‘the scale of abstraction [brought] back down to the level most comfortable for White people: the individual and the uncontextualized realm of fair play’ (Wilderson, 2015: 407). At this level, empathetic resolution obscures the *structural difference* of anti-blackness as social order and individual experience, the level at which resolution

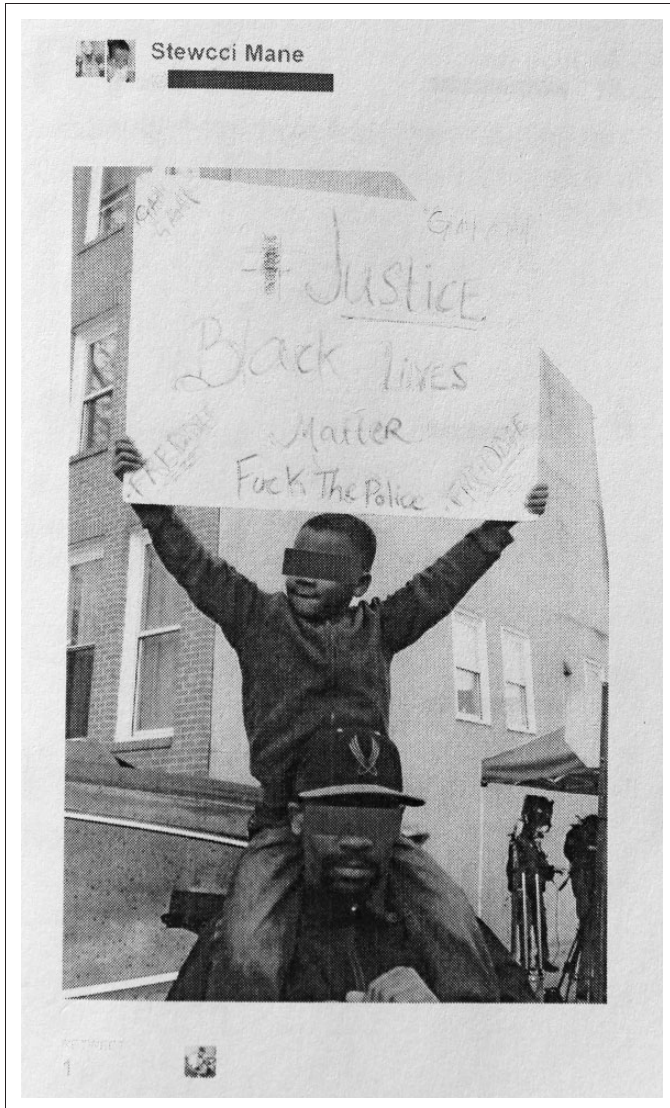


Figure 7. Page of *The 2015 Baltimore Uprising: A Teen Epistolary*. Second edition.

would need to be achieved to be meaningful. Empathy also carries a tendency toward the ‘obliteration of otherness’, an ‘identification with the other only as we “feel ourselves into those we imagine as ourselves”’ (Hartman, 1997: 19–20, quoting Jonathan Boyarin). It is a move that slides into the structural form of slavery, whereby the capacity to make use of blacks for the self-augmentation of white subjecthood and society is realized whether that use is physical violence, fascination, or (in the moment of empathy) the accumulation of moral virtue (Hartman, 1997).

It is not that race abolition is achievable without a degree of empathy, or that empathy is wholly withdrawn from the form of *Baltimore Uprising*. Rather, the empathetic encounter must be persistently troubled, in favour of a wrenching structural critique that leaves the reader without resolution, provoked to the fraught task of problematizing their own structural relationship to racial violence, and reconfiguring the terms and practices of solidarity accordingly.

In *Baltimore Uprising*, this tangle of empathy and its undoing is most evident in one of the tweeted photographs, where a young boy sits on a man's shoulders, holding a placard that declaims 'Justice' for Freddie Gray (Figure 7). The fragility and innocence of life upon which empathetic relation is often drawn is here symbolized by childhood. But a jolt disrupts white identification, for the child's placard also reads: 'Fuck the Police'. It recalls for me a 1960s documentary film of black primary-school children in the Black Panther Party's breakfast programmes, singing a song whose chorus goes: 'Gun, pick up the gun, pick up the gun and put the pigs on the run' (Olsson, 2011). Both make for uncomfortable viewing, children not only awakened to murderous violence but declaiming an *agential discursive violence of their own*, a violence that is usually rendered illegitimate even when asserted by adults. Shifting from the personal to the *structural* scale, however, this tweet pushes the reader to see a vertiginous political truth in the young boy's declamation. For anti-black terror transgresses generational division, as is attested in the United States by the recent deaths of Aiyana Stanley-Jones, at seven-years-old, Tamir Rice, 12, Trayvon Martin, 17, and Darius Simmons, 13, all African-American children shot by police or white citizens.

Conclusion

Baltimore Uprising is a mesh of forms, processes, and relations that bear and interrogate today's horizons of political publishing. A codex filled-out with tweets, it responds to the displacement of books from cultural and medial centrality with a post-digital construction of disparate publishing materialities. Yet the horizon of post-digital publishing here is *political* as much as it is medial. Apt for our time of concatenating social crisis, this book courses with conflictual social relations, constructed as it is from the communicative scene of an uprising against racial terror.


There is no necessity for the Baltimore tweets to issue in a book. And compared to the riots themselves, this book is of little consequence. But publishing is nonetheless a significant terrain of racialization and its resistance. In this terrain, today's horizon of the publishable, *Baltimore Uprising* is less a book *about* the uprising than *of* it. This book *prolongs the rupture* into publishing form, as the temporal fragmentation and

affective swells of the riots are engendered in the unmarshalled flow of tweets; as it meets the looting of commodities with disruption of the commodity book; and as it renders Twitter and book to the 'poor image', today's visual terrain of anti-black terror and resistance. *Baltimore Uprising* has no self-secure identity, as is patent from its appropriated content, degraded visuality, and only-just-achieved physical form. It is a *wrecked* book, racial terror and rupture wreaking havoc on the book form. And there is no reconsolidation in narrative progression and uplift. Through recourse to facial redaction, refusal of narrative emplotment, and disruption of readers' empathy, *Baltimore Uprising* voids civil society's legible, legitimate, and world-consolidation routes to redress. Instead, brokering neither prior equilibrium nor plenitude restored, it heightens sensitivity to crisis and contradiction. This book carries into the horizon of publishing the unbearable terror of anti-blackness, and the imperfect rupture with this world that ensued on the police killing of Freddie Gray.

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