

## THE CONVERSATION

Academic rigor, journalistic flair



Ahmaud Arbery's best friend, right, and his sister speak at a memorial event for Arbery on May 9, 2020. Sean Rayford/Getty Images

# Why cellphone videos of black people's deaths should be considered sacred, like lynching photographs

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As Ahmaud Arbery fell to the ground, the sound of the gunshot that took his life echoed loudly throughout his Georgia neighborhood.

I rewound the video of his killing. Each time I viewed it, I was drawn first to the young black jogger's seemingly carefree stride, which was halted by two white men in a white pickup truck.

Then I peered at Gregory McMichael, 64, and his son Travis, 34, who confronted Arbery in their suburban community.

I knew that the McMichaels told authorities that they suspected Arbery of robbing a nearby home in the neighborhood. They were performing a citizen's arrest, they said.

The video shows Arbery jogging down the street and the McMichaels blocking his path with their vehicle. First, a scuffle. Then, gunshots at point-blank range from Travis McMichael's weapon.

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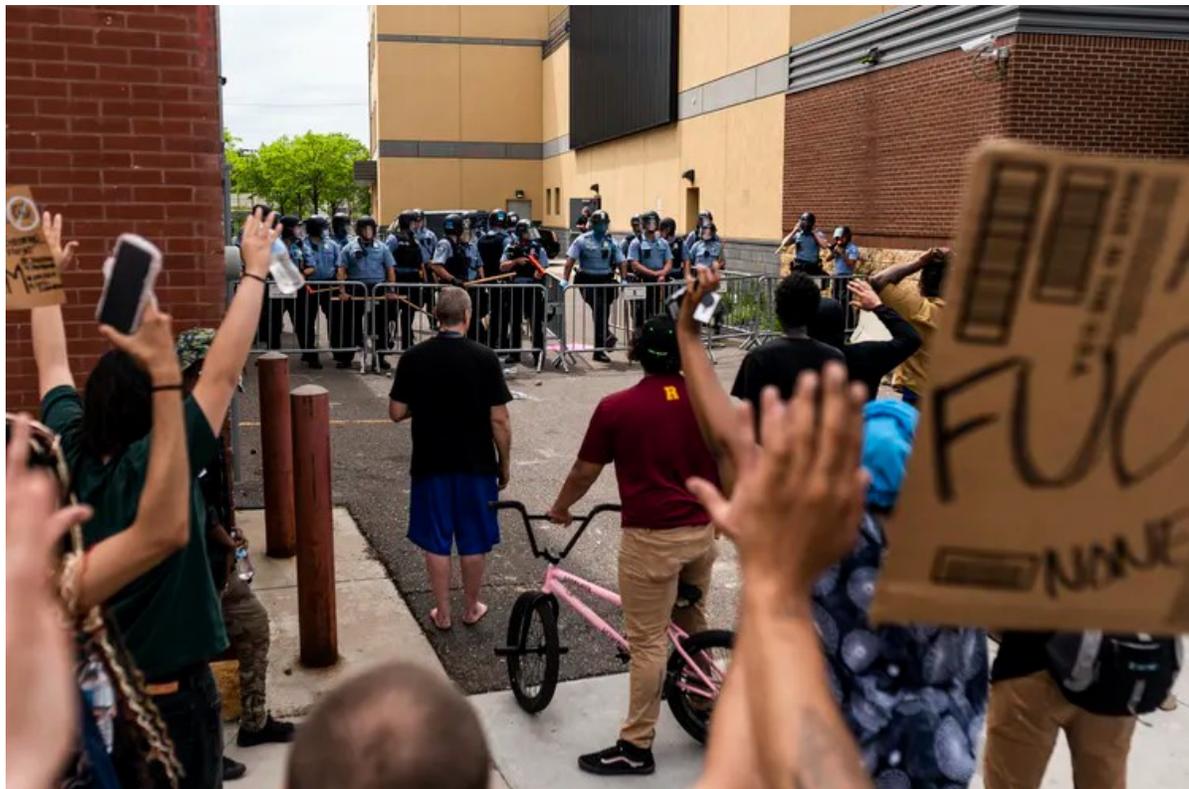
My eyes traveled to the towering trees onscreen, which might have been the last things that Arbery saw. How many of those same trees, I wondered, had witnessed similar lynchings? And how many of those lynchings had been photographed, to offer a final blow of humiliation to the dying?

### **A series of modern lynchings**

It may be jarring to see that word – lynching – used to describe Arbery’s Feb. 23, 2020, killing. But many black people have shared with me that his death – followed in rapid succession by Breonna Taylor’s and now George Floyd’s officer-involved murders – harkens back to a long tradition of killing black people without repercussion.

Perhaps even more traumatizing is the ease with which some of these deaths can be viewed online. In my new book, “Bearing Witness While Black: African Americans, Smartphones and the New Protest #Journalism,” I call for Americans to stop viewing footage of black people dying so casually.

Instead, cellphone videos of vigilante violence and fatal police encounters should be viewed like lynching photographs – with solemn reserve and careful circulation. To understand this shift in viewing context, I believe it is useful to explore how people became so comfortable viewing black people’s dying moments in the first place.



Police confront protesters in Minneapolis in the wake of George Floyd’s death while in police custody on May 25, 2020. Stephen Maturen/Getty Images

### **Images of black people’s deaths pervasive**

Every major era of domestic terror against African Americans – slavery, lynching and police brutality – has an accompanying iconic photograph.

The most familiar image of slavery is the 1863 picture of “Whipped Peter,” whose back bears an intricate cross-section of scars.

Famous images of lynchings include the 1930 photograph of the mob who murdered Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith in Marion, Indiana. A wild-eyed white man appears at the bottom of the frame, pointing upward to the black men’s hanged bodies. The image inspired Abel Meeropol to write the poem “Strange Fruit,” which was later turned into a song that blues singer Billie Holiday sang around the world.

Twenty-five years later, the 1955 photos of Emmett Till’s maimed body became a new generation’s cultural touchstone. The 14-year-old black boy was beaten, shot and thrown into a local river by white men after a white woman accused him of whistling at her. She later admitted that she lied.

Throughout the 1900s, and until today, police brutality against black people has been immortalized by the media too. Americans have watched government officials open firehoses on young civil rights protesters, unleash German shepherds and wield billy clubs against peaceful marchers, and shoot and tase today’s black men, women and children – first on the televised evening news, and, eventually, on cellphones that could distribute the footage online.

When I conducted the interviews for my book, many black people told me that they carry this historical reel of violence against their ancestors in their heads. That’s why, for them, watching modern versions of these hate crimes is too painful to bear.

Still, there are other groups of black people who believe that the videos do serve a purpose, to educate the masses about race relations in the U.S. I believe these tragic videos can serve both purposes, but it will take effort.

# **THE SHAME OF AMERICA**

**Do you know that the United States is  
the Only Land on Earth where human  
beings are BURNED AT THE STAKE?**

**In Four Years, 1918-1921, Twenty-Eight People Were Publicly  
BURNED BY AMERICAN MOBS**

# 3436 People Lynched 1889 to 1922

For What Crimes Have Mobs Nullified Government and Inflicted the Death Penalty?

The Alleged Crimes	The Victims	Why Some Mob Victims Died:
Murder.....	1288	Not turning out of road for white boy in auto
Rape.....	871	Being a relative of a person who was lynched
Crimes against the Person.....	615	Jumping a labor contract
Crimes against Property.....	333	Being a member of the Non-Partisan League
Miscellaneous Crimes.....	453	"Talking back" to a white man
Absence of Crime.....	178	"Insulting" white man.
	<b>3436</b>	

## Is Rape the "Cause" of Lynching?

Of 3,436 people murdered by mobs in our country, only 871, or less than 25 per cent., were even accused of the crime of rape.

**83 WOMEN HAVE BEEN LYNCHED IN THE UNITED STATES**  
Do lynchers maintain that they were lynched for "the usual crime"?

**AND THE LYNCHERS GO UNPUNISHED**

# THE REMEDY

**The Dyer Anti-Lynching Bill Is Now Before the United States Senate**

The Dyer Anti-Lynching Bill was passed on January 25, 1922, by a vote of 220 to 119 in the House of Representatives

The Dyer Anti-Lynching Bill Provides:  
That culpable State officers and mobsters shall be tried in Federal Courts on failure of State courts to act, and that a county in which a lynching occurs shall be fined \$10,000, recoverable in a Federal Court.

The Principal Question Raised Against the Bill is upon the Ground of Constitutionality.

The Constitutionality of the Dyer Bill Has Been Affirmed by—  
The Judiciary Committee of the House of Representatives  
The Judiciary Committee of the Senate  
The United States Attorney General, legal adviser of Congress  
Judge Guy D. Goff, of the Department of Justice

The Senate has been petitioned to pass the Dyer Bill by—  
29 Lawyers and Jurists, including two former Attorneys General of the United States  
19 State Supreme Court Justices  
24 State Governors  
3 Archbishops, 83 bishops and prominent churchmen  
29 Mayors of large cities, north and south.

The American Bar Association at its meeting in San Francisco, August 3, 1922, adopted a resolution asking for further legislation by Congress to punish and prevent lynching and mob violence.

Fifteen State Conventions of 1922 (3 of them Democratic) have inserted in their party platforms a demand for national action to stamp out lynchings.

The Dyer Anti-Lynching Bill is not intended to protect the guilty, but to assure to every person accused of crime trial by due process of law.

**THE DYER ANTI-LYNCHING BILL IS NOW BEFORE THE SENATE  
TELEGRAPH YOUR SENATORS TODAY YOU WANT IT ENACTED**

If you want to help the organization which has brought to light the facts about lynching, the organization which is fighting for 100 per cent. Americanism, not for some of the people some of the time, but for all of the people, white or black, all of the time:

Send your check to J. E. SPINGARN, Treasurer of the

**NATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF COLORED PEOPLE**  
70 FIFTH AVENUE, NEW YORK CITY

THIS ADVERTISEMENT IS PAID FOR IN PART BY THE ANTI-LYNCHING CRUSADERS.

In 1922 the NAACP ran a series of full-page ads in The New York Times calling attention to lynchings. New York Times, Nov. 23, 1922/American Social History Project

## Reviving the 'shadow archive'

In the early 1900s, when the news of a lynching was fresh, some of the nation's first civil rights organizations circulated any available images of the lynching widely, to raise awareness of the atrocity. They did this by publishing the images in black magazines and newspapers.

After that image reached peak circulation, it was typically removed from public view and placed into a "shadow archive," within a newsroom, library or museum. Reducing the circulation of the image was intended to make the public's gaze more somber and respectful.

The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, known popularly as the NAACP, often used this technique. In 1916, for example, the group published a horrific photograph of Jesse Washington, a 17-year-old boy who was hanged and burned in Waco, Texas, in its flagship magazine, "The Crisis."

Memberships in the civil rights organization skyrocketed as a result. Blacks and whites wanted to know how to help. The NAACP used the money to push for anti-lynching legislation. It purchased a series of costly full-page ads in The New York Times to lobby leading politicians.

Though the NAACP endures today, neither its website nor its Instagram page bears casual images of lynching victims. Even when the organization issued a statement about the Arbery killing, it refrained from reposting the chilling video within its missive. That restraint shows a degree of respect that not all news outlets and social media users have used.

## **A curious double standard**

Critics of the shadow archive may argue that once a photograph reaches the internet, it is very difficult to pull back from future news reports.

This is, however, simply not true.

Images of white people's deaths are removed from news coverage all the time.

It is difficult to find online, for example, imagery from any of the numerous mass shootings that have affected scores of white victims. Those murdered in the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting of 2012, or at the Las Vegas music festival of 2017, are most often remembered in endearing portraits instead.

In my view, cellphone videos of black people being killed should be given this same consideration. Just as past generations of activists used these images briefly – and only in the context of social justice efforts – so, too, should today's imagery retreat from view quickly.

The suspects in Arbery's killing have been arrested. The Minneapolis police officers involved in Floyd's death have been fired and placed under investigation. The videos of their deaths have served the purpose of attracting public outrage.

To me, airing the tragic footage on TV, in auto-play videos on websites and social media is no longer serving its social justice purpose, and is now simply exploitative.

Likening the fatal footage of Ahmaud Arbery and George Floyd to lynching photographs invites us to treat them more thoughtfully. We can respect these images. We can handle them with care. In the quiet, final frames, we can share their last moments with them, if we choose to. We do not let them die alone. We do not let them disappear into the hush of knowing trees.

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