

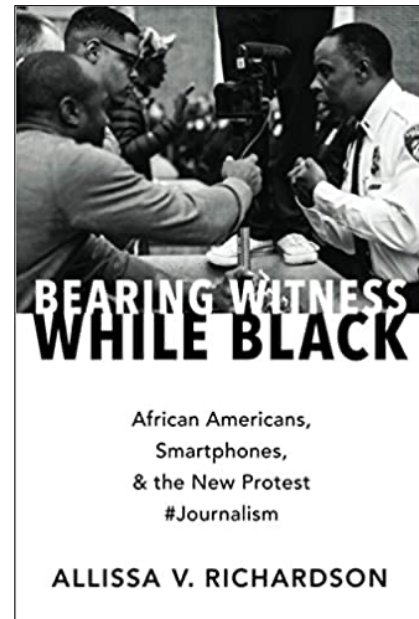
Allissa V. Richardson, **Bearing Witness While Black: African Americans, Smartphones, & the New Protest #Journalism**, New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2020, 305 pp., \$23.92 (paperback).

Reviewed by
Kelli Moore
New York University

In *Bearing Witness While Black: African Americans, Smartphones, & the New Protest #Journalism*, author Allissa V. Richardson has written a love letter to the Black Press, the people who invent a way to account for Black life critically, even as civil society renders it subject to erasure. Living the active life that informs what visual culture critic Leigh Raiford (2009) described as “critical black memory,” Black activists practice a form of labor tied to “a mode of historical interpretation and political critique that has functioned as an important resource for framing and mobilizing Afro-American social and political identities and movements” (p. 113).

This book shows how catalyzing Black death and the traffic of Black corpses are to the political economic structure of civil society and Black and Brown justice responses. Richardson positions the circulation of audio-visual recordings of Black death and dying in fatal interactions with the police as catalyzing the resurgence of Black witnessing practices, specifically those associated with the Black Lives Matter movement. Typically, recordings of Black suffering and death at the hands of police are taken by Black and Brown bystanders. Contemporary recordings of Black death and dying fosters critical Black memory around these images and their victims. At the same time, their circulation expands legacy media profits, and with it, the so-called democratic ideal. Such videos are visual evidence of civil society’s anti-Black structure: They are descendants of lynching images, projecting both symbol and product of racial capital, because of the profitability of harnessing, caging, and killing the Black body. Bystander recordings are not the primary object of analysis, however; the focus is on the *bystanders*, who are compelled to use their smartphones, always at risk to their own health and safety. Black witnessing is not only about fighting the cops; the insurrection is also directed against the 4th estate in its discursive production of Blackness as the ante of the public sphere. Richardson demonstrates how bearing witness while Black is an expansive historical practice of Black radical imagination and action.

Richardson makes the case for an Afro-centric theory of media witnessing, an intervention necessitated by the limited models of media witnessing offered by communication and media studies: Either distant witnessing is privileged as most effective or witnessing firsthand is exalted. Neither model accounts for the specific case of Black witnessing, a now global social media activity operating under the sign of Black Lives Matter, itself commentary on the anti-Black structure of civil society. Legacy news belongs to the legacy of slavery. Richardson argues that an ethnocentric model of media witnessing is needed to orient Black witnessing phenomena historically and socially. The new protest #Journalism examined can be seen as another movement in the evolution of marronage and the Black radical tradition (Kelley, 2002; Robinson, 1983).



The first chapter systematically traces and periodizes Black protest movements to Black mass media forms: "Bondage and Slave Narratives (1734–1939)," "Anti-lynching and Black Newspapers (1827–1960)," "Jim Crow and Black Magazines (1942–1970)," "Civil Rights Movement and Black Talk Radio (1938–1982)," "Black Television (1955–1968)," and "Police Brutality and the Early Black Web (1980–2008)" (pp. 24–40). This expands the traditional origins of communication study: The field emerged as an academic discipline by prioritizing the study of the propaganda prior to and after the Holocaust. Against formal study, the author represents the *informal, unpaid* labor of Black activism to the field. Richardson is positioned as a Black woman scholar located in the Eurocentric disciplines of communication and journalism. By positioning the history of the Black Press in media witnessing, she makes a significant contribution to both fields and speaks to the recent arguments of #CommunicationSoWhite (Chakravartty, Kuo, McIlwain, & Grubbs, 2018). *Bearing Witness While Black* decenters the Whiteness of witnessing in communication and media study, and decenters the Holocaust as an origin story of news and propaganda studies.

Richardson's efforts toward an Afrocentric theory of media witnessing suggest that the inception of Black Twitter as a news outlet is a contemporary site of marronage, specifically in its disengagement with legacy media, whose coverage of Black death and dying is incompetent at best. The author locates Black witnessing in enclaves and counterpublics. Something compelling about the "new protest #Journalism," emerging in part from the Black Twitter enclave and Richardson's examination, is how the book eschews stories about the internal dynamics of a cohesive Black Lives Matter organizational leadership, which readers might expect. These chapters are not about the heartbreak and betrayal of activists who disagree with this or that political concept or this or that collective action. Unlike some Marxist labor histories that elaborate how bitter disagreements lead to frustrating dissolutions and reconstitutions of radical collectives, Richardson hones in on the way *individual* activists conduct and inhabit their protest journalism. Through interviews, activists emerge as types: "BLM activists," "Day 1's," "Masters of Agitprop," "Bards," and "Rogues," each contributing to the division of labor of Black witnessing (p. 47). The effect is not propagation of activist stereotypes, but rather a testament to the different orientations constituting movement participation.

Richardson explores the nitty gritty of being on the social media front lines of the movement. Interviews reveal the harassment, surveillance, and general attempts the state and individuals make to destroy the activists' lives. These stories are contextualized by details about how geolocation and data mining platforms like Facebook and Twitter complicate the safety and free speech of Black witnesses at the same time they enable protest journalism. But Richardson's real task is to showcase how Black protest journalism gives rise to alternate ways of making knowledge. Notable is how activists like Samuel Sinyangwe curate criminal justice statistics heretofore uncollected by the police, following in the footsteps of Wells-Barnett and Douglass' (1894) *A Red Record*. The author captures a division of labor among activists who resist legacy media by providing succor against racial battle fatigue. Labor division consists of "round robin participation," and activists such as Brittany Packnett Cunningham make the work collective, taking turns with others to post news to prevent burnout (p. 121). Richardson's attention to mobile device metadata and Twitter collection tool use (Twecoll) and schedulers (Hootsuite) offers a window onto activists' shared labor and tech preferences.

Forms of care take center stage in discussions of advocacy journalism. The emotional and physical vulnerability of Black activists is searchingly rendered alongside examples of savvy and nimble social media navigation in activists' posts and emails, tweets and retweets, and in-person meetings. Advocacy journalism

is emotionally, financially, and physically taxing work and one feels the weighty baggage of “prolonged stress and depression” from this form of activism (p. 87). Black love politics emerge as cybercultures, computer networked communication. Through advocacy journalism, Black cybercultures suggest a mode of living focused on the potential of civil society to come.

A final chapter questions the arrival of police dash and body cams, and what they mean for the complexity of Black witnessing. For some Black activists and their allies, federal level responses are tempting. But Richardson returns to familiar media theories that challenged the fantasies of documentary realism, first-person viewer bias, and narrative fragmentation, redirecting those ideas toward state cameras to unsettle the police gaze as power/knowledge. These technologies and the policies governing them are shown to expand state panopticism by further automating state witnessing practices. Readers are left with little enthusiasm for these solutions; however, the author’s extensive exploration of Black advocacy media praxis assuages both the pessimistic view of the Black visual public sphere and the technologically deterministic view of digital technology. A final task of the book is to argue, simply, that despite its ever-increasing capture by the corporate state, seeing still matters. Richardson’s Afrocentric framework posits nothing less than Black witnessing and its discursive practices as a form of Black sociality, whose work is internal and external, backward and forward looking. It is equally a professional activity whose theorization and funding in communication, media, and journalism studies is receiving more attention. Wonderfully, the book joins other recent excellent contributions to research on Black cybercultures bridging Black studies and communication, media, and journalism: Andre Brock’s (2020) *Distributed Blackness: African American Cybercultures*; Sarah J. Jackson, Brooke Foucault-Welles, and Moya Bailey’s (2020) *#Hashtag Activism: Networks of Race and Gender Justice*, and Moya Bailey’s (2021) *Misogynoir Transformed: Black Women’s Digital Resistance*.

References

- Bailey, M. (2021). *Misogynoir transformed: Black women’s digital resistance*. New York: New York University Press.
- Brock, A. (2020). *Distributed Blackness: African American cybercultures*. New York: New York University Press.
- Chakravartty, P., Kuo, P., McIlwain, C., & Grubbs, V. (2018). #CommunicationSoWhite. *Journal of Communication*, 68(2), 254–266. <https://doi.org/10.1093/joc/jqy003>
- Jackson, S. J., Foucault-Welles, B., & Bailey, M. (2020). *#Hashtag activism: Networks of race and gender justice*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Kelley, R. (2002). *Freedom dreams: The Black radical imagination*. Boston, MA: Beacon.
- Raiford, L. (2009). Photography and the practice of critical Black memory. *History and Theory, Theme Issue*, 48, 112–129.

Robinson, C. (1983). *Black Marxism: The making of the Black radical tradition*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

Wells-Barnett, I. B., & Douglass, F. (1894). *A red record: Tabulated statistics and alleged causes of lynchings in the United States, 1892-1893-1894. Respectfully submitted to the nineteenth century civilization in "the land of the free and the home of the brave."* Chicago, IL: Donohue & Henneberry.