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. . . the dignity of the victims cannot be “given by the photographer” . . . ; it must inhere in their own stoicism or defiance, and it is, in a sense, their gift to us.

—John Benthall¹

Harrowing images of death, injury, and of people in various states of distress, terror, and vulnerability circulated by humanitarian organizations, memorial museums, and exhibits seek to encourage empathy with disempowered victims. Such images, in the form of amateur snapshots, photojournalism, and art photography of atrocities, are now pervasive.² Critics contend that these images “constitute political space” and that they fashion the suffering global humanity with whom Western spectators are supposed to feel solidarity.³ There exists a great deal of commentary on atrocity photography—especially on those images most formally accomplished—because of its centrality to politics, although the relationship between images and politics is vexed and the subject of considerable debate. Much of this discussion seeks to link affective response (by which I mean often unconscious response filtered through the cognitive processes by which feeling may be articulated) and political recognition in a variety of ways: from the instrumental methods by which Western media shape responses to distant others to theoretical discussions about the way that photographs make human rights claims in a Kantian aesthetic tradition that calls upon viewers’ faculties of judgment.⁴

The purpose of this essay is not to take sides in these kinds of analyses or to interpret photographs. Rather, I wish to explore the fundamental assumptions that underpin discourses on atrocity photographs, including most centrally the idea that images objectify photographed subjects or traumatize viewers.⁵ My aim is thus to analyze the mostly unexamined presumptions that construct these discourses, in particular the affective investment in a particular concept of human dignity as bounded, whole, and metaphorically upright. All the discourses about atrocity photography assume that images of violated human beings are ethically problematic in some basic way, and their arguments, including affirmative views of such pictures, proceed from their interpretation of this problem. The bridge from affect to political recognition is fragile and always complicated by the specter of aversion, recoil, and numbness. Discourses on atrocity photography thus pit important if recent concepts of photography’s ostensibly transformative if vexed political function—to “bear witness,” “never again”—against an aversion to the display of violated human dignity whose sources are psychic and cultural. It is impossible even to conceive a “genre” or

“genres” of atrocity photography in the post-1945 period without exploring the basic cultural assumptions that construct the terms of discourse about the images.

In what follows I will use these critical discourses as a surrogate for the collective body of Western spectators and their perception of the meaning of human dignity, and in the process I will synthesize a wide array of work at its most general level in order to draw out similarities in otherwise radically different arguments about diverse kinds of images. I examine how critics interpret atrocity photos’ rhetorical and affective dimensions. My aim, again, is not to reiterate or contribute to the debates I synthesize about what constitutes a dignified image but to examine the conditions underlying such judgments, and in so doing, to address what the debates suggest beyond what they articulate explicitly. I thus wish to demonstrate that debates about atrocity photography are part of a mostly unacknowledged cultural discourse about humanity in which some narratives emerge and others are repressed. That is, they participate in the historical and cultural constitution of what we call “global humanity” beyond the role they play in debates about photography’s status in aesthetic theory. In closing, I discuss an essay by Judith Butler on photographs of Abu Ghraib to ask how she conceives atrocity images in terms of repressed narratives. Though there is not space to discuss a general history of assumptions about suffering humanity, I would speculate that the particular ambivalence and difficulties encountered in debates on atrocity photography are related to the increasing preeminence of vulnerable bodies in human rights discourses and the commensurate decline of heroic narratives of victims’ struggles after the Second World War, and especially after the 1970s.

Atrocity Photography and Witnessing

The discussion of photographs of atrocity repeats older anxieties—Platonic worries about the substitution of false idols for essences and recurrent Christian iconoclasts’ anxieties about the representation of Christ’s suffering. An eighth-century iconoclast, for example, once protested against reproducing Christ’s “humiliation.”⁶ Photographic illusionism repeats these older fears but also engenders forms of objectification that reframe atrocity anew: photographs generate mechanically reproducible images for passive consumption, advertising, technological surveillance, and political manipulation. Already by 1890 in the United States, the objectifying power of modern media led Samuel Warren and Louis Brandeis to assert a right to protect inviolate personhood against cameras and advertising.⁷

And yet, as has been amply chronicled, photographic images also heralded new forms of transformative realism, and they were used for moral and political purposes. The first atrocity photographs to be mobilized against social injustice were publicized by the evangelical Congo Reform Association in the years 1903–13. They were not decried as indecent, most likely because they were of African subjects whom Western spectators had yet to envision as fully human—indeed the campaign to stop the abuse of Africans in the Belgian Congo was couched in the language of a religiously inspired civilizing mission.⁸ But critics have decried photographs of dead soldiers from the American Civil War and even up to the present as objectifying human beings,

violating their privacy, and infringing upon “decency,” although such images were often staged and at best sought to ennoble fallen soldiers.

By the end of the Great War in 1918, such photographs, by virtue of their ostensible evidentiary value, also played a critical role in rejecting redemptive narratives of war. Antiwar critics compiled books of pictures meant to shock populations into some grasp of the human costs of war.⁹ When General Eisenhower issued his call to Americans to witness photographs of Bergen-Belsen and Buchenwald in 1945, he also relied on images and film footage, this time to justify the war by publicizing the horror of Nazi deeds.¹⁰ His demand was part of larger political and cultural efforts, including the creation of supranational institutions like the United Nations and the emergence of humanitarianism and human rights as a global (if Western-defined) discourse in the 1948 United Nations’ Declaration of Human Rights. Shortly after the end of the war, the graphic film *Nazi Concentration Camps* was screened at the Nuremberg trials, and images of Buchenwald and Bergen-Belsen appeared in *Life* magazine and in newsreels in the United States and Britain in an effort by those countries’ governments to stir outrage at German war crimes.

By the 1970s and 1980s, interest in the concentration camps and other images of the Holocaust gave birth to an unofficial category of atrocity photography as consciousness of Hitler’s genocide and the preeminence of Jewish suffering were more widely recognized. Atrocity photographs were not new, though the graphic shots of Western soldiers and civilians widely distributed after 1945 had not been readily available until then, except in antiwar tracts. The images of concentration camp inmates alive and dead also portrayed an unimaginable level of inhumanity in the West that extended the image of mass death in the Great War to the now infamous shoveling of anonymous corpses in the camps.¹¹ By the 1970s and 1980s, such images had become part of a more expansive moral imperative to use photographs to teach moral lessons and to turn spectators into faraway “witnesses” of events they had not themselves experienced.

In the past fifty years, the obligation to witness the suffering of distant others in the name of preventing future crimes has become central to human rights activism even though it is not clear how, other than by a metaphorical displacement, witnessing the pain of others leads to action.¹² Indeed, views that make no distinction between witnessing an event as a participant and seeing the same event in a photograph are extremely common and central to critical discourses on atrocity photographs. In keeping with the implicit and sometimes explicit aims of documentary photography, critics assume a relationship between seeing pictures and a resolve to take action, as if one had been or might eventually be in a situation “like that.” The French humanitarian group Doctors Without Borders not only uses photographs to fundraise but stages replicas of institutional discrimination—say, checkpoints in the Occupied Territories—for pedagogical purposes to produce a dramatic identification with victims.¹³ Bearing witness to violated human dignity also defines the purpose of attending photography and museum exhibitions. Indeed, the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum displays “You Are My Witness” (Isaiah 43.10) at its entrance and on its brochures, as if images and artifacts of twentieth-century suffering constitute a sacred presence to which all visitors must testify. Witnessing others’ suffering is

supposed to affirm our own commitment to humanist values and to translate into future action. After 1980, photographic portrayals of violence have in some cases made critics deem “witnessing” impossible and have even led to calls for a prohibition on the public display of atrocity photographs. As Frank Möller suggests—and he is hardly alone—the traumatic effects of photographs cannot be absorbed by spectators, so that only art photography shot in the aftermath of genocide can guarantee the critical distance required to “witness.”¹⁴

The central question about photographs of suffering and persecution specific to twentieth-century and more recent catastrophes recognizes the destabilizing and dislocating force of atrocity photographs, especially images on which the status of art cannot be conferred. In various ways critics ask how we might look, and whether we should or even can “witness” atrocity and its consequences. Most importantly, the question about how to witness is now inevitably posed as a question about whether or how the photograph violates or leaves intact the subject’s dignity, a normative precept (indeed the touchstone for any foundational concept of humanity) that is consistently evoked and yet treated as self-evident because dignity is a stand-in for humanity regardless of the racial, gendered, and other ideological prisms through which critics know its perception is filtered. The ability to witness depends not only on whether the photograph leaves the subject’s dignity intact but also on the extent to which the process of bearing witness does or does not dislocate the viewer’s own sense of coherence and presence by disturbing human dignity (although dislocation might also be a general feature of coping with many dimensions of normal life, here it is a specific response to the disturbance created by graphic images of the agony or death of others).

This relation between the ability to witness and human dignity is mirrored in the two major strands of argument about atrocity photographs (though each is multidimensional and nuanced at the level of reading images, and they often overlap). One line of argument emphasizes the various forms of spectators’ complicity in the violence pictured. Already in 1960 Gerhard Schoenberner, who compiled a book of atrocity snapshots for West German consumption, wrote that they “put [the viewers] into the role of the murderers.”¹⁵ This fear of complicity is continuous with earlier, nineteenth-century discourses condemning viewers’ potential voyeurism, spectacle, the hyperstimulation created by urban spaces, and the passivity of a new consumer culture. It is linked with anxieties about the photograph’s objectification and domination of its subject and thus with the violation of human dignity.

The second pervasive argument about atrocity photographs is that they cannot be absorbed because traumatic events cannot be represented as they are lived and thus exceed our ability to grasp. In her discussion of Lee Miller’s images of Dachau, Sharon Sliwinski writes: “The public bore witness in 1945, but they did not know what they had seen.”¹⁶ Cornelia Brink uses “visible blindness” elsewhere to describe this problem.¹⁷ As is implicit in the idea that spectators could not “know what they had seen,” the relatively recent critical discourses on atrocity photography focus above all on the ethical and emotional difficulties as well as on the importance of looking. In particular this emphasis focuses as much on the photographed subject’s dignity as it does on the viewer’s own integrity. Frances Guerin and Roger Hallas remind us that

images of “historical trauma” require particular care because of the emotions they arouse.¹⁸

Atrocity Photography and Dignified Comportment

Thus human dignity is central to the discourses of how affirmatively or problematically an atrocity photograph witnesses atrocity. The concept of dignity was given its most powerful secular form by Immanuel Kant, for whom dignity was a demonstrable axiom in which human beings should be treated as ends rather than means. But dignity inheres as well in comportment—indeed, until the eighteenth century and even after, comportment referred to a dignified or aristocratic bearing. Thus Kant, whose work famously divides duty and feeling, argued that the “criminal’s death” under torture “is ennobled (its disgrace averted) by the resoluteness with which he dies” and added that “bowing and scraping before a human being seems in any case unworthy of . . . human dignity.”¹⁹ The epigraph of this essay, taken from a seminal analysis of human rights and media by John Benthall, demonstrates how dignified comportment is conceived as “stoicism.” Debate about atrocity photography’s focus on dignified comportment is a focus on how dignity looks and feels, though arguably the now voluminous philosophical and legal arguments about dignity cannot be extricated from such affective investments.

The persistence of an eighteenth-century construction of dignified comportment is pervasive and stubborn in spite of recent efforts, most famously Hannah Arendt’s assertion that the refugee problem during the Second World War made clear that statelessness removed claims to inherent dignity and that citizenship was dignity’s fundamental guarantor.²⁰ It is perfectly reasonable to question images of humanity still indebted to older Western conceptions of the human body as a metaphorical boundary not to be traversed, with differential consequences for women, whose sovereignty resides in sexual as well as moral integrity. Moreover, recent and forceful criticisms of human rights imperialism have demonstrated how the symbolically impermeable body is a signifier of political status, the condition of self-possession and its institutionalization in property ownership and citizenship.²¹ The broader question of how a dignified comportment is related to and likely constitutive of normative constructions of dignity is therefore implicit in this discussion. I am not interested in whether or not the photographs dignify a person but in how critics inevitably pose the question about images’ unsettling effects as a matter of affirming or negating human dignity. I emphasize these critics’ presumptions not to question the importance of dignity as an assertion of intrinsic worth but in order to emphasize dignity’s figuration, and thus how it becomes historically meaningful in different times and places.

How atrocity photography captures indignity becomes clear if we use W. G. Sebald’s momentary solidarity with a vulnerable hare to illustrate it. Sebald is wandering, as always, and he comes upon a terrified hare. The hare is frightened, and his fright, Sebald says, “cut right through me.”²² He becomes “one” with the hare, if only for an instant. Sebald’s blood pounds through his veins but he recovers gradually and continues on his way. If the hare were a photograph, the narrator’s heart might pound but he could determine that he was being emotionally manipulated. If he had

a particular investment in the nobility of hares, he might declare the image an insult to hares or claim that it counters efforts to depict large rabbits with dignity.

I use the hare as a means of defamiliarizing what has become a commonplace assertion about atrocity photographs: that the inherent dignity of the subject of such a photograph has been violated because she was photographed, a pervasive assumption that should be treated as questionable. But how do we interpret this conflation of a subject's contingent circumstances and her intrinsic moral worth—she is not, presumably, responsible for the persecution and suffering she experiences—a conflation critics assume takes place in the snapping of a photograph? Must we assume, as many critics have since the nineteenth century, that the reduction of a life to one harrowing moment is in itself degrading or that the image's reproducibility destroys the subject's dignity?²³ What about the viewer's possible resentment at being traumatized or disturbed by the sight of violated human bodies and the potential projection back onto the image of the viewer's own powerlessness and frustration or even disavowal, as Brink has shown in the case of postwar West Germany, when the viewer's own accountability for such crimes was at stake. How does the recognition or denial of dignity permit or undermine the recent idea of secondary or distant witnessing?

The increasing attention paid to actual “witnesses” in Holocaust literature since the Eichmann trial in 1961—and thus to a new cultural phenomenon Annette Wieviorka calls “the era of the witness,” in which we consume the suffering of others rather than assess it critically—frames a heightened concern with the voyeurism intrinsic in photos of others' suffering.²⁴ The new centrality of victims' experiences to discussions of genocidal and other crimes since the 1960s and 1970s might itself generate recoil from victims who did not resist or defenses against the shame often identified with victimization itself. This recoil and defensiveness might take the form of proclamations of dignity that neglect the various ways in which cultural anxieties create attitudes toward victims that often go unacknowledged. For by fighting for dignity we are presumably fighting for the recognition of victims on terms that cannot always emphasize narratives of heroic defiance or struggle but rather weakness, despair, and powerlessness. The conditions that create perceptions of indignity should be the focus of discussions. Though powerlessness is hardly commensurate with indignity, critics have difficulty reconciling human dignity with fragility.

Sontag and After

The body of critical work about atrocity photography has been limited until recently.²⁵ There are many reasons for this lacuna, but most important is that, of all the illustrations of political persecution available, atrocity photographs are most vulnerable to charges that they are implicated in the violence they depict. This complicity—because the camera is there, because the degraded person is made into a spectacle—tends to foreground ethical and political questions over aesthetic ones. Critics of documentary photography in the 1980s made much of the camera's metaphorical violence when photographers portrayed the poor and downtrodden. Martha Rosler called such images, no matter how dignified or beautiful, “victim photography” because they were “sentimental mythifications” that obscured or represented only metonymically the

causes of poverty.²⁶ But atrocity photography, though by definition metaphorical, depicts literal violence and suffering, especially in its snapshot form.²⁷ For this reason it makes stubborn ethical demands and often elicits rejection or lack of interest from even the most sophisticated visual theorists.

As noted, these images and their effects on the way we picture distant others have mostly been understood in terms of their voyeuristic or numbing effects, reiterating in new terms nineteenth-century criticisms of commercial culture and the effects of overstimulation. Though there is clearly evidence that such images do generate empathy—they are, after all, used to fundraise for causes—most critics believe that their mass circulation simply “habituates” us to them and deadens our senses.²⁸ Journalists now use the term “compassion fatigue” to describe this process.²⁹ Much of the groundwork for these arguments and those I will discuss shortly was laid out by Susan Sontag in *On Photography*, her famous assessment of photography in the 1970s. Sontag denounces photography in general as a form of aggression against its objects, the product of an age of consumption and a demand for newer and more effective “shocks.”

Most important for my purposes, Sontag argues that war and disaster photography became objects of fascination and voyeurism because Westerners live in a world in which such violence is no longer part of the natural course of life. In short, photography’s mechanically produced realism (digital photography was not yet on the horizon) always complicates if not compromises aesthetic accomplishment and could degenerate into pure consumerism and voyeurism. “Photography,” she writes, “is the paradigm of an inherently equivocal connection between self and world—its version of the ideology of realism sometimes dictating an effacement of the self in relation to the world, sometimes authorizing an aggressive relation to the world which celebrates the self. One side or other of the connection is always being rediscovered and championed.”³⁰

Sontag thus reiterates the old ambivalence about photographs but extends her argument to “photographs of Agony” (the capital “A” presumably a reference to the tradition of expressive suffering) that “convey distress . . . by neutralizing it.”³¹ Photographs of agony represent a microcosm of the problem posed by photography: they are signs of a potentially passive or voyeuristic enjoyment that turns agony into a spectacle to be consumed. They also provoke a sense of mastery of others’ suffering in which the photographer appropriates objects for his own ends. In both cases photography militates against a measured relation to the world and leaves the self off balance, self-effacing, or aggressive in relation to its subjects. Atrocity photography, moreover, leads to deadness—the neutralizing of feeling—provoked by the realism that is both the accomplishment of photography and the source of its pretense to provide new forms of knowing. For although Sontag goes on at great length about how photography reveals the deep instability of the relationship between self and world, it is only in photographs of war and violence that the relationship is finally numbed by our deep rage or dismay (“shock,” as Sontag ventriloquizes Walter Benjamin, turns into “cliché”). The pleasure of photography and in particular of representations of war and agony derive not from impropriety but from a dual desire to consume passively and to make come alive, which finally estranges rather than transforms reality.

Some twenty-five years later, in her second book about the numbing effect of photos, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Sontag rebukes the idea that “cosmopolitan discussions of images of atrocity . . . have little effect, and . . . there is something innately cynical about their diffusion.”³² She maintains that her earlier view set forth in *On Photography* was perhaps too close to the privileged views of Western spectators and more recent French theoretical views that she now conceives as exemplary of a “breathtaking provincialism”—that is, hers was the perspective of urbane and comfortable consumers of violence for whom war is a spectacle that happens to someone else.³³ The urbane and comfortable are too distant to fully understand photographs, and the war-weary are too proximate to violence not to feel exploited by them. But, she says, at least we should acknowledge that images of atrocity may haunt us or teach us, and that there is no reason to condemn them simply because they may disperse shock. After all, that dispersal may well be a form of overwhelming feeling, including rage and powerlessness, that cannot be experienced as such.

Perhaps Michael Fried brings us closest to Sontag when he invokes her not to discuss atrocity photos but to comment on the one photograph she admires that is not really an atrocity photo: Jeff Wall’s photograph of actors posing as slaughtered Russian soldiers in Afghanistan titled *Dead Troops Talk* (the whole is formed by images taken at different times and later melded into one near life-size picture). The photograph illustrates what Fried defines as “absorption”—the subjects care not one whit about the beholder and do not seek to engage his or her gaze.³⁴ In a gloss on Sontag in which he reveals *her* investment in modernism more clearly than do her own comments on Wall, Fried suggests that Wall’s work posits two complementary and mutually reinforcing worlds: one in which the war-weary exist with their own private knowledge of war that cannot be shared; and another in which the bourgeois consumers of war are sheltered entirely from it. Fried’s reading of Wall evades the issues posed by atrocity photography in favor of the kind of modernist resolution—a separate and self-referential world—that Sontag herself may have ultimately been most comfortable with. It is not a coincidence that Sontag finds Wall so compelling and that Wall’s work dispenses entirely with the need to discuss atrocity photographs that are not art, since the photographer resolves the problem of voyeurism by eliminating the beholder that atrocity photographs demand. And it reiterates Sontag’s view that in the end, pictures may haunt us but Western spectators will never really understand, and those who live in the midst of war can never adequately convey their experiences. Implied is that perhaps only art can help us to behold atrocity.³⁵

In the end, Sontag argues that pictures of suffering can aid those of us who wish to remember war and injustice, but she does little to interrogate the so-called numbing effect of photography except to link it to a series of writers who comment on how human beings are drawn viscerally to spectacles of horror and quickly become habituated to them. She knows that numbness is a defense against feeling. But the argument about “habituation” and thus the reference essentially to the terrible things that people do to other people, however commonsensical and intuitive, focuses primarily on restricted affect as a basic feature of coping with the overstimulation of modern life and normalizes the condensed historical and psychic process implicit in terms like “habituation” and “brutalization.”³⁶ Her late in life thoughts about the

potential value of such images render numbness as simply the product of modernity and the camera's role in it, but with a caveat: images may numb us, but sometimes they make us weep.

I would argue that it is really impossible to analyze atrocity photographs' reception before having grappled with the particular dislocation they engender, not to mention its conceptual consequences. This question emerges in the debates about atrocity photography, however unselfconsciously, and merits some discussion. The dislocation atrocity photographs generate tells us little about the difficult political question of how to evaluate victims' claims. And it may be greater or lesser depending on the victims depicted and the context that frames such images. But the reception of atrocity photography and its conceptual difficulties can help us understand how imagining other people's suffering may be limited, expanded, and altered in ways that link the affective force of (in)dignity with its ideological articulations.

In 1945 James Agee asserted in *The Nation* that images of the invasion of Iwo Jima were "pornographic."³⁷ More recently, André Bazin called photographs of death "ontological obscenities."³⁸ And barely a decade ago Dora Apel wrote: "Looking and seeing seem to implicate the viewer . . . in the acts that turned human beings into horribly shamed objects, as if viewing itself were a form of aggression."³⁹ These are the tropes Sontag draws on, but now others, like Susie Linfield, set aside such concerns and celebrate looking itself as a mode of affirming dignity. Thus Linfield writes that looking at photographs of suffering can demonstrate "what happens to a society that loses sight of dignity as an organizing principle."⁴⁰ Looking teaches us the consequences of inhumanity.

Linfield reasserts the importance of documentary photography against recent skepticism about its illustrative power and affirms the moral position expressed by Schoenberner in 1960. Schoenberner, as noted earlier, compiled a famous book of Nazi atrocity photographs (overwhelmingly soldiers' snapshots) for West German consumption, *The Yellow Star*. Though he insisted that the photographs "put us into the role of the murderers," he also wrote, "The human dignity of the victims shines through." He believed that looking at such pictures would "strengthen our conviction that every human being has the right to live."⁴¹ How the same photographs can create both effects is never discussed, but the tension underscores the difficulty that critics manifest in response to these photos.

Dislocation and Paradox

In light of these ambiguities and tensions, I want to speculate about how the stubbornness of the photographs' ethical demands shapes their critical reception and interpretation. By ethical demands I do not mean how we should respond to photographs' entreaties, though that is how these images are usually discussed. I refer instead to the dislocation such photographs generate as they ask us to respond to their harrowing representations of suffering, and thus how those representations are properly witnessed. If Bazin and Agee are concerned with the ontological disturbance photographs create or their potential voyeurism, respectively, Linfield's and Schoenberner's affirmations of dignity are metaphorical displacements that allow these authors to long for a world in which such images—or, more importantly, what they

represent—would not exist; but they are also efforts to deny the image's imaginary positioning of the beholder as complicit in murder. The fantasies, displacements, and projections atrocity photographs engender thus don't necessarily lead to critical distance and assessment. It is easy to contend that looking at them undermines a coherent vantage point: looking at photographs leads to the instability if not to the unraveling of the spectator's position and to the collapse of critical distance as spectators seek to extricate themselves from accusations of murder or to make meaning out of the beseeching eyes of victims without being thrown too dramatically awry or surrendering to voyeurism. Indeed, the concern about loss of balance is so great that a few critics simply argue that such pictures should not be shown at all.

There is, then, sometimes an explicit interpretative and an implicit cultural consensus that atrocity photographs help create conditions for a political and emotional will to dignity normatively understood. But there is no real analysis of how they might accomplish this aim other than by reference to the continued power, however compromised theoretically, of photographic realism. Compounding the problem of how these photographs might accomplish this goal is their "operational reality."⁴² Like older defenders of image-making against iconoclasts, critics who defend atrocity photographs manifest the same anxieties about images as those who seek to destroy them: do these photographs of suffering and dying or dead people, they ask, incarnate their subjects or are they figurative representations and thus potentially fetish objects? As has been often noted, photographs cannot be literal because they are by definition only traces of something that happened. They can be faked and they can be staged: they are always metaphors. And yet, as W. J. T. Mitchell argues, they appear to have lives and desires of their own.⁴³ Indeed, images of suffering, death, and dying do appear to unsettle viewers. Even though they are metaphors, such images are experienced as if they were inescapably real in ways that seem to render viewers complicit in violence. The unsettlement, sanctimoniousness, and even rage that atrocity photographs generate suggest some discomfort with vulnerability that arguments about such pictures reiterate by reference to anxiety about the unwarranted exposure of other people stripped of their dignity, transformed into the fetishes that make them both powerful symbols and screens of an unbearable inhumanity.

Many critics find that such images are unbearable not only because of the suffering they portray but also because they cannot resolve or stabilize the continual oscillation between the image of suffering and the reality of suffering conveyed by the image. Yet these critics are well aware that the images are images and are removed from reality in some fundamental way.⁴⁴ Janina Struk speaks about a famous image of a woman and children walking toward a gas chamber at Birkenau. She asserts: "Whoever they were, they have been condemned to tread the path forever . . . They had no choice but to be photographed. Now they have no choice but to be viewed by posterity. Didn't they suffer enough the first time around?"⁴⁵ Her conclusion that we should not look at these pictures derives from an interpretation of the photograph as an image (its subjects will tread the same path forever), in which the people are still alive (they will suffer again, as if they could feel the indignity of our gazes upon them). Such a reaction seems to avoid or disavow the photograph's effect on the viewer rather than

on those depicted in it, since it is arguably the viewer who is forced at least imaginatively “to tread that path forever.”⁴⁶

When Susan Crane argues that the camera itself “redoubles” the “violence perpetrated on the victim,” she also intimates that making images itself constitutes violence against those pictured as if they were alive but involves viewers as well. She claims that “the undignified deaths” will “forever be able to harm viewers,” but also that the images guarantee that victims are denied mourning.⁴⁷ Griselda Pollack writes that she does not reproduce particular images in her text since she wants to avoid “the risk [of] inflicting by exposure some of that [already inflicted] pain upon those trapped under the documenting perpetrator’s gaze.”⁴⁸ The oft-remarked magical quality of photographs, their ability to bring things to life even though they are also emanations of death, is here dark magic that has the same impact on everyone who looks: no consolation, no rest for their weary subjects or viewers, no precognitive “wounds” that affect me but not you, only unremitting suffering and dying, again and again.

According to the introduction of *Picturing Atrocity*, a recent compilation of essays by Geoffrey Batchen, Mick Gidley, Nancy K. Miller, and Jay Prosser, such photos might “have a function for us as citizens.” Speaking of the “genre” of trophy photographs—or those pictures taken as spoils of war—Jay Prosser asserts, “The entanglement of photography in atrocity is one reason why photography is ‘in crisis.’ The photographing of atrocity always involves an ethical crisis of representation . . . Does it bring more benefit or further harm?” He adds, “On some level ethical questions about how we should respond affect whoever looks at atrocity photographs . . . If the photograph asks us as viewers to witness, one characteristic of atrocity photography can be the inclusion of bystanders, those who simply watch, who can often show a disturbing lack of visible response to the event, and whose lack of response seems to increase its atrocity. The viewers *of* such a photograph will not want to replicate this failure of witnessing. But what else should we do?”

Of course, Prosser knows that the photographs are images (“the photograph is . . . a representation of the atrocity, even though the photograph may be compounding the event it at first seems merely to depict”).⁴⁹ Yet the messiness of the relationship between such photographs and spectators means that it is hard to address the nature of the harm “compounded” without seeming to dismiss the spectator’s complicity, and difficult to understand the function of witnessing, since the demand for the latter comes from the picture itself. What does it mean to witness an image of an event? Or, to paraphrase Mitchell, what does the photograph actually want? Could we interpret Prosser’s speculation about the photograph’s desire that we witness to mean that spectators seek from photographs some absolution for their desire to look? One that “witnessing” might supply? In short, in these accounts, to ask whether looking is good or bad displaces the spectators’ dislocation onto the problem of witnessing, whose status as an ever-failed effort to be accountable is even further complicated by the fact that we never know from where the imperative to witness emanates. Witnessing here becomes a sign less of moral accountability and more exemplary of the spectators’ dislocation, uncertainty, and sense of powerlessness, not to mention potentially a fetish obscuring the very difficulty of establishing what it might mean to witness an image.

Pictures can, of course, formally place the viewer in the witnesses' role, as did many photographs of Germans forced to witness Nazi atrocities.⁵⁰ The aim of these pictures was to situate the viewer as a witness to the process of witnessing and therefore affirm the moral horror of the camps and German guilt. But why would all photographs situate the viewer in a similar position, much less implicate her directly or indirectly? Moreover, no action can be taken to stop the suffering depicted at that moment. The purpose of witnessing conceived by these critics can only be to ensure the prevention of future harm as well as the protection of the subject's dignity, as Prosser's other assertion that such photographs "challenge the integrity of the human" implies.⁵¹ But aside from the range of possible responses to any photograph of violence and its motivation, including learned and unconscious social performances of affect that may have a complicated relation to feelings themselves, the introduction to *Picturing Atrocity* sets the spectator up as a potentially implicated bystander. But to what is he a bystander? In the end, he appears to be a witness to his own powerlessness to stop suffering in the world.

Again, this conceptual slipperiness, in which an image is both an image and not an image, underscores the difficulty of addressing the interpretation of an atrocity image that is also treated as "real."⁵² The impossible aliveness of persons in atrocity photos undermines any stable or coherent position in relation to them, as evidenced in the way the spectator is seemingly always a failed witness. This failure could be productive or disruptive as an effect of the photographs if it were analyzed as such. Instead, failure becomes a feature of critical interpretation.⁵³ Critics repeat the same paradox again and again: the images that constitute human bonds sunder those same bonds because looking at them perpetrates violence toward those photographed or provokes a gap between the photograph and spectator. If the same gesture by which we affirm our common humanity sunders our bonds with suffering others, it is not surprising that interpretation seems constrained by some version of the question about whether looking is harmful or beneficial.

This interpretative constraint emerges even in those works that most vehemently want looking to affirm rather than abrogate human dignity. That approach already presumes that looking is problematic even if well-intended, always contaminated by what is being looked at.⁵⁴ At the end of a long book arguing for the significance of using photographs' performative power to create a new "civil contract" because they show and implicate viewers in regime violence, the sensitive critic Ariella Azoulay feels compelled to add "a comment on the photographs" to justify her use of them. As she puts it: "The question facing me again and again was whether or not to reprint photographs that show the photographed persons in situations so harsh as to entail humiliation or to cause injury to them."⁵⁵ It is difficult to assert that photographs that performatively constitute a civil contract violate that same contract because looking at photographs injures the person pictured. This paradox begs the question of how atrocity photography constitutes the global citizenry it is supposed to reflect as well as how such images mobilize either critical thinking or compassion. If atrocity photographs reiterate the violence they are supposed to contest, are they then doomed to

stage the failure of our common bonds? That atrocity photographs constitute unimaginable indignity is thus never represented as a question but instead reiterated as an argument.⁵⁶

In the critical reception of atrocity photographs, the disturbance generated by the “lives of images” does not therefore lead to the kind of seemingly automatic transformation Walter Benjamin and others once believed media might generate dialectically by shocking us into new sensibilities. Though he recognized the danger of the media spectacle and its capacity to distract, Benjamin hoped that the spectacular nature of photography and film, for example, might liberate rather than transform us into passive observers.⁵⁷ The concern about the collapse of critical distance created by the triumph of spectacle has been one of the most salient themes in discussions of atrocity photography. Of course, many critics have argued that after the 1960s this dialectic collapsed, or nearly: Guy Debord insists that society itself is a spectacle, Jean Baudrillard asserted that the world is nothing but images of images with no referents, and so on.⁵⁸

The reception of atrocity photographs has generated a similar kind of dizziness, because the spectator tries desperately to repair and stabilize a fraught relationship with the image that has already been constituted as beyond repair. If atrocity images transform the spectator into a witness who perpetrates the violence he wishes to stop, then a coherent vantage point can only be established through an interrogation of the cultural preconceptions that render the mutual (moral, psychic, corporeal) dislocation of spectator and image so intolerable and inconceivable. Though the image may always contain some measure of excess, are there any particular cultural frameworks that position the beholder at less risk for self-implosion? Can the paradoxical nature of the atrocity image be negotiated or counteracted? Might some form of “witnessing” be a means of restoring a truth about human dignity that the unsettlement of witnessing appears to disable? This is a purpose of witnessing that we can recognize only if we conceive unsettlement as constitutive of the discourse about the ethical problems posed by atrocity photography instead of a problem that must be resolved.

If looking at atrocity photographs in the end undermines its own good intentions, could we ever conceive an image of unredeemed vulnerability that might be consistent with human dignity? Most critics do not conceive such images as a form of productive instability but rather condemn or repeat their destabilizing effects without altering the terms of discussion—is it good or bad, should we look at photographs or not, or “yes, but,” as Sontag finally concluded.⁵⁹ Or they collapse the dialectic between shock and spectacle and thereby doom both critical distance and empathy in favor of a self-soothing moralism or voyeurism or numbness.

I cannot emphasize enough the affective and conceptual effects of the spectators’ dislocation, which pervades the critical response to atrocity photographs and sustains the paradox that photographs evoke human beings in a way that undoes humanity. The images dislocate the spectator by virtue not only of their sheer horror but also because this horror is linked to the degradation or fragmentation of bodily form.⁶⁰ This fragmentation, as we have seen, evokes multiple responses: a displacement that projects corporeal wholeness into a pain-free future, the metaphorical disruption of

the spectator's stable relation to the world, or the dispersal of shock and attendant numbness. Perhaps for this reason too, critics make constant allusions to the indignity of the photographs even when they wish to affirm their existence. There is also little room for the dignity conferred (in the Judeo-Christian tradition) on the weak and the disabled. A compassionate response is undermined again because the images create sufficient dislocation that they lead critics to seek solid ground by refusing solidarity with vulnerability in the name of the vulnerable. As with Sebald's hare, one might refuse images of its terror in the name of rabbit pride. These responses leave us unable to imagine, in reference to images of extreme powerlessness, a tormented and flinching body as metaphorically intact in the absence of redemption that would allow for closure of an otherwise perpetual and thus unbearable mourning. Indeed, as Barbie Zelizer has argued, digestible atrocity images must be of persons "about to die" whose gazes are unflinching. She argues that the absence of redemption is probably why media outlets so quickly pulled the images of hapless souls jumping off the Twin Towers on 9/11.⁶¹

Judith Butler on Atrocity Images: Dignity and Human Vulnerability

These discussions about photography repudiate photos' violations in the name of dignity, including an exploration of the unsettling effects of atrocity photographs that may (or may not) be transformed into knowledge. Could such photographs be envisioned otherwise? I turn to Judith Butler's efforts to link the affect generated by photographs of Abu Ghraib prisoners to politics in order to suggest how she interprets the Kantian animation of humanity implicitly as an impediment to other ways of imagining human attachment. Butler helps us to imagine humanity differently.

Butler claims that atrocity photographs taken at Abu Ghraib offer an alternative framework to extant arguments within which the violation of human dignity and the catastrophe represented by the war on Iraq might be interpreted. Her framework stresses our interconnection and commonality as human social animals prior to our formation as autonomous individuals, and it questions humanist norms of individualism and autonomy. Butler uses atrocity photography to address the question of when life is grievable, a question that assumes some lives are deemed worthier—more dignified—than others even though all life is precarious. She refers in particular to the racism and colonialism that make Western eyes respond more powerfully and empathically to the pain of people "like them" than to the pain of those who are culturally foreign. These assumptions are not unusual. But Butler thinks through at great length and thoughtfully the larger question of how the media create hierarchies of recognition. She argues that normative frameworks of human worthiness based on others' likeness to us may be broken or altered. A new framework may emerge within which human dignity can be recognized as such especially when people are dying, suffering, or dead: all sentient being is subject to injury and thus intrinsically and equally worthy based on this vulnerability.⁶²

The shock of atrocity photographs is the unbearable humanity that unsettles the frameworks of recognition:

What we are left with are photos of people who are for the most part faceless and nameless. But can we nevertheless say that the obscured face and the absent name

function as the visual trace—even if it is the lacuna within the visible field—of the very mark of humanity? This is a mark, in other words, not registered through a norm, but by the fragments that follow in the wake of an abrogation of the normatively human. In other words, the humans who were tortured do not readily conform to a visual, corporeal, or socially recognizable identity; their occlusion and erasure become the continuing sign of their suffering and of their humanity.⁶³

The occlusion of humanity in the photographs paradoxically leaves traces of the human even in the absence of recognizable human identities. Butler reframes what I have been referring to as the viewer's dislocation—the intolerability of corporeal fragmentation, pain, and suffering—by demonstrating how the normative perception of human dignity relies on a metaphorical equation of wholeness with humanity. She defines the animation of humanity in the discourse of atrocity photography as the disavowal of other possible frames within which human dignity might be recognized and acknowledged. Looking at such photographs not only unsettles but also potentially repairs connections and intensifies longings that this suffering not be. The shock that we feel does not necessarily engender numbness or contempt for the image's subjects but a more productive undoing of the self that generates grief, loss, and mourning for the damage wrought.⁶⁴

The point is not, as Butler notes, to replace one norm with another but instead to see what is excessive to the photographs that the normative frame represses, which is the trace of another image of humanity. She argues that we lament the lack of victims' names and faces but should not, since their traces are there. She also insists that the decision by media (in accord with the Geneva Conventions that were flouted) not to show the faces of those victims who might be identified is right:

We might think that the terms of humanization require the name and the face, but perhaps the “face”⁶⁵ works on us precisely through or as its shroud, in and through the means by which it is subsequently obscured. In this sense, the face and name are not ours to know, and affirming this cognitive limit is a way of affirming the humanity that has escaped the visual control of the photograph.⁶⁶

We then return to a familiar argument:

To expose the victim further would be to reiterate the crime, so the task would seem to be a full documentation of the acts of the torturer, as well as a full documentation of those who exposed, disseminated, and published the scandal—but all this without intensifying the “exposure” of the victim, whether through discursive or visual means.⁶⁷

I should say right away that Butler explicitly rejects the idea that the camera abuses its subjects because the photograph is a representation. She is far more interested in how these images, in spite of their content, serve the perpetuation of war. She is therefore most concerned not with what the photographs show but in how we might “see the frame that blinds us to what we see.”⁶⁸ Her effort to find a trace of the human is thus an effort to reframe the photographs so that we do not remain blind. And yet, in this last long passage about exposure, Butler moves from literal exposure (what she refers to elsewhere as “graphic effectivity” or the importance of documenting for an

audience what the perpetrators did) to figurative uses of the term (the “exposure” of the victims). This shift may indicate some uncertainty about what constitutes the nature of occlusion and exposure in relation to the “trace” of humanity to which we may affectively respond.

On the one hand, the photographs not only show but figure fragments of humanity as shrouded faces and names in which “a certain incommensurability emerges between the norm and the life it seeks to organize. Can we name that gap and ought we to name it?”⁶⁹ And yet, on the other hand, the shroud also seems to refer, literally, to visual traces of these particular faces that might be seen were they not shrouded, their vulnerability exposed, as does Butler’s mention of the visual traces that are also “lacunae in the visual field” as long as they remain hidden. Of course, Butler is speaking only of these particular photographs taken in Abu Ghraib. We could argue that not exposing the victims’ names and faces is consistent with the idea of a trace of humanity (she wants to expose the scandal without exposing the victims, or without taking “seeing” too literally). And yet the reference to visual traces, to the visual field, and to these photos and not other images of atrocity intensifies rather than resolves this conceptual tension between one kind of exposure and another: one in which the human figure always exceeds its normative representation, and another in which the shroud could be removed but should not be to preserve the trace of the human or of the other. One undoes the metaphorical equation between invulnerability and humanity, and the other reiterates it.

There are of course multiple frameworks within which humanity is made recognizable, and Butler references at least two. It is precisely to insulate the argument from charges that she is an “outsider” to the frame—a “first world observer” looking at others who are unknown—that she also acknowledges that her reading is limited to contexts of First World consumption. She insists elsewhere that bodily autonomy has to be part of any “normative aspiration” of women and minorities and asks whether there is any way to transform the attachment to others that makes us vulnerable into a normative aspiration “within the field of politics.”⁷⁰ At the same time, Butler’s emphasis on the trace, the unthought, the “cognitive limit,” and the “mark of humanity” that undo the viewer’s autonomy is hard to distinguish from the literal uses of terms involving the shrouding and exposing of degraded humanity. This tension makes it difficult to reconcile her powerful critique of the metaphorical equation of invulnerability with humanity and the political discourse in which exposure violates that same invulnerability. Seeing is necessary to a strategic politics, a politics that refuses exposure but literalizes the victims, their humanity, their faces, beneath the shroud: their “traces” are also literal faces properly unavailable to us. If affective response to vulnerability based on connectedness rather than on autonomy is not or cannot be articulated in the “field of politics” defined as such, how can humanity coexist with the body’s exposure and the shame it provokes, since we are still within that discourse even if we have one foot out? How are these multiple frames of reference that mobilize different affective responses related to historically and culturally constituted norms of recognition? Can humanity and human solidarity based on vulnerability ever be revealed in the field of politics or are they ultimately only accessible as a nonrepresentational traces or fragments?

Butler's assertions that showing what is usually unseen and rendered off-limits by the state can change public attitudes toward war are reiterated at the end of her Abu Ghraib essay, when she refers hopefully to the "grief and outrage" finally provoked by the circulation of the images in spite of their general ineffectiveness in altering the course of the war. In the end, her own recognition that Americans were blind to what they saw is counteracted by an argument, implicit in the productivity of grief to which I referred earlier:

. . . the grievability of a life: its pathos is at once affective and interpretive. If we can be haunted [by a photograph], we can acknowledge that there has been a loss and hence that there has been a life: this is an initial moment of cognition, an apprehension, but also a potential judgment, and it requires that we conceive of grievability as the precondition of life, one that is discovered retrospectively through the temporality instituted by the photograph itself.⁷¹

But again, to the extent this interpretation is always in excess of the humanity it marks, how can grief dependent on the circulation of the always potentially exposed faces be transformed into a possible judgment rather than the sensation of dislocation and its effects?

We still have not resolved the fundamental question encountered in discussions of atrocity photos about how, by witnessing an event, the spectator offends or affirms the dignity of those whose injury she witnesses. But Butler draws our attention to the importance of analyzing the relationship between norms of recognition and affective responses in reference to the spectator's unsettlement. She proposes another framework that conceptualizes human solidarity in terms of our surrender of sovereignty and in terms of our precariousness, realized through a life grieved after a haunting image retrospectively leads to interpretation. Butler uses the more conventional language of "exposure" when she seeks a strategic political response because the traumatic undoing that alters the frame cannot be articulated except as a gap in the normative framework whose figural interpretation is interrupted by the anxiety (I am not sure what else to call it) that political effectiveness requires a more literal kind of sight in the midst of so much blindness. Thus vulnerability could theoretically reframe the normatively human, but it cannot do so without mimicking the violent meaninglessness and loss associated with exposing vulnerable bodies. It is as if vulnerability were a form of indignity rather than merely an expression of powerlessness.

Of course, injurability should not preclude autonomy—it merely presumes that the forcible denial of our autonomy is not a cause for shame. Similarly, captivity should not necessarily provoke tragic drama, since it can be represented simply as a quality of life denied rather than a potential proving ground of heroism against the odds. The difficulty Butler has articulating a means of recognizing the Abu Ghraib victims' frailty in terms other than the agreement not to expose them suggests the absence of a viable cultural form in which human vulnerability to political persecution shorn of shame, generative of aversion or dislocation, or evocative of a potentially condescending pity might be articulated other than the loss of dignity.

Richard Rorty addresses this problem when he claims that fellow feeling moves us to help others rather than any sort of argument about what we might have in common

with them, for the “in common” argument begs the question of why having things in common with others should move us to act on their behalf. His position presumes that “we” recognize the pain of others as like our own rather than as an opportunity for pity or prurience. Rorty anticipates objections to his use of the West as his frame of recognition and insists on the strategic revelation of our universal sameness: “We shall have to accept the fact that the fate of the women in Bosnia depends on whether TV journalists manage to do for them what Harriet Beecher Stowe did for black slaves, whether these journalists can make us, the audience back in the safe countries, feel that these women are more like us . . . than we had realized.”⁷² This reliance on “our” ability to recognize others is exactly what Butler rejects when she glimpses a different picture of “humanity.” And yet she does not offer a solution to the intractable problem of how human vulnerability can be witnessed from a perspective that is not wrenched by anxiety about the exposure of vulnerable bodies. She frames very clearly a central problem: how do we link the affective responses the photographs provoke and their ability to generate the recognition of others as suffering human beings? How then do we establish the critical distance required for political action to prevent the causes of that suffering? In so doing Butler is implicitly critical of the view that catastrophes have created an image of humanity that is immediately identified as that from which we must avert our eyes. But it is nonetheless hard to figure out how to look.

Conclusion

Perhaps all the hand wringing about how to approach atrocity photographs is a form of moral regulation that defines human dignity within a specific frame of recognition that treats vulnerability and fragility as unsightly and abject or as incentives to reinvigorate human resilience and determination against oppression. What if the very problem defined by the critical reception of atrocity photographs—their ostensible reiteration of the victims’ powerlessness, the aliveness of and hence violence done to their subjects—revealed how narratives of political persecution in some cases render images of disempowered people indecent? What if the images revealed how a glimmer of freedom on the horizon implicit in resistance, refusal, and stoicism becomes the necessary condition of our ability to look? What if our admiration for resilient victims obscures how our respect for victims might be accompanied by contempt for other, frail ones? Could this approach—that is to say, to ask about rather than assume the self-evidence of aversion and recoil—be one way of at least demonstrating that vulnerable people may well be forced beneath the level of common dignity through no fault of their own, a simple assertion about the mechanisms of persecution that images of vulnerability manifest, but which spectators have trouble seeing pictured?

This is not to say that contextualization cannot go far in counteracting recoil and paradox. It makes no sense to argue that texts that expose the usage, say, of lynching as “folk pornography” become part of that genre.⁷³ I wish only to argue that context is an insufficient screen as long as dignity imagined as resilience under pressure is still a powerful picture of idealized humanity. In the instances I have discussed, the incommensurability of power and powerlessness in extreme cases overwhelms the frame and provides an image of humanity in crisis, of disempowerment that is not a structural

property of the image but provokes a highly individualized and precognitive response. Thus atrocity photographs begin to render human vulnerability seeable, reveal a rupture in the frame as itself a focus of critical reflection as well as affective response. Georges Didi-Huberman has called this rupture a “tear” in the image of horror that allows it to operate as both veil and rupture, what he calls “fetish and fact.”⁷⁴ At the very least, vulnerability and frailty may affirm dignity and yet begin to displace the idealized picture of humanity in the process: dignity understood stubbornly as resilience and honor comes increasingly to appear as a defense against powerlessness and injury and all that which threatens upright and whole subjects capable of using their last ounce of strength to fight oppression.

Is it possible to conceptualize an alternative form of imagining human dignity under stress that could be articulated in the realm of politics—meaning one that had some cultural power that could not be reduced to pitying the vulnerable, a sentiment always laced with contempt? Could witnessing in this context mean that affective response to such images would be respect and solidarity as often as aversion and recoil? Might such images evoke empathy rather than voyeuristic gratification? While images of passive people circulate endlessly and stress the powerlessness of victims, how do we account for the pervasive ambivalence about photos of human frailty, and might it be possible to envision suffering others without simply pitying them? Would it be conceivable to render witnessing not as a helpless act that satisfies the feel-good needs of spectators or their voyeurism but as meaningful for victims of persecution? The various efforts by Sontag and Butler to understand how atrocity images “haunt” us are different efforts to reconceive human vulnerability in terms that escape aversion but in the end fail to provide the interpretative framework “in the field of politics” that dignity provides. Their work emphasizes instead, at least implicitly, the difficulty of open-ended mourning represented by the photograph that “exposes” vulnerability and horror.⁷⁵

We cannot envision closure on death without metaphorical wholeness—redemption and restoration. But this should not preclude us at least from asking about the cultural discourse that generates specific narratives about dignity and precludes us from interrogating more deeply the skepticism about why people do not resist oppression more effectively, blaming the victim, and the shame often associated with having been victimized or tortured. One only has to think about the stigma attached to the person who confesses under torture to remember the powerful link between dignity and honor. Of course, we cannot reject dignity and embrace what John Roberts has termed “a mortuary,” in which photographs exist to fuel our “bloodlust” rather than to establish the critical distance necessary to make “witnessing” possible.⁷⁶ Roberts himself has insisted on the photograph’s violation as “not unidirectionally negative” and has called for a “different economy of reception, one that involves the dedicated apprehension and social reimagining of the evidence of bodily trauma, a fully mimetic opening up to its effects and consequences that involves a reorganization of affect in the spectators.”⁷⁷ He is cynical about the possibility of this “reorganization of affect,” arguing that the strategic deployment of atrocity images in the West serves the interests of imperialism and neoliberalism. He argues that photographs will be productive only if they are deployed in a “circuit-breaking fashion.”⁷⁸ For now, we

might propose that “circuit-breaking” involves exploring the relationship between dignity and honor, or rather, the relationship between dignity and the specific historical and cultural forms that bodily integrity takes. The celebration of honor, for example, leaves in its wake a long string of victims who were unable to resist, who confessed under torture, and who remain ashamed of their powerlessness and thus indignity. This shame we feel on behalf of those photographed and our complicity or failure to intervene also informs the circular logic of the often very sophisticated discourses on atrocity photography: shame that makes it so difficult to think through the problem of how to look.

To undertake an investigation into the tension between the “human conscience” touched by human suffering and the prevalence of and preference for narratives about heroic victims might require a history of the construction of suffering global humanity as a wailing, beseeching collective subject of human rights that has been especially powerful in visual representations since the 1970s, when atrocity photography became particularly widespread.

NOTES

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1. Jonathan Benthall, *Disasters, Relief and the Media* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1993), 103.
2. Videos are also widespread but obviously revitalize the image and are so close to film as to merit a separate discussion. For reasons of conceptual coherence I address only images of suffering and persecuted humanity. Photographs of tormented animals (in war or in other contexts) as well as pictures of sites where capital punishment is administered may be conceived as atrocity photographs but tend not to be assimilated into arguments about them. See Wendy Lesser, *Pictures at an Execution: An Inquiry into the Subject of Murder* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993); Maria Pia di Bella, “Observing Executions: From Spectator to Witness,” in *Representations of Pain in Art and Visual Culture*, ed. Maria Pia di Bella and James Elkins (New York: Routledge, 2013), 170–85. Thanks to Austin Sarat for asking about the more capacious images implied by the term “atrocity photography.”
3. Frank Möller, “Rwanda Revisualized: Genocide, Photography, and the Era of the Witness,” *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political* 35, no. 2 (April-June 2010): 113–36.
4. Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites, eds., *No Caption Needed: Iconic Photographs, Public Culture, and Liberal Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007); Sharon Sliwinski, *Human Rights in the Camera's Eye* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).
5. For example, the visual theorist W. J. T. Mitchell, who was relieved by the careful contextualization on display at an exhibition on lynching, writes: “What purpose, I want to know, is being served by putting these terrible, harrowing images of evil on display for the voyeuristic gratification of the gallery-going public?” In short, do traumatic effects always get in the way of “witnessing” or can they be mobilized to disrupt or challenge dominant forms of knowledge? Can they ever provide forms of political and cultural recognition or is “voyeuristic gratification” the only possible affective response they evoke? Mitchell’s response and the questions it provokes define the most typical terms of argument, but those terms are rarely discussed as such. W. J. T. Mitchell, *What*

Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 142. For a sophisticated and interesting interpretation of such images that I did not have time to incorporate fully before this essay went to press, see John Roberts, *Photography and Its Violations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014). I address his argument where possible at the end of the essay and in footnotes.

6. Arnold Hauser, *The Social History of Art*, vol. 1, *Prehistoric, Ancient, Oriental, Greece and Rome, Middle Ages* (1957; repr. New York: Vintage, 1985), 138. See also Alain Besançon, *The Forbidden Image: An Intellectual History of Iconoclasm*, trans. Jane Marie Todd (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

7. Samuel Warren and Louis Brandeis, "The Right to Privacy," *Harvard Law Review* 4, no. 5 (December 15, 1890): 193–220.

8. See the perceptive essay by John Peffer, "Flogging Photographs from the Congo Free State," in di Bella and Elkins, *Representations of Pain and Art in Visual Culture*, 122–42.

9. Ernst Friedrich, *Krieg dem Krieg: Mit einem Vorwort von Gerd Krumeich* (1924; repr., Munich: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 2004).

10. See Patricia Heberer and Jürgen Matthaus, eds., *Atrocities on Trial: Historical Perspectives on the Politics of Prosecuting War Crimes* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008), 59, n. 56.

11. The U.S. government censored all war photos except pictures from Japan's war against the Chinese, presumably because they were of foreign acts of barbarism perpetrated by people deemed culturally inferior. See George H. Roeder Jr., *The Censored War: American Visual Experience during World War Two* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1993), 126–27. I should emphasize that in the Soviet Union, where Nazi mass killing took place, photography reflected the atrocities in a forensic manner. Russians had a much clearer sense of Nazi atrocities than journalists in Western countries. See David Shneer, *Through Soviet Jewish Eyes: Photography, War, and the Holocaust* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2011).

12. I understand that historians might assume that images of death are "events" that make determining agency and contextualization more challenging, but I am interested here in how discourses about these photographs and their meaning are constructed, even once contexts and events have been verified. That warring parties often change the captions on photographs to manipulate emotions is well known (massacred Serbians reappear as massacred Croatians) and can lead either to increased violence in the heat of a propaganda battle, or, as Barbie Zelizer has argued, to increased passivity as events are dehistoricized and removed from their actual context. Barbie Zelizer, *Remembering to Forget: Holocaust Memory through the Camera's Eye* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

13. Didier Fassin, *Humanitarian Reason: A Moral History of the Present* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 207.

14. Möller, "Rwanda Revisualized," 113–36. I might also note that "to witness" is, as the Holocaust Memorial Museum's use of Isaiah 43:10 suggests, a religious concept yoked to the affirmation of human dignity in certain discourses after the Second World War, particularly French Catholic texts. For example, by the end of the 1940s the French Resistance had redefined their mission no longer as armed struggle but as "bearing witness." See Emma Kubly, "In the Shadow of the Concentration Camp: David Rousset and the Limits of Apoliticism in Postwar French Thought," *Modern Intellectual History* 11, no. 1 (April 2014): 147–73.

15. Gerhard Schoenberger, quoted in Robert Sacht, "Pictures of Atrocity: Public Reception of Der gelbe Stern in 1960s West Germany," *German History* 24, no. 4 (Winter 2006): 529.

16. Sliwinski, *Human Rights in Camera*, 83.
17. Cornelia Brink, "Secular Icons: Looking at Photographs of Nazi Concentration Camps," *History and Memory* 12, no. 1 (2000): 146. Brink draws the term "secular icon" from Patrick Maynard, cited in Cornelia Brink, *Ikonen der Vernichtung: Öffentlicher Gebrauch von Fotografien aus nationalsozialistischen Konzentrationslagern nach 1945* (Berlin: Akademie, 1998), 233, n. 7.
18. Frances Guerin and Roger Hallas, "Introduction," in *The Image and the Witness: Trauma, Memory, and Visual Culture*, ed. Frances Guerin and Roger Hallas (New York: Wallflower Press, 2007), 14.
19. Immanuel Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Mary J. Gregor (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 188.
20. Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Penguin, 2001), 267–302.
21. Elizabeth S. Anker, *Fictions of Dignity: Embodying Human Rights in World Literature* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2012); Samuel Moyn, *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2010); Joseph R. Slaughter, *Human Rights Inc.: The World, Novel, Narrative Form, and International Law* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007); Miriam Ticktin, *Casualties of Care: Immigration and the Politics of Humanitarianism in France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).
22. W. G. Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, trans. Michael Hulse (London: Harvill Press, 1998), 234–35.
23. Interestingly, in a book on the history of film in human rights trials, Christian Delage, sophisticated about media, writes of the ethical problem involved in leaving a cinematic record of *perpetrators* who will only be remembered for their crimes—that is, the one moment when they are on trial, which implicitly denies the dignity of a life fully lived. See Christian Delage, *Caught on Camera: Film in the Courtroom from the Nuremberg Trials to the Trials of the Khmer Rouge*, ed. and trans. Ralph Schoolcraft and Mary Byrd Kelly (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014), 4.
24. Annette Wieviorka, *The Era of the Witness*, trans. Jared Stark (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2007).
25. Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography*, trans. Relia Mazali and Ruvik Danieli (New York: Zone Books, 2008); Azoulay, *Civil Imagination: A Political Ontology of Photography*, trans. Louise Bethlehem (London: Verso, 2012); Ulrich Baer, *Spectral Evidence: The Photography of Trauma* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2005); Stephen F. Eisenmann, *The Abu Ghraib Effect* (London: Reaktion Books, 2007); Susie Linfield, *The Cruel Radiance: Photographs of Political Violence* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010); W. J. T. Mitchell, *Cloning Terror: The War of Images, 9/11 to the Present* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011); Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (1977; repr., New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1980); Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003); Zelizer, *Remembering to Forget*; Barbie Zelizer, *About to Die: How News Images Move the Public* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010). Other works are primarily collections of essays that cover multiple images and contexts and provide no synthetic argument but pose important questions. See Geoffrey Batchen, Mick Gidley, Nancy K. Miller, and Jay Prosser, eds., *Picturing Atrocity: Photography in Crisis* (London: Reaktion Books, 2012); di Bella and Elkins, eds., *Representations of Pain in Art and Visual Culture*.
26. Martha Rosler, *Three Works* (Halifax, N.S.: Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1981), 71–86; Allan Sekula, "The Body and the Archive," *October* 39 (Winter 1986): 3–64; Allan Sekula, "On the Invention of Photographic Meaning," *Artforum* 13, no. 5 (January 1975): 45.

See also John Tagg, *The Disciplinary Frame: Photographic Truths and the Capture of Meaning* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009).

27. When such images do have aesthetic properties, debates ensue about the propriety of treating them as art. A good example is the images of Cambodians photographed before execution at Tuol Sleng prison, which were exhibited at MoMA, *Photographs from S-21, 1975–1979*, from late spring to autumn 1997.

28. John Berger first argued that atrocity photographs numbed the senses so dramatically that they “dispersed shock” and generated only self-palliative responses such as donating to charity. The chapter in which he discusses this is titled “Photographs of Agony” and is meant as a rejoinder to Susan Sontag’s use of the expression. John Berger, *About Looking* (New York: Vintage, 1980), 40–44.

29. The now-classic account is Susan Moeller, *Compassion Fatigue* (New York: Routledge, 1999).

30. Sontag, *On Photography*, 123.

31. *Ibid.*, 105. I should note that most catalogues of war photography avoid these issues. See Jane Livingston, foreword by Frances Falin, *The Indelible Image: Photographs of War—1846 to the Present* (New York: Abrams, 1982); and *Voir! Ne pas voir la guerre: Histoire des représentations photographiques de la guerre* (Paris: Bibliothèque de documentation internationale contemporaine, 2001), 277.

32. Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, 110.

33. *Ibid.*

34. Michael Fried, *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2008), 30–35. Fried draws on the argument he first developed in *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

35. Judith Butler notes that for Sontag the “ethical force” of the atrocity photograph may be that it “refuses to mirror back the final narcissism of our desire to see and to refuse satisfaction to that narcissistic demand.” Butler finds this compelling if insufficient and perhaps generated by Sontag’s efforts to make the photograph meaningful, since its haunting quality generates outrage but does not “show her how to transform that affect into effective political action.” Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (New York: Verso, 2009), 99–100.

36. Again, see Berger, *About Looking*, 41–44.

37. James Agee, “Films,” *The Nation*, March 24, 1945, 342.

38. Bazin argues that dying cannot be shown without reversing the natural course of existence, a reversal that cinema revitalizes. André Bazin, “Death Every Afternoon,” in *Rites of Realism: Essays on Corporeal Cinema*, ed. Ivone Margulies, trans. Mark A. Cohen (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2002), 30–31.

39. Dora Apel, *Imagery of Lynching: Black Men, White Women, and the Mob* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2004), 9.

40. Linfield, *The Cruel Radiance*, 102.

41. Schoenberner quoted in Sachett, “Pictures of Atrocity,” 529. For a more recent photographic account of German war atrocities, see Hamburger Institut für Sozialforschung, *Verbrechen der Wehrmacht: Dimensionen des Vernichtungskrieges, 1941–1944, Ausstellungskatalog* (Hamburg: Institut für Sozialforschung, 2003).

42. Mitchell, *Cloning Terror*, 118; and Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want?*, 125–44.

43. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want?* Roland Barthes famously equated photography with death in *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981).
44. Though taboos might explain the difficulty of looking at corpses, the desecration of corpses in images, as W. J. T. Mitchell notes, is designed to traumatize viewers even though the corpse can't feel anything and the spectators see an image. Mitchell, "Cloning Terror: The War of Images 2001–04," in *The Life and Death of Images: Ethics and Aesthetics*, ed. Diarmuid Costello and Dominic Willsdon (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2008), 195.
45. Janina Struk, *Photographing the Holocaust: Interpretations of the Evidence* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2004), 216. Sybil Milton shares this view in "Documentary Photography and the Holocaust," *Simon Wiesenthal Center Annual* 1 (1984): 49.
46. See also Susan Crane, "Choosing Not to Look: Representation, Repatriation, and Holocaust Photography," *History and Theory* 47, no. 3 (October 2008): 318.
47. *Ibid.*, 318.
48. Griselda Pollack, "Dying, Seeing, Feeling: Transforming the Ethical Space of Feminist Aesthetics," in Costello, *The Life and Death of Images*, 221.
49. Prosser, "Introduction," *Picturing Atrocity*, 8, 9, 10.
50. Zelizer, *Remembering to Forget*, 100–108.
51. Prosser, *Picturing Atrocity*, 11.
52. John Roberts addresses this issue directly in the context of aesthetic theory about photography by asserting that the photograph is catachrestic: it is both indexical and figurative but not really either. In so doing, he intervenes in debates about whether digital photography has finally eclipsed photography's indexical relation to the real, voicing a nuanced "no." Ultimately he is also interested in how the changing conditions of production (now, neoliberalism) impact how and whether we can tie photography to a larger project of political liberation. To repeat, my own aim here is to discuss the role of atrocity photography not in aesthetic theory but as central to the constitution of global humanity and the ability to witness (which, as Roberts also notes, is always ideologically constrained).
53. See also Azoulay "The Executioner's Portrait," in Prosser, *Picturing Atrocity*, 249–60.
54. See also *Exposed: Voyeurism, Surveillance, and the Camera since 1870*, ed. Sandra S. Phillips (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2011), 11. The editor discusses images as invasions of privacy though the exhibit does not focus on suffering.
55. Azoulay, *The Civil Contract*, 493.
56. Azoulay's latest work seeks to provide a different conception of witnessing by reframing the atrocity photograph in terms of what it does not show. She rightly contests the idea that the violence conceived as superfluous and thus shocking in such photos—their depictions of things that should not have happened—conceals the extent to which the picture may be part of institutionalized atrocity that is not at all superfluous. In response to a colleague's suggestion that he saw no atrocity in photographs of sites where it must be occurring (in the context of the Israeli occupation of the West Bank), she suggests that we ask not "did the atrocity leave a trace in the photograph?" but "what trace did the atrocity leave in the photograph?" (Azoulay, "The Execution Portrait," in *Picturing Atrocity*, 252). The latter question reframes the trace of atrocity as an absent presence. The acknowledgment that the photograph is "an integral part of the activity that produces the atrocity" (249) is crucial. This argument sensitively emphasizes the invisible, everyday violence spectators do not see because it has become so self-evident. Thus Azoulay focuses on a

“civil gaze” generated by the crossing of various gazes across the photograph and the relationship between the inside and outside of the photographic frame. Photographs are the product of an “encounter between citizens” (Azoulay, *Civil Imagination*, 117). Though Azoulay expands the scope of what we mean by images of atrocity, she does not address the affective responses to the depiction of atrocities themselves because she believes that such questions derive from the limitations of conceiving atrocity in terms of the visual attributes of the image. The implication of her argument is that by understanding the ontological violence of the image as such we grasp the institutional reasons for atrocity and can act politically, so that the “civil gaze” links affect and politics. She thus resolves the question of how the civil gaze acts (or learns or knows) by rendering the images—and spectators—already implicated in political processes for better or worse. I am not sure this actually explains how the relationship between affect and politics works, though it takes us outside the frame and allows us to think about photographs in new ways. Azoulay, *Civil Imagination*, 18, 26, 104, 113.

57. Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1978), 222.

58. Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1994), 12; Jean Baudrillard, *The Evil Demon of Images*, trans. Paul Patton and Paul Foss (Sydney: Power Institute of Fine Arts, University of Sydney, 1987), 24–25. Jacques Rancière criticizes these views in *The Emancipated Spectator*, trans. Gregory Elliott (New York: Verso, 2011).

59. Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*.

60. Talal Asad, *On Suicide Bombing* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 65–83. Asad discusses how much the particular horror of suicide bombing owes to the visible mutilation of bodies that is rendered invisible when perpetrated by Western powers in their own “war on terror.”

61. Zelizer, *About to Die*, 56, 223. Several critics have suggested that the resolution to the problem of distance posed by the atrocity photo is to recast the photographs aesthetically as haunting absences or to depict certain kinds of resilient victims. See Baer, *Spectral Evidence*; Batchen, “Looking Askance”; Barbie Zelizer, “Atrocity, the ‘As If,’ and Impending Death from the Khmer Rouge,” in *Picturing Atrocity*, 155–56; Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, 103–5; and Edie L. Wong, “Haunting Absences: Witnessing Loss in Doris Salcedo’s *Atrabilarios* and Beyond,” in Guerin and Hallas, *The Image and the Witness*, 173–88.

62. This alternative understanding of human community based not on a universal concept of humanity but on differentiated perceptions of vulnerability shaped by norms of recognition is worked out in Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (New York: Verso, 2003). For a different but interesting discussion that is, however, universalistic in aim, see Bryan S. Turner, *Vulnerability and Human Rights* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006).

63. Butler, *Frames of War*, 94.

64. Butler, *Precarious Life*, 30–39.

65. This is presumably a reference to Emmanuel Levinas’s focus on the “face” in his work, in particular *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Norwell, Mass.: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1991).

66. Butler, *Frames of War*, 95.

67. *Ibid.*

68. *Ibid.*, 99.

69. Ibid., 95.
70. Butler, *Precarious Life*, 26.
71. Butler, *Frames of War*, 98. On claims about showing what is unseen, see Butler, *Precarious Life*, 147–50.
72. Richard Rorty, “Human Rights, Rationality, and Sentimentality,” in *On Human Rights: The Oxford Amnesty Lectures, 1993*, ed. Stephen Shute and Susan Hurley (New York: Basic Books, 1993), 133, 129.
73. See Leon Litwack, “Hellhounds,” in *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America*, ed. James Allen, Hilton Als, Congressman John Lewis, and Leon F. Litwack (Santa Fe, N.M.: Twin Palms, 2000), 22.
74. Georges Didi-Huberman, *Images in Spite of All: Four Photographs from Auschwitz*, trans. Shane B. Lillis (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 79–80.
75. Roberts refers to “representational intolerance” to describe the “inhuman in representation in defiance of a culture where the representations of direct violence are constantly being dissolved into humanist empathy.” The point, as he makes clear, is not simply to presume that atrocity photographs should be endlessly circulated with no regard to context but to assess how the photograph can rupture the calmness of the spectator and encourage a critical (that is to say distant) reevaluation of a particular historical situation. Roberts, *Photography and Its Violations*, 150.
76. Ibid., 162.
77. Ibid., 152, 163.
78. Ibid., 164.