

AT WAR

# When We See Photographs of Some Dead Bodies and Not Others

By Sarah Sentilles

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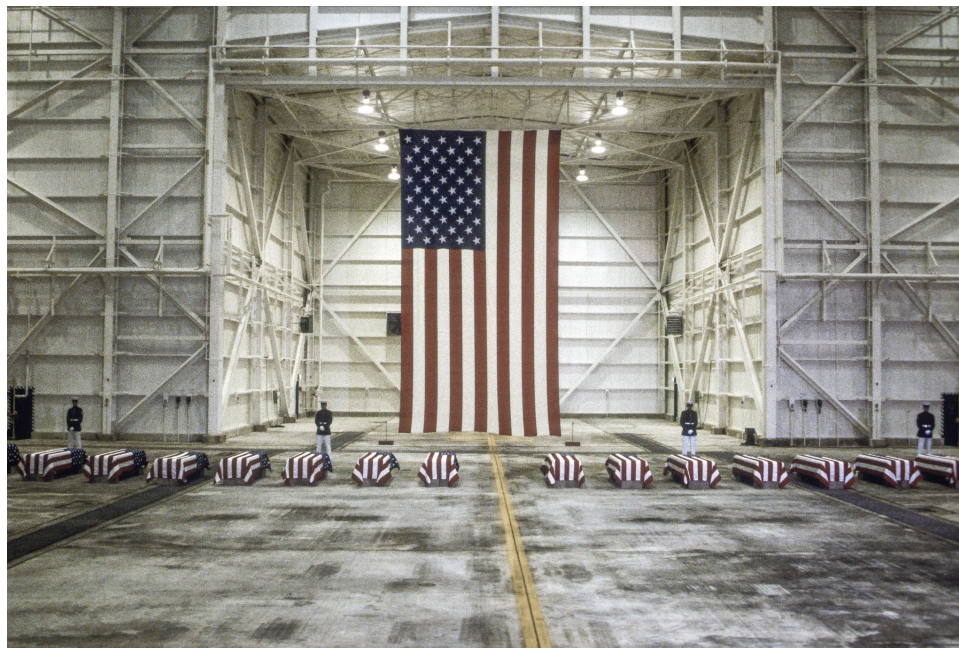
From 2007 to 2016, I taught college courses about photography and war, and my students and I discussed what to make of the fact that we almost never saw images of dead American soldiers in the news media. Dead Iraqis, dead Afghans, dead Syrians — yes, we saw those bodies, blown up and bloodied, buried in rubble, partly covered by sheets, on the floor, on the ground, on a stretcher, in a pile — but not dead Americans. Though we couldn't reach an agreement about whether or not the media should show images of our war dead, my students understood that there was a relationship between the visible images from other countries and the suppressed images from our country. Hiding some dead bodies affects how other dead bodies are viewed.

Under President George H.W. Bush, the Defense Department instituted a ban against photographing flag-draped coffins returning from the Persian Gulf war in 1991. The ban, which lasted 19 years, followed a televised embarrassment for Bush. In 1989, networks covering the American invasion of Panama showed split-screen images: On one side, a military honor guard unloading coffins at Dover Air Force Base; on the other, a news conference where Bush, a veteran of World War II, was joking with reporters. That a policy for the suppression of photographs was prompted by what was perceived to be an inappropriate response to the homecoming of fallen soldiers fascinates me as someone who has been researching ethical responses to photographs of suffering for 15 years. The dead often come to us by photograph — in our morning newspapers, in our social-media feeds, on our computer screens next to advertisements for diamond watches or cruises or yoga pants. And many of us fear that we don't know how to look at them, or what to do in response to what we see. We feel helpless. Useless. And then we feel ashamed. Better not to look at all. Better to avoid images of the dead.

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The Obama administration lifted the ban against images of returning military coffins in 2009, but photographs of our war dead remain scarce. This virtual absence of images of American military casualties has been interpreted in multiple and conflicting ways. For some, policies against publishing photographs of dead American service members is a form of censorship that sanitizes war and obscures the violent consequences of military engagement. The news media's near blackout enables collective amnesia about war and its aftermath, critics argue, and allows the American public to ignore the real costs of the wars we send our fellow citizens to fight. Those who support banning photographs of American military casualties understand the images not just as antiwar but also as anti-soldier. They argue that showing the dead inflames controversy and politicizes soldiers' sacrifices. For them, refusing to publish images of dead Americans is a sign of respect, a way to honor the privacy of service members and their families. War-trophy photography — the practice of taking pictures of the dead enemy and bringing those images home like souvenirs — renders suspect all photographs taken in military conflict: Their dead can be captured by our cameras, while our dead should be shielded from theirs. And it is this distinction between "ours" and "theirs" that haunts how photographs of the dead are viewed. In her book "Regarding the Pain of Others," Susan Sontag argued that showing only photographs of violence that happens abroad generates separation between subjects and viewers. These images imply that tragedy is inevitable and unavoidable — and therefore more acceptable — when it is experienced by faraway people; they create the sense that violence is something that happens elsewhere and to others.

When it's common practice to publish photographs of war casualties from other countries but not to publish photographs of war casualties from the United States, then the very fact of visual access to the dead marks them as "other." Likewise, if the refusal to publish images of dead American service members is a sign of respect, then the willingness to publish photographs of other people's dead bodies can be read as a sign of disrespect. Publishing some images while suppressing others sends the message that the visible bodies are somehow less consequential than the bodies granted the privilege of privacy. Whenever I see a photograph of a dead body in the media, I take a screenshot of the image. It's my informal attempt to keep track of whose bodies are shown and whose are hidden. For years, among the hundreds of images I saved, none showed an American soldier. My screenshots also didn't show bodies belonging to American civilians. But then, in 2014, Michael Brown was killed in Ferguson, Mo., by Officer Darren Wilson, and a photograph of Brown's body appeared on the front page of The New York Times.



A ceremony at Dover Air Force Base honoring the servicemen killed in the bombing in Beirut and the invasion of Grenada in October 1983. Mark Reinstein/Corbis, via Getty Images

Before I saw Brown's body in the newspaper, I thought nationality shielded some dead bodies from view and made other dead bodies available for people to see. But Michael Brown was American. Philando Castile, Terence Crutcher, Alton Sterling, Walter Scott, Tamir Rice, Eric Garner, Stephon Clark — all Americans. News outlets not only published photographs of them dead or dying in a car, in the street, in a parking lot, in the grass, in a park, on a sidewalk, in their own backyard; they also showed graphic videos of their deaths.

I understand that photographs of Americans killed during war and photographs of black Americans killed by the police are not the same kind of images. They don't exist in the same numbers, either: In the last three years, the annual number of American service members killed in action has been less than 35, while the annual number of black Americans killed by the police has been more than 220. I am also not an expert in the media policies that shape decisions about publishing violent photographs. But it's not the policies themselves that interest me; it's their effects.

If we are rarely allowed to see photographs of dead American soldiers in the news, then what does it mean that we can routinely view, in every major media outlet, images and videos of black Americans being killed by the police? Images — both those we see and those blocked from our view — send messages about whose lives count, about whose lives should be mourned, about who belongs to us and who doesn't. How do we grieve bodies we aren't allowed to see? Concealing images of soldiers killed in action can be read as suggesting there is something

shameful about dying, something that should be hidden from view, as if to see the soldier's body would be a kind of humiliation. By not publishing photographs of our war dead, it seems to me we fail our soldiers by denying what it is we ask them to do and to risk when we send them to fight.

It's challenging to care about what we can't see, but we also don't seem to care about what we *can* see. "The more remote or exotic the place, the more likely we are to have full frontal views of the dead and the dying," Sontag wrote. But 15 years later, her words are not quite true. Sontag's sentence could be rewritten: The darker the skin, the more likely we are to have full-frontal views of the dead and the dying, even when those suffering bodies are just across town, down the street, right next door.

I cannot view the images of black men killed by the police without remembering lynching photographs, those pictures taken to record the white mob's savagery — to champion it, not to protest it. Lynching photographs were intended to code black bodies as criminal, beatable, killable, and to code white bodies as purveyors of justice. The images were then turned into postcards and sent around the country to celebrate the racist violence that was being done.

## Timeline for a Body: 4 Hours in the Middle of a Ferguson Street

By JULIE BOSMAN  
and JOSEPH GOLDSTEIN

FERGUSON, Mo. — Just after noon on Saturday, Aug. 9, Michael Brown was shot dead by a police officer on Canfield Drive.

For about four hours, in the unrelenting summer sun, his body remained where he fell.

Neighbors were horrified by the gruesome scene: Mr. Brown, 18, face down in the middle of the street, blood streaming from his head. They ushered their children into rooms that faced away from Canfield Drive. They called friends and local news stations to tell them what had happened. They posted on Twitter and Facebook and recorded shaky cellphone videos that would soon make their way to the national news.

Mr. Brown probably could not have been revived, and the time that his body lay in the street may ultimately have no bearing on the investigations into whether the shooting was justified. But local officials say that the image of Mr. Brown's corpse in the open



JAMES CLAY, VIA NEWSSHARE

Michael Brown's body was not immediately covered and was recorded on video by bystanders.

set the scene for what would become a combustible worldwide story of police tactics and race in America, and left some of the officials asking why.

"The delay helped fuel the outrage," said Patricia Byers, a committeewoman in Ferguson. "It was very disrespectful to the community and the people who live there. It also sent the message from law enforcement that

'we can do this to you any day, any time, in broad daylight, and there's nothing you can do about it.'"

Two weeks after Mr. Brown's death, interviews with law enforcement officials and a review of police logs make clear that a combination of factors, some under police control and some not, contributed to the time lapse in removing his body.

The St. Louis County Police Department, which almost immediately took over the investigation, had officers on the scene quickly, but its homicide detectives were not called until about 40 minutes after the shooting, according to county police logs, and they arrived around 1:30 p.m. It was another hour before an

*Continued on Page 16*

Michael Brown's body on the front page of The New York Times on Aug. 24, 2014. The New York Times

A dangerous thing, photography. Sometimes, being seen, being looked at, signals value, importance, rank. Yet, other times, being seen — or being watched — signals objectification, victimization, being stripped of dignity. Racism renders black and brown bodies simultaneously hypervisible and invisible. In 1955, when Emmett Till's lynched and mutilated body was pulled from the Tallahatchie River in Mississippi, his mother, Mamie Till-Mobley, wanted her son's body visible, his coffin open so people could see what had been done to him. "Let the people see what they did to my boy," she said. "I believe that the whole United States is mourning with me." But were we? Are we? And if we are, is mourning enough?

Sixty years later, Michael Brown's mother, Lesley McSpadden, wanted his body covered. She learned that it was her son who had been killed when someone showed her a cellphone picture of him laying in the street. "Her son was not an orphan body for everyone to look upon," Claudia Rankine wrote in June 2015 for The New York Times Magazine. "She wanted him covered and removed from sight. He belonged to her, her baby." When the decision about a body's visibility can be made by a mother or a loved one, it's hard to imagine how it could be decent to intervene in that intimate and painful choice. But on a societal level, as a policy, decisions about whose bodies are seen and whose are hidden matter enormously.

Despite the risks and contradictions that come with looking and seeing — the tension between witnessing, honoring and responding on the one hand, and gawking, appropriating and violating on the other — I am convinced that the videos and photographs of police violence against black bodies should be made public, that they must be seen, just as photographs of dead American soldiers should be made public. And holding the two disparate cases together — the contrasting policies of hiding our dead soldiers from sight and circulating images of our slain fellow civilians — can make us understand both war and racism better. If we were to put our war dead and our civilian dead in the same frame, might it be possible to see that they are all “ours”?

It is the hierarchy of grief that must be questioned, Judith Butler argues in “Precarious Life,” a book written at the start of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, criticizing the use of violence as a response to loss. Depending on who you are and where you stand, some lives count more than others, and some deaths count more, too. That is why “there are no obituaries for the war casualties that the United States inflicts, and there cannot be,” Butler writes. “If there were to be an obituary, there would have had to have been a life, a life worth noting, a life worth valuing and preserving, a life that qualifies for recognition,” a life worth protecting — and that’s a value a country doesn’t wish to accord to the people it has categorized as enemies or rivals. But these hierarchies of value and grief are not inevitable or immutable, Butler tells her readers. They are learned and constructed, which means they can be unlearned and reimagined.

“Come on,” one of my students said when I taught Butler’s text. “Of course we’re going to mourn our dead more than theirs.” “Who counts as our dead?” another student asked. Publishing some images of the dead while hiding others restricts our answers to that question. Keeping images of “our” war dead out of sight signals a distrust of the viewing public, a fundamental misgiving about our ability to view images ethically, to do anything to repair the violence we see. What’s more, it negatively affects how we view the images of the dead we are allowed to see; it suggests that those visible dead do not belong to us. Looking brings risks, particularly through the warped lenses of racism and nationalism. But censorship is not the solution to these failures of looking. The remedy is to become better viewers, to learn ethical and constructive ways to view images of people in pain, especially when those suffering bodies have been marked as “other,” as “stranger,” as not our kin, and especially when those suffering bodies have been hidden from us.

I worry every day that my response to the pictured suffering of others is inadequate, inappropriate, that I turn away too soon, go on with my daily life, absorbed by my to-do lists and my own pressing concerns. But my failure as a viewer is exacerbated by our media’s practice of keeping some bodies protected from view while other bodies — be they victims of bombings or natural disasters or police violence — are visible everywhere. My students were right: Hiding some bodies affects how other bodies are seen. But if we were allowed to see all our dead, if we were to stop obscuring some bodies while revealing others, then photographs might be able to teach us to become better viewers, better grieverers, responsible and accountable for the injuries we see.

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