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Disparate Dignities: Images of the Dead

On September 2, 2015, three-year-old Alan Kurdi washed ashore dead on a Turkish beach, and the photograph of his corpse made international headlines. The image depicts Kurdi face down in the damp sand, his vibrant red t-shirt and dark blue shorts contrasting sharply with the pale blues and tans of the beach ground. His tiny, lifeless, doll-like body creates a haunting presence amidst the otherwise tranquil nature scene. This horrifying image portraying the catastrophic human costs of the European refugee crisis was shared millions of times on social media and prompted hundreds of thousands of people to donate money to charities supporting this vulnerable population. The Migrant Offshore Aid Station, an organization that provides medical assistance to refugees, reported that donations increased by 15 fold within 24 hours of the photograph's publication. Politicians and celebrities across the globe expressed their shock, deep sadness, and outrage. The emotional outpouring ignited by the photograph of Alan Kurdi, which seemed to symbolize an entire crisis, carried the potential to catalyze action.

The story of Alan Kurdi reveals the immense power of imagery yet simultaneously raises questions regarding the ethics behind publishing, sharing, and distributing images of human corpses. Images of the dead have consistently aroused controversy due to their uniquely disturbing and emotional nature. Media outlets around the world have developed policies and procedures to balance their responsibilities to both inform the public and to respect the dead and their families. This essay explores the tension between these two duties in order to reach a more nuanced understanding of both the benefits and pitfalls of publishing images of the dead. It is often argued that the public has a right to view these photographs because they are an important

aspect of the ability of citizens to hold their governments accountable (Morse, 2013). However, when considering the moral dimensions of publishing images of the dead, it is vital to not only evaluate individual photographs but to recognize larger patterns that dictate which pictures are published and which are not. Although images of the dead carry the potential to inspire empathy and socio-political change, the ways in which different nationalities are portrayed in the media indicate disparities regarding human dignity that reinforce rather than combat racial hierarchies, making the benefits of publishing these images superficial and significantly diminishing the possibilities for meaningful change.

The moral quandary surrounding images of the dead and dying is a topic deeply explored in “Beautiful Suffering,” an exhibition showcased at Williams College in 2006. The photographs and accompanying wall text urge viewers to not only contemplate each striking image but also to question whether their very existence is justified. The images differ in time period, location, purpose, and subject, yet they are linked by their depiction of some form of physical or emotional suffering. The majority of the images portray human suffering, whether it be famine (plate 23), torture (plate 60), or homelessness (plates 30-31). However, there are also photographs of scenes and landscapes of suffering, such as the remnants of the twin towers after 9/11 (plates 18 and 19) and minefields in Afghanistan (plate 20). In addition, certain images, such as “Afghan Girl” (plate 7) and “Sudan” (plate 23), are accompanied by representations of how the original photograph was repurposed by the media, sparking questions about the morality of its widespread distribution. The curators acknowledge their own potential hypocrisy in repurposing such images but claim that wall texts justify the “traffic in pain” perpetuated in the exhibition by providing contextual information and through the posing of questions. “Beautiful Suffering” is philosophical; it leaves viewers with more questions than answers and encourages

them to consider whether the curators are justified or hypocritical in their exhibition of the photographs.

Although several photographs of the dead exist within the “Beautiful Suffering” exhibition, additional case studies help to illuminate the multi-dimensional debate concerning these images. Famous photographs of dead bodies, such as the images of Emmett Till’s deformed face and Alan Kurdi’s drowned corpse, are relevant examples of the ways in which images both arouse the public and reinforce problematic narratives. Additionally, quantitative research studies as described in Tal Morse’s article “Covering the Dead: Death images in Israeli newspapers - ethics and praxis,” provide evidence regarding the media’s disparate treatment of ethno-national groups when it comes to publishing images of the dead. In conjunction with several of the photographs and commentary provided by “Beautiful Suffering,” this diverse yet condensed data set demonstrates the severity and complexity of the problems that these photographs pose.

Images of the dead have historically played an important role in inspiring social and political movements, and can therefore be considered beneficial in their ability to evoke empathy and pique interest in critical issues. One of the most famous American photographs of the 20th century was that of the mutilated body of Emmett Till. Emmett Till was a 14-year-old African-American boy who was kidnapped, brutally beaten, and shot to death in Mississippi after a white woman accused him of flirting with her, which she later admitted never happened. Although the Mississippi police requested that Till’s body be buried quickly, an effort to literally cover up the murder, Emmett Till’s mother Mamie Till Mobley held an open casket funeral for her son and allowed his deformed face to be photographed (Berger, 2017). Her intent was to show the world her son’s maimed image in the hopes of sparking change, stating: “[People] would not be able to visualize what had happened, unless they were allowed to see the results of

what had happened. They had to see what I had seen. The whole nation had to bear witness to this.” (Berger, 2017). Mobley’s emphasis on the importance of visualization denotes the extent to which Till’s image carried a power that words could not.

As demonstrated by the outcome of the murder trial, in which both of the men accused were acquitted by an all-white jury, the institutionalized racism that characterized much of the 20th-century criminal justice system prevented Till from receiving justice in the courtroom. White women were believed and black men were not. Emmett Till’s photograph was a way for Americans to directly confront, and as Mobley articulates, “bear witness” to the horrifying realities of racist violence, prompting hundreds of thousands of Americans to join the Civil Rights Movement. The photograph provided indisputable evidence of African American suffering and triggered an emotional response on the part of both black and white viewers. Further, Emmett Till’s image played a synecdochic role in that it came to symbolize a larger narrative of black criminalization, dehumanization, and suffering. Sociologist Joyce Ladner coined the phrase “the Emmett Till Generation” to describe this group of young African American activists, conveying how his image influenced the American public to participate in protests against Jim Crow (“The Murder of Emmett Till”). Ultimately, Emmet Till’s image and the responses it elicited exemplifies the socio-political benefits images of the dead can manifest and inspire.

The impact of photos of the dead on social and political movements can also be shown through the inaction that occurs when these photographs are not published. Addressing the absence of response and criticism when images are missing from the media is a crucial indicator of the high stakes of publishing images of the dead. In the article, “Why is it Important - Today - to Show and Look at Images of Destroyed Human Bodies?,” Thomas Hirschhorn outlines eight

reasons why photographs of the dead are not only beneficial but vital. Hirschhorn argues in his third point titled “Invisibility” that the absence of photographs of dead bodies in the media is not neutral or inconsequential as some may argue. Instead, he states, such absence detracts from the public’s ability to criticize their government or society in cases of injustice. To look at and distribute photographs of the dead is a “way of campaigning against war and its justification and propaganda” (Hirschhorn, 2012). Hirschhorn’s use of the term “campaign,” connoting the military, conveys his belief that viewing images of the dead is not passive but in fact highly strategic and offensive in operation. The importance of the distribution of photos, as opposed to simply their viewing, suggests his belief that the public must actively participate in the “traffic in pain” to afford the public a proper understanding of injustice and suffering. Hirschhorn’s emphasis on participation connects to Mamie Till Mobley’s painful decision to not only allow those who attended Till’s funeral to witness his corpse but to have him photographed so that millions more could see his deformed figure as well. Mobley took part in the “campaign” against white violence by disseminating the image of her son, transforming his horrifying murder into an extraordinary catalyst for young African American activists to join the Civil Rights Movement.

Mark Reinhardt, in his essay “Picturing Violence: Aesthetics and the Anxiety of Critique,” also acknowledges the profound impact that the absence of images of the dead can have on public opinion. “Picturing Violence” is one of five essays that accompany “Beautiful Suffering,” each of which is written by a notable academic within the discourse of the photography of pain. In his essay, Reinhardt opposes the common notion that aestheticization is problematic in images of suffering, and instead argues that it can be beneficial to the viewer’s experience. In the first section of the essay, titled “Absence, Presence, and the Faces of Suffering,” Reinhardt includes a black square photograph (Figure 1) captioned “Iraqi Children

Killed by American Bombs” (15). Figure 1 and its corresponding caption create a jarring representation of absence within the media. During the Bush administration, when there was high public support for the Iraq war, the refusal on the part of the American media to publish such photographs obstructed war critique (Reinhardt 15). The detrimental effects of image censorship imply that there is a true possibility for images of the dead to sway public opinion. And yet, while it is clear that images of the dead do carry enormous power and possibility, to describe only the socio-political benefits of such images would be a gross oversimplification because the cultural meanings of death can create a hierarchical power dynamic when not all are published equally.

Discrepancies regarding who is photographed dead and published by the media align with differing national identities. As Susan Sontag remarks in her book *Regarding the Pain of Others*, “[t]he more remote or exotic the place, the more likely we are to have full frontal views of the dead and dying” (56). The words “remote” and “exotic” connote removal and distance, while the characterization as “full frontal” suggests that it matters how subjects are photographed and not just whether they are photographed. The term “full frontal” is often associated with nudity, alluding to the vulnerable and unprotected nature of the dead. Reinhardt also acknowledges the asymmetry of images of the dead in regards to the black square of Figure 1 by revealing that, more recently, American death has been absent from the media as well (15). The notion that distributing images of dead Americans is immoral, indecent, and ultimately unpatriotic has become extremely widespread and leads to, as both Sontag and Reinhardt note, the publication in the United States of many more images of dead foreigners than images of dead Americans. Between September 11, 2004 and February 28, 2005, not a single photograph of a dead American soldier appeared in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *Time Magazine*, or

Newsweek Magazine (Reinhardt, 18). This inconsistency is not accidental but rather an intentional attempt on the part of the American media to preserve the dignity of Americans even while exposing the most vulnerable photographs of non-Americans.

Comparing the reactions and criticisms of photographs of American with non-American corpses epitomizes the double-standard concerning what is morally acceptable to publish. Luc Delahaye's 2001 photograph "Taliban" (plate 6) was published in *Newsweek Magazine* as part of an article titled "The Fall of the Taliban" (Duganne 61). "Taliban" is an aerial image of a dead Taliban soldier laying in the midst of dirt and leaves. The soldier's neutral clothing effortlessly camouflages into the dirt below him. Delahaye's intent in his documentary photography was to reject the "immediacy" and "sensationalism" that often characterizes photojournalism (Duganne 60). Despite these motivations, the photograph nevertheless shows a fully identifiable dead soldier. Had the soldier been American, publication of the image would have been highly unlikely and, had it been published, likely heavily criticized; yet, such criticism was absent from responses to "Taliban." As Erina Duganne explains in her "Beautiful Suffering" essay "Photography After the Fact," critics did not consider whether Delahaye's photograph afforded proper dignity or respect to the dead soldier. Instead, the image became a tool used for Americans to educate themselves about the war in Afghanistan, thereby eliminating the soldier's individuality and integrity in the photograph (Duganne 65). Once again, the non-American was merely a dehumanized synecdoche robbed of the dignity or respect that an American counterpart would be afforded. Despite this wrongdoing, no critics seemed to object to the photograph's publication.

In stark contrast to this response was the backlash against Sally Mann's 2000 image "What Remains" (plate 21), a black and white photograph of a decaying white human corpse

accompanying a scientific article. Given that neither the face nor the front side of the body is visible, the corpse is entirely unidentifiable. Sarah Boxer, a *New York Times* critic, nevertheless saw Mann's photography as problematic because the photographs "have something of a grave robber in them" and infringe upon the "the privacy of the decency of the dead" (Duganne 62). Boxer's commentary may seem sound in isolation, yet when contextualized with examples of the response to photographs of dead non-Americans, it becomes clear that even the most unidentifiable images of dead Americans are deemed disrespectful. As Duganne explains, the extensive criticism that Mann received and the astonishing lack of criticism with respect to Delahaye's photography is emblematic of larger societal norms regarding who is allowed to be photographed dead. She writes that "the print media will, largely out of moral decency and respect for families, obscure the faces of American and European dead. But, as Sontag further explained, 'This is a dignity not thought necessary to accord to others'" (64). Duganne and Sontag both shed light on the glaring inconsistencies regarding how photographs of the dead are published. In particular, Sontag notes the link between these photographs and their subject's dignity, which demonstrates how the American public associates the media's decisions about photographs of the dead with the amount of respect that person is believed to deserve.

Disparities based on nationality occur not only within the United States but also in other societies based in racial castes. In Tal Morse's article "Covering the Dead: Death images in Israeli newspapers - ethics and praxis," he uses data from a visual content analysis of Israeli newspapers to uncover the discrepancies in how different ethnicities are portrayed. According to this study, when images of dead Jewish Israelis were published, only 7.1% percent of the images showed an uncovered body. Conversely, when images of dead non-Jewish non-Israelis were published, 50.8% of the images showed an uncovered body. Similarly, while only 1.0% of

images of dead Israelis were identifiable, 35.2% of the images of non-Jewish non-Israelis were identifiable (Morse 106). Morse describes these incongruities as “two distinct modes” of media coverage, revealing the double standard within the Israeli media that allows Jews and non-Jews to be published in two strikingly different ways (108). The Israeli media is one of many institutions within Israeli society that marks a clear difference between Jewish and non-Jewish ethnicities and these dissimilarities only reinforce the already deeply engrained cultural stereotypes. Although Morse’s research does not directly reference the American media, it nevertheless conveys how societal power dynamics affect who is and is not thought deserving of dignity in photographs.

Given that the portrayal of the dead is often associated with dignity and respect, the disparities in the ways the dead are photographed and published in the United States reinforce a hierarchy of human life that objectifies and dehumanizes non-Americans. Formal consent to be photographed by the dead subject is impossible to obtain, and putting the photograph into the public sphere means that it is possible that the subject’s friends and family will see it. These conditions indicate that ethics must play a large role in the media’s decision-making process. The cultural meaning that societies attach to death significantly impacts the ways in which viewers process and interpret photographs of the dead, and therefore how they view the people who are portrayed. As Morse explains, “The norms governing the coverage of death events in visual terms manifest what the news-media see and understand as the ‘us’”. This further shows how death and its imagery facilitate the organization of society and help to establish hierarchies between different groups” (109). The us/them dynamic that Morse describes is perpetuated by the media’s portrayal of Americans (“us”) differently than non-Americans and Americans of

color (“them”). Ultimately, the social scales that these photographs create uphold racist ideologies and therefore deplete the socio-political benefits that are otherwise possible.

As shown through the examples of Emmett Till and Alan Kurdi, images have the power to spark empathy and contribute to societal change. However, when we contextualize such images and recognize that images of the dead are not all represented equally, it becomes clear that they often uphold rather than upend unequal hierarchical structures, rendering the potential benefits superficial. Although Mamie Till Mobley’s decision to show the world her son’s image was an act of defiance against the Mississippi police and larger systems of white power, its widespread circulation also, at the same time, served to reinforce racial hierarchies by objectifying and dehumanizing the black body. Given that Emmett Till’s image exists within a larger social context in which it is only morally acceptable to photograph people of color dead or deformed, the famous photograph not only demonstrates the horrifying realities of racist violence against African American men in the 20th century but also the media’s lack of consistency regarding human dignity. When people of privilege see people of color represented in such an undignified manner, they are made aware of racial injustice yet simultaneously take part in its perpetuation.

Similarly, despite the donations that took place after images of Alan Kurdi were circulated, it is important to ask whether such an image would have been published of a white American child. Alan’s aunt Tima Kurdi verbalized her disappointment about how the photograph seemed to transform from viral to irrelevant in a short period of time. She explained that within a few months of the photograph’s publication, everyone “went back to business” (BBC News, 2016). Tima Kurdi’s comment suggests that while the image undeniably created short-term relief and symbolic gestures from politicians, it was unable to generate lasting change.

The privileged, overwhelmingly white audiences who read the high-profile newspapers in which Kurdi's image was published had an emotional response to the image, but even so, may have continued to view refugees as "other" because only pictures of dead non-Americans seem to be published in such a manner.

The media has enormous power to transform the ways in which the public perceives pressing societal and global issues, and the debate over how photographs of the dead contribute to this power must be carefully considered to ensure that the media is acting morally in regards to both its subjects and readers. It may be tempting to create a binary in the debate — that either photographs of the dead should be published or banned. It is essential to recognize that this topic is far more complicated than such a simple binary due to the pre-existing inequalities that influence who is thought deserving of death with dignity. The media must consistently consider the subject's dignity without allowing racial or national hierarchies to influence the choice of whether or not to publish images of the dead. Only once the American media can achieve a balance between providing adequate information for the public and publishing dignified images of the dead in an equitable manner, without fortifying the dehumanization of black and brown bodies, can these photos reach their full potential and inspire authentic, substantial socio-political change.

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