

Pesky Questions of (In)Visibility and (In)Humanity: Affective Imagery of Anti-LGBT Hate Crime

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Abstract

This paper explores the complex interactions of race, class, gender and sexuality that fuel the affective imagery of anti-LGBTQ violence. Although statistics show black trans bodies as the main targets of bias crimes, popular media does not mirror that. More often than not, mainstream understanding of anti-LGBTQ violence begins and ends with the visibility of white male victims, such as Matthew Shepard. Most vulnerable to hate crimes, non-normative sexualities who do not fit this ideal image of the victim are left invisible within the established conventions and dominant aesthetics of the mainstream media landscape.



Figure 1. Eugene Lovendusky.
Source: David Badash, "LGBT Activist Becomes Victim Of Anti-Gay Violent Attack In NYC's Hell's Kitchen," The New Civil Rights Movement, May 25, 2013, accessed March 27, 2016, <http://www.thenewcivil-rights-movement.com/lgbt-activist-becomes-victim-of-anti-gay-violent-attack-in-nycs-hells-kitchen/news/2013/05/25/67502>

The attack against Eugene Lovendusky on May 24th, 2013, marked him as the ninth victim in just one month in a series of violent acts against the LGBTQ community in New York City. The very particularly styled black-and-white photograph of Lovendusky went viral (Figure 1). Since May 2013, there have been a disturbingly high number of homicides of trans women of colour outside New York City, but none of those cases have gained noteworthy attention in popular media discourse – they remained invisible to the public eye. The white urban gay male is the most visible transnationally iconic image of anti-LGBTQ violence in our media landscape. In this paper, I will explore the complex interactions of race, class, gender, and sexuality that result in such select yet popular images of anti-LGBTQ violence and the elimination of others. More specifically, I will focus on the dynamics of the affective economies that the heightened (in)visibility of anti-LGBTQ victims evokes.

The conditions of our current habitus¹ do not really allow us to question popular images of anti-LGBTQ violence or enable to untangle the affective economies that

1 In *Practical Reason: On the Theory of Action* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), Pierre Bourdieu describes the *habitus*: as "the kind of practical sense for what is to be done in a given situation – what is called in sport a 'feel' for the game, that is, the art of anticipating the future of the game, which is inscribed in the present state of play, 25." *Habitus* as the "feel for the game" in a particular social context helps to make "distinctions between what is good and what is bad, between what is right and what is wrong [...] and so forth 8."

they form. Sara Ahmed explains that in such affective economies, “emotions do things, and they align individuals with communities—or bodily space with social space—through the very intensity of their attachments.”² Explaining the nature of affective economies, Ahmed uses a Marxian understanding in which value increases through circulation using an M-C-M (money to commodity to money) formulation and where surplus value is added resulting in more M (money).³ In other words, Ahmed sees emotions as social, material, as well as psychic currency that circulates among and between subjects and objects rather than “residing positively within them,” and through this circulation increase their affective value.⁴ Although emotions do not reside in subjects or objects, they may be “a form of residence as an effect of a certain history, a history that may operate by concealing its own traces.”⁵ Affect becomes only seemingly attached to specific images of anti-LGBTQ violence that are not instilled with emotion but rather animate the emotion that is circulating around them.

When looking at the particularities of our current affective economies of anti-LGBTQ violence, it is impossible to look at the photograph of Eugene Lovendusky and not be consciously or unconsciously informed by a 15-year-old case – the murder of Matthew Shepard (Figure 2). Matthew Shepard’s story is arguably one of the most well-known instances of anti-LGBTQ violence. Russell Henderson and Aaron McKinney met Matthew Shepard at a bar in Laramie during the evening of October 6, 1998. According to a popular account, the two murderers pretended to be gay and lured Matthew Shepard to go with them. The three men got into McKinney’s truck and left for a remote area east of Laramie. The beating started in the truck after McKinney apparently said, “We’re not gay, and you just got jacked.”⁶ Matthew Shepard was pistol-whipped, tortured, robbed and left tied to a fence. He was found the next morning by two cyclists, and transported to the hospital in Fort Collins where he died 5 days later.

What followed was extensive national and international media coverage of the case. The intense visuality and A-list level celebrity attention devoted to his story have encouraged to this day the creation of theater productions, films, books, poetry, music performances and beautiful acts of public protest. As a student at the University of Wyoming I even witnessed Sir Elton John come down to Laramie, Wyoming, and give a 10-year anniversary benefit concert to commemorate Matthew



Figure 2. Matthew Shepard.

Source: Judy Shepard, *The Meaning of Matthew: My Son’s Murder in Laramie, and a World Transformed* (New York, NY: Hudson Street Press, 2009).

2 Sara Ahmed, “Affective Economies,” *Social Text*, 22, (2004), 2: 119.

3 Ahmed, “Affective Economies,” 120.

4 *Ibid*, 120

5 Ahmed, 119.

6 Beth Loffreda, *Losing Matt Shepard: Life and Politics in the Aftermath of Anti-Gay Murder*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 9.

Shepard. All this has neutralized a very complicated story and turned Shepard into a highly commodified symbol of anti-LGBTQ violence. In other words, this attention has given the Matthew Shepard story one uncomplicated narrative and foreclosed the possibility of alternate interpretations or different question. Most importantly and disturbingly, this is the case that, so to speak, has decided the currency of our current affective economies, and set the standards for proper ways of reacting to this particular kind of outburst of violence today.

It is not easy to make sense of such affective economies of anti-LGBTQ violence, and not to either be completely callous or engulfed by emotion. In *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections*, Slavoj Žižek provides a useful framework for discussing violence on logical levels as he recommends that we not look at violence directly, but instead cast “sideways glances.”⁷ According to Žižek, there are two kinds of violence: objective and subjective. Subjective violence – which dominates media discourse – is perpetrated by an agent who can be rendered accountable. Objective violence is inherent to the system comprising of institutions, politics and ideologies.⁸ When we look at subjective violence directly, we cannot give a proper conceptual analysis because we are overtaken by empathy and terror. At the same time a distanced and “cold” analysis of violence would reproduce and participate in its horror, and would be an example of systematic objective violence.

My “sideways glance” toward affective economies of anti-LGBTQ violence lies in the further important distinction that Žižek makes between truth and truthfulness.⁹ Žižek explains that in order for an account to be truthful, the survivor of rape, for instance, is expected to explain events in a confused and inconsistent manner. A rape survivor that orders events in a completely coherent and methodological way is suspicious. Truthfulness is really a balanced combination of coherent and incoherent ways of reporting. Importantly, established consistency lies in this perceived inconsistency. The fact that we only see a certain amount of confusion and inconsistency as truthful when it comes to victims or survivors refers to a consistency of violence on the next logical level. In other words, truthfulness that is predominantly articulated in what Žižek sees as subjective violence, becomes an instrument of objective violence.

At the level of media representations truthfulness means particular aesthetics that implicitly make some cases more truthful than others. The current most truthful image of anti-LGBTQ violence is a black-and-white medium close-up image of a clean-cut white gay man. The defining image of Matthew Shepard in a grey sweater did not appear in news media until after his death. The image first chosen for publication by national and international media was of Matthew Shepard in his home kitchen. We see Shepard in front of kitchen cupboards, holding what appears to be a dishtowel in his hands. The logic of figuration and context makes the viewers the intruders who have the opportunity to let their voyeuristic tendencies run wild because Shepard is not looking back at us. Importantly, this is a snapshot in a domestic setting and considerably different from the black-and-white fine-tuned photograph we have settled on now. Lisette Model has argued about the truthfulness of snapshots: “I am a passionate lover of the snapshot, because of all photographic images it comes

7 Slavoj Žižek, *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* (New York: Picador, 2008), 3.

8 *Ibid.*, 4.

9 Žižek, *Violence*, 4.

closest to truth. The snapshot is a specific spiritual moment. It cannot be willed or desired to be achieved. It simply happens, to certain people and not to others.”¹⁰ There is innocence in snapshots because they are private. In the case of Matthew Shepard this privacy evident in snapshots was paired with the privacy that the family demanded after his hospitalization.

The photo series that we have become most familiar with today consists of at least four poses, mostly published as black-and-white images. Shepard is pictured in a desolate environment; walking in the midst of abandoned buildings or standing next to a rusty window. The visual politics of Matthew Shepard are very much shaped by his mother, Judy Shepard, whose book jacket featured one of the photographs from the series and who chooses to display those images during interviews or when visiting talk shows.

This photograph, that solidified Matthew Shepard’s status as the quintessential victim of anti-LGBTQ violence, shares remarkable similarities with the image of Eugene Lovendusky, the founder of the anti-violence activist group, Queer Rising, who was attacked on May 24th near Time Square when 9-10 men “started yelling ‘faggot’” and punched him in the jaw.¹¹ The New Civil Rights Movement blog was first to publish the black-and-white medium close-up photograph that was later used as a poster for rallies. The two skinny, white, blond-haired gay men are strikingly similar in appearance. The words used to describe Matthew Shepard – “classy, stylish, and cultured” and with a “very clean shaven look” – can easily be applied to Lovendusky who is a skinny, white, blond-haired gay man.¹² Lovendusky looks like an older metronormative version of Matthew Shepard who has the support of his community and life experience to fight back.



Figure 3. Matthew Shepard and Eugene Lovendusky.

Sources: Michele Josue, “Matt Shepard Is a Friend of Mine,” *Kickstarter*, April 17, 2011, accessed January 5, 2016, <https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/1253709612/matt-shepard-is-a-friend-of-mine>; Badash, “LGBT Activist Becomes Victim.”

The two images also share formal characteristics and have a similar logic of configuration (Figure 3). Both are medium close-up images with the camera angle

¹⁰ Elisabeth Sussman, *Lisette Model* (London: Phaidon Press, 2001), 6.

¹¹ Margaret Hartman, “Gay-Rights Activist Latest Target of City’s anti-LGBT Violence,” *New York Magazine*, 28 May 2013, available at <http://nymag.com/daily/intelligencer/2013/05/gay-rights-activist-targeted-in-anti-lgbt-attack.html>, accessed 28 January 2016.

¹² James Brooke, “After Beating of Gay Man, Town Looks at Its Attitudes,” *The New York Times*, 1 October 1998.

placing us eye level with the men. These are professional photographs, not the out-of-focus selfies or snapshots we often see of victims of violence on online news blogs. The fact the images are black-and-white is not insignificant. There is an aura of some unexplained “original truth” in the black-and-white photograph, as Roland Barthes has argued.¹³ Barthes saw the photograph as violent in this perceived honesty, “not because it shows violent things, but because on each occasion it fills the sight by force, and because in it nothing can be refused or transformed.”¹⁴ Photographs use this “force” to make a lasting impact on people as they allow statements that make no sense in real life to become indisputable for remembered life.¹⁵ In this context, the use and circulation of specifically styled photographs helps to make certain images of anti-LGBTQ violence truthful and others untruthful in our popular imagination.

The aesthetics of representation tell a multilayered story of anti-LGBTQ violence. How stories are constructed and put together (what kind of words are used, next to which images and so on) create a particular kind of affect on their own. In our everyday consumption we tend not to pay as much attention to the affective qualities of the structural aspects of news. Walter Benjamin argued that we apprehend architecture “in a state of distraction, unlike other practices, which we consume with due attention in appropriate surroundings – or try to.”¹⁶ I would argue that when it comes to the form and syntax of online news, we take in information in a similar “state of distraction,” which perpetuates the invisibility of objective violence.

In the first two months of 2015, trans women of color were murdered at rate of almost one per week.¹⁷ One way of critiquing the established conventions of the affective economies of mainstream online culture and coming out of our current “state of distraction” is to look at which stories get published and receive attention and which ones do not. As discussed earlier since Lovendusky’s attack on May 24th, 2013, there have been a disturbingly high number of homicides of trans women of colour outside New York City, but there has not been an outrage one might assume to take over popular media discourse. Konyale Madden was found beaten to death in her home in Savannah, Texas on September 1st, 2013. Melony Smith was discovered beaten to death in her hotel room in Baldwin Park, California on September 9th, 2013. Ms. Hartley was found beaten to death in her home in Baton Rouge, Louisiana on September 19th, 2013. Eyricka Morgan was stabbed to death in her home in New Brunswick, New Jersey on September 24th of the same year.¹⁸ However, the habitus of our current media cultures does not let us see such images. As one woman explained, “My grandmother is 90 and I have more dead friends than she does. Killing us is nothing new. It’s like being a policeman. When you go to work,

13 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 81.

14 *Ibid.*, 91.

15 Sarah McKim Webster Goodwin, and Elisabeth Bronfen (eds.), *Death and Representation* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 330.

16 Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968), 241.

17 Samantha Michaels, “It’s Incredibly Scary to Be a Transgender Woman of Color Right Now,” 26 June 2015, available at <http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2015/06/transgender-women-disproportionately-targeted-violent-hate-crimes>, accessed 15 March 2016.

18 National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs, “NCAVP Community Alert,” 27 September 2013, available at http://www.avp.org/storage/documents/2013.9.27_ca_avp_islannettlesdastatement.pdf, accessed on 15 March 2016.

you know you might get shot. It's just something that comes with the territory."¹⁹ Online news media that caters to the taste of the mainstream audience continues to focus on white, male, and urban cases that fit the transnationally iconic image of anti-LGBTQ violence.

Another way to notice the overbearing racism and misogyny evident in online news coverage is to pay attention to how the cases that do not fit the ideal profile of a victim get portrayed. For instance, "Ms. Hartley" who was found dead in a vacant building in Baton Rouge, Louisiana was referred to a "transvestite" by the Baton Rouge local newspapers as and The Baton Rouge Advocate used her birth name and male pronouns in her obituary.²⁰ It is also usual that in cases that deal with trans women of color their arrests for prostitution are mentioned, as was the case with Hartley. Journalists did not even investigate the story enough to find out Hartley's preferred first name.

It is notable that no image was included with the murder case of Hartley. Again, we can assume that this means bad investigative work on the part of the journalists. However, including an image in the context of a murder case often perpetuates the same old stereotypes rather than draws attention to groups of people who are most vulnerable to hate crimes.

The image used by online news sources to report on the murder case of Eyricka Morgan shows her on a bed in her underwear with a bottle of liquor behind her (Figure 4). It is very uncommon to encounter a full body shot of a male identified victim of anti-LGBTQ violence.



Figure 4. Eyricka Morgan.

Source: Sunnive Brydum, "New Jersey Paper Refuses to Correct Coverage of Trans Woman's Murder," *The Advocate*, September 28, 2013, accessed 15 March, 2016, <http://www.advocate.com/politics/transgender/2013/09/28/new-jersey-paper-refuses-correct-coverage-trans-womans-murder>.

Not to mention that I have yet to find a news story that is accompanied by a sexual and provocative image, but focuses on a male victim. Suggesting they are rare. What made this coverage even worse was that the New Jersey Star-Ledger initially used Morgan's birth name, male pronouns, and refused to apologize or correct their mistakes in articles that remained accessible to readers (although the newspaper switched to Morgan's preferred name in later articles).

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Sunnive Brydum, "Trans Women Beaten to Death in Los Angeles, Baton Rouge," *The Advocate*, 16 September 2013, available at <http://www.advocate.com/politics/transgender/2013/09/16/trans-women-beaten-death-los-angeles-baton-rouge>, accessed 15 March 2016.

Photographs may seem anachronistic with the range of possibilities of media today yet they are still arguably the most affective bits of information. Susan Sontag has argued that our memory as a “freeze-frame” has a single image as its basic unit.²¹ According to Sontag, “photographs – and quotations – seem, because they are taken to be pieces of reality, more authentic than extended literary narratives.”²² Therefore, photographs that permit us to linger over a single image of horror indeed have a greater affective impact on viewers than violence on television and in movies.

As the previous discussion indicates, the aesthetics of photographs used to accompany news stories about anti-LGBTQ violence on the Internet are varied. On the one hand, we have the extremely polished photographs in the like of Lovendusky and Shepard. On the other hand, we have the low quality photos taken by bystanders or most often by the victims themselves after or before the incident. Therefore, the digital vernacular of anti-LGBTQ violence has its own set of aesthetics that are mainly informed by the truthfulness of reporting (as discussed earlier), but also by the often-tumultuous relationship queers have always had with technology, self-portraits and authority. The majority of images used in online news stories are not polished professional photographs yet they share characteristics that are common enough to talk about a specific digital vernacular of anti-LGBTQ violence. There are two kinds of images: 1) photograph taken after the attack in order to provide evidence of bodily harm and injury 2) a photograph taken before the attack for private or public (social media) use that gets picked up the media.

If the photograph is taken after the attack in order to have a record of injuries, the victim is alive and the image works as a way to have control over a situation in which the person’s control over the safety of their body was minimized. In the case of such images, the victim often chooses to post the image on social media. The screenshot of Ben Stoviak’s Facebook post from October 7th 2013 shows a close up of his face and written account of the incident (Figure 5). According to the post, Stoviak and his boyfriend were attacked in the evening of October 6th after leaving a local bar in Pittsburg, Pennsylvania.²³ The image appears to be taken in Stoviak’s home. We can see a beige couch and a pillow to his right in the background and a light coming from the space lamp from the right. The top of his head and part of

Figure 5. Ben Stoviak’s Facebook post.
Source: Ben Stoviak’s Facebook page, accessed 18 October, 2013, <https://www.facebook.com/stoviak>.



21 Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2003), 22.

22 Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, (New York: Anchor Books, 1990; Original 1977), 74.

23 James Nichols, “Ben Stoviak, Pittsburgh Gay Man, Attacked In Alleged Hate Crime,” *The Huffington Post*, 08 October 2013, available at http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/10/08/pittsburgh-anti-gay-hate-crime_n_4063670.html, accessed 16 March 2016.

his jaw do not fit in the frame, but we can see the right side of his face with visible bruises on his forehead, cheekbones, and lips.

One of the most obvious aspects of everyday and ordinary use of the internet is the connection between different devices that provide Internet access. Most photos are taken with a smartphone. Stoviak's post received thousands of "likes" and "shares," and was picked up and used by online news blogs, The Huffington Post among them to contribute to the displays of subjective violence that is exciting, clickable and therefore marketable. These reactions to violence are genuinely important in our *society of spectacle* of 2015. In such a setting it is the consumer of represented brutality who judges on the truthfulness of displays of violence and death, and not so much the perpetrators or victims. It is important, however, to notice the relationships between technologies, social media, and the audience in order to be able to critically look at this particular culture of violence, and the communities it creates.

The shared consumption and transmission of sentiments through telemediating devices evokes what Karen Tongson in *Relocations: Queer Suburban Imaginaries* calls "remote intimacy."²⁴ Tongson credits the term to Jennifer Terry and, building on her work ,argues that "in a pre-digital age, remote intimacies were practiced through the shared consumption (or some would say overconsumption) of broadcast television and popular music, as well as by 'hanging out' live."²⁵ In our current digital world, the internet, and especially more recently the convergence of different media on the internet allows "remote intimacy" to take up an unprecedentedly extensive space in our lives.

The second category of images is not taken with the intention of reporting an act of violence on the part of the victim. Sometimes the person in the images has survived the attack and has given permission to use the photograph, and in the case of death, the image is pulled from the person's public social media account (mostly Facebook) or given to the media by the relatives, close friends, or chosen family. One of the images picked up to talk about the shooting murder of Mark Carson in New York City was a low angle close-up image of showing his face and upper body (Figure 6). He is leaning forward and wearing a red T-shirt that reads 'HOTTIES.' It reads



Figure 6. Mark Carson.

Source: Dennis Slattery, Eric Badia, and Joe Kemp, "Gunman Shoots 32-year-old Mark Carson Dead in Greenwich Village Bias Attack: Officials Say," *The New York Daily News*, 19 May, 2013, accessed 17 March, 2016, <http://www.nydailynews.com/new-york/gunman-shoots-32-year-old-man-dead-greenwich-village-bias-attack-officials-article-1.1347776>.

²⁴ Karen Tongson, *Relocations: Queer Suburban Imaginaries* (New York: New York University Press, 2011) 25.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

as a mirror image because it has been taken most likely with a camera attached a computer or laptop. The picture is taken indoors, perhaps at his home as we can see part of a white window awning and black shades in the background. The photograph is slightly off center. We can only see one of his left shoulders fully; the right shoulder does not fit in the frame. The light is coming in from the upper left corner of the image which makes part of his shaped head shiny. The image is rather pixelated and lower quality than that of Stoviak's, which against the backdrop of established truthfulness of anti-LGBTQ violence and hierarchy of images leaves Carson on the margins.

Media images of violence have been picked for us to represent a myriad of interests. Currently the truthfulness of anti-LGBTQ violence discourse confirms that victims of certain ideologies (urban white gay men) are more deserving than others (queer people of colour). Despite the somewhat increased visibility in the last few years, the reality is that trans women of colour remain most vulnerable to street, police, and structural violence. Out of all the documented anti-LGBT homicide victims in 2014, 80% were people of colour and 50% were transgender women, whereas transgender survivors of color were 6.2 times more likely to experience police violence.²⁶ Trans women of colour are also four times more likely to live in poverty than the rest of the general population and the prevalence of HIV among trans women is nearly 50 times as high as for other adults.²⁷ Statistics always hide more than they reveal and although dreadful, those numbers give us an illusion of having an understanding of or control over injustice and violence whereas in fact we do not.

Although there was a considerable response to deaths of Mark Carson and Eyricka Morgan, as queers of colour, they had to pay more in blood to achieve this kind of visibility. The criminalization of non-white bodies does not allow for a smooth transition to be included in the image of truthfulness of anti-LGBTQ hate crime. Even with current limited visibility, non-white and especially female identifying victims get judged against established mainstream LGBTQ aesthetics, the ideal of which is a polished image of a white gay male: Matthew Shepard. As this paper demonstrates the often invisible established conventions and aesthetics of mainstream media perpetuate the current affective economies of anti-LGBTQ violence, which grant visibility to white male bodies and leave everyone else visibly culturally insignificant.

26 National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs, "Hate Violence Against Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and HIV-Affected Communities," June 2015, available at <http://www.avp.org/resources/avp-resources/405-2014-report-on-lesbian-gay-bisexual-transgender-queer-and-hiv-affected-hate-violence>, accessed 15 March, 2016.

Significantly, this report includes data only from organizations who are partners with NCAVP that is headquartered in New York City. Founded in 1995, the National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs (NCAVP) brings together anti-violence programs in cities and regions across the United States. Although this report is by far not perfect, it's more thorough than the annual FBI report on hate crimes.

27 Movement Advancement Project, *Paying an Unfair Price: The Financial Penalty for Being LGBT in America*, 2015, available at <http://www.lgbtmap.org/file/paying-an-unfair-price-full-report.pdf>, accessed 8 January 2016; Center of Disease Control and Prevention, *HIV Among Transgender People*, 2013, available at <http://www.cdc.gov/hiv/group/gender/transgender/index.html>, accessed 8 January 2016.

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