comments and reflections

on cultural anesthesia: from Desert Storm to Rodney King

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> We lost any sense of seasons of the year, and we lost any sense of the future. I don't know when the spring was finished, and I don't know when the summer started. There are only two seasons now. There is a war season, and somewhere in the world there is a peace season.
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> —Resident of besieged Sarajevo[1]

In March 1992, I spoke, by invitation, at a conference titled "Violence and Civilizational Process," which was held in Sweden. My topic was violence and everyday life in Northern Ireland (see Feldman 1991a). A Croatian folklorist, the other foreign guest, talked on the culture of fear in the former Yugoslavia.[2] The rest of the presentations concerned the rationalization of violence by the state in the process of Swedish nation building. The conference theme was inspired by the work of Norbert Elias (1982), who had argued that modernization entails the progressive withdrawal of violence from everyday life in tandem with its increasing monopolization by the state. This stratification may have been felicitous coloring for "mainstream" European modernization but could only be dismissed as a bureaucratic conceit when considering the current situations of Northern Ireland and the former Yugoslavia. In these locales, the state, in various ethnic and legal incarnations, has pursued hegemony by democratizing violence through the clandestine support of populist paramilitary terror.[3] In Northern Ireland and the various ethnic enclaves of Bosnia, Croatia, and Serbia, the state's capacity to flood everyday life with violence has been enabled by the sequestering of political aggression behind legal, procedural, and nationalist facades. This potent combination of instrumental rationality, state formalism, and public terror cannot easily be explained by the evolutionary drive of Norbert Elias's notion of civilizational process.

Due to their adherence to Elias's perspective and their own biographical experience in Sweden, the local ethnologists and historians attending the meeting had difficulty conceptualizing political violence as a routinized element of everyday life, a concept without which it is impossible to grasp what has been happening in Northern Ireland for the last two decades and, more recently, in ex-Yugoslavia. In discussion, it became clear that, for most of the scholars, violence, like the geographies it had disordered, occupied the verges of civilizational process and European modernity. Violence linked to, and defining of, the cultural Other confirmed the exceptionalism of the historical and geographical periphery.

This tacit ghettoization was momentarily shaken as the Croatian folklorist delivered a paper punctuated, in the white space between her words, by barely concealed emotional disorder approaching public mourning. This did not seem to be the aftershock of her life in a war zone, nor the catharsis of having momentarily exited. Rather, her distress exposed the frustration, risk,

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and uncertainty of communicating local terror to an audience at an historical and experiential remove. I was thrown back to the enforced spaces of silent fear I had first encountered, doing fieldwork in Belfast, among those who were intimate with the regularity of random violence and who could not trust me with this intimacy of which, at that time, I had no bodily experience. How does one transport the experience of everyday terror that is almost inexpressible outside the sensory encompassment of violence? The Croatian did not speak explicitly of the sensory alterity she had made tangible in that conference room; rather, it was borne by her body and voice. Incarnate sensory difference was the gulf at which explicit theoretical communication hesitated. The Croatian's tension was about speaking, without guarantee of perceptual connection, to an audience who inhaled different cultural givens, who touched different material realities, and who did not have to sniff out immanent death from once familiar surrounds.[4]

The Croatian was in search of a translatable language of terror, the conversion of local dread into a mobile cultural form. She spoke of "ethnographic self-reflexivity," a concept taken from recent criticism in American anthropology. But in contrast to the mentalist, confessional, and text-centered tendencies of this approach, what emerged from her presentation was a palpable and gendered[5] self-reflexivity that had been channeled by the sensory remembrance of scheduled terror.

The grief in her voice and body rewrote her text as she spoke it and opened up a historical and experiential chasm that no one could easily cross, but which could at least be acknowledged. Recognition of cultural difference was not forthcoming. Rather, the terms of dialogue were set immediately after she had finished speaking-mourning, as her first interlocuters rushed to insulate the room from the vortex of history-as-pain and to smooth the now-broken plane of cultural presupposition. They fired defusing questions about media imagery, newspaper reportage, and the like; subjects as reassuringly global as unvoiced sensory terror was deemed site specific. The audience moved from unease to animation as the discussion gravitated to the issue of how the Serbian and Croatian media were diversely depicting the war, though they had just witnessed a Croatian choking on the experiential inadequacy of conventional representation. Confronted with the personification of intractable materialities, authoritative questioners forcefully rerouted the conference to familiar culture-bound platforms from which to address the question of violence. This thematic shift may have been sheer politeness in the face of bared emotions, but I could not help but experience it as culturally mediated misdirection. The talismanic invocation of media imagery and issues provided a reassuring social narrative (certainly not limited to Swedes or scholars) on which to hang *cultural anesthesia*: the banishment of disconcerting, discordant, and anarchic sensory presences and agents that undermine the normalizing and often silent premises of everyday life. The segue into media practice and form and the avoidance of the Croatian's situated sensibility replicated the very effects of the first world's media processing of "exotic" violence; in this context, the media was simultaneously critiqued and fetishized by the discussants.

The audience's response thereby encapsulated Elias's theory as cultural symptom: violence was withdrawn from the everyday and its disturbing perceptual dispositions were confined and silenced by invoking the informational norms of a universalizing rationality. It made no difference that the questions were after truth through the documentation of the media's distortion of "objectivity," for the general discussion presupposed, to the detriment of exposed embodied fear, that media criticism was a more suitable forum for grasping historical events. The audience's easy identification with media imagery, to which we are all susceptible, symbolically rescued the subject of violence from the alien sensorium evoked by the Croatian and delivered it to an ethnocentric apparatus of historical perception.

All of this inadvertently demonstrated the extent to which violence and its consequences are automatically associated with aberrant cultural difference and then tamed by exclusions that enable the self-serving perceptual negotiation of that difference. My own unvoiced questions

were directed at the total dynamic symbolized by the conference dialogue, in which I was also culturally implicated: *How does the periphery speak truth to the center if the very construct center/periphery is conditioned by the inadmissibility of alien sensory experience?* When the Other is caught in and even identifies with the powerful and mirroring gaze of direct or indirect mass media culture, what other perceptual options have been banished, closed, and delegitimized by cultural anesthesia?

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Cultural anesthesia is my gloss of Adorno's (1973) insight that, in a post-Holocaust and late capitalist modernity, the quantitative and qualitative dissemination of objectification *increases* the social capacity to inflict pain upon the Other[6]—and I would add—to render the Other's pain inadmissible to public discourse and culture.[7] It is upon this insight that a political anthropology of the senses in modernity can be elaborated. This formula implies that the communicative and semantic legitimacy of sensory capacities, and their ability to achieve collective representation in public culture, is unevenly distributed within systems of economic, racial, ethnic, gender, sexual, and cultural domination.[8] Adorno's point about modernity's pain can be linked to the respective theses of Lukács (1971), Foucault (1978), Jameson (1981), Corbin (1986), Taussig (1992), and Feldman (1995) that the construction of the modern political subject entailed the stratification and specialization of the senses, and the consequent repression of manifold perceptual dispositions (see Seremetakis 1993).[9] As a driving force in this historical dynamic, the mass media's depiction of the agents and objects of violence is crucial to the modernizing embodiment of those political subjects who occupy both sides of the screen of public representation. This is all the more pertinent when the very embodied character of violence is evaded, ignored, or rewritten for collective reception.

Like other institutions (industrial, penological, psychiatric, and medical), the mass production of facts, *and of facticity itself,* are based on techniques and disciplines that, in the case of the media, materially mold a subject and culture of perception. The mass media has universalizing capacities that promote and inculcate sensory specializations and hierarchical rankings such as the priority of visual realism and the often commented on gendered or racial gaze. Like the normative optics of gender and race, objective realism, the depictive grammar of the mass media, should be not be perceived as an ahistorical given; it is an apparatus of internal and external perceptual colonization that disseminates and legitimizes particular sensorial dispositions over others within and beyond our public culture.

In the 19th century, "realism" was associated with modes of narration and visualization that presumed an omniscient observer detached from and external to the scenography being presented. It was linked to formal pictorial perspectivism and narrative linearity with all its assumptions about causality, space, and time. Yet during this period, cultural and scientific attention gradually detached itself from exclusive concentration on the scene observed in order to dissect and depict the act of observation itself (Crary 1991). The perceiving subject could no longer remain external once perception became one object among others of realist representation. The scientific objectification of perception dovetailed with the commodification of perception by such forces as new media technologies, the manufacture and consumption of reproducible mass articles and experiences, advertising, new leisure practices, the acceleration of time, and the implosions of urban space—all of which involved the remolding of everyday sensory orientations.

In the 1930s, Ernst Bloch, redefined "realism" as *the cult of the immediately ascertainable fact,* thereby pointedly linking it to norms of rapid and easy consumer satisfaction (see Bloch 1990). More recently, David Harvey's (1989) spatial analyses implicitly show the historical connection between the mass production/consumption of facticity and the apparent increase in perceptual mobility that accompanies the space/time compression characteristic of late

modernity. Space/time compression can be defined as the implosion of perceptual simultaneity—the abutment of persons, things, and events from a plurality of locales, chronologies, and levels of experience once discrete and separate. Harvey attributes this not only to technological advances, but also to the accelerated circulation and increasingly efficient distribution of commodities, and to the permeation of exchange values in which new objects, spaces, and activities become commodifiable and measurable and, thus, interchangeable with each other. When previously uncommodified things, activities, and spaces become interchangeable and substitutable and carry mobile valuations, they take on new temporal and spatial coordinates for human perception (Feldman 1991c).

The economic and psychic binding of perceptual command to consumer satisfaction, discernment, and skills generates a pseudo-mastery over "the real" through the experience and manipulation of simultaneity. The media's mass production and commodification of visual and audio facticity both creates and depends upon a perceptual apparatus of holistic realism. Here the ingestion of totality, perceptual holism—the personal capacity to encompass things through prosthetics—becomes a valued commodity in itself. The holistic apparatus frequently jettisons the indigestible depth experience of particular sensory alterities. This is the case when sensory difference conflicts with the myth of immediate and totalizing perceptual command by resisting norms of accelerated consumption and the easy disposability of things (Seremetakis 1993, 1994). These complex interactions of perception, space, time, facticity, consumption, and material culture pose an eminently modernist dilemma: *that the perception of history is irrevocably tied to the history of sensory perception.*[10]

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Cultural anesthesia is a reflexive passageway into historical consciousness and representation, as Alain Corbin (1986) pointed out when he complained that Western history, as written, has no odor. In the mass media, perceptual holism and cultural anesthesia converge and take many forms. Generalities of bodies—dead, wounded, starving, diseased, and homeless—are pressed against the television screen as mass articles. In their pervasive depersonalization, this anonymous corporeality functions as an allegory of the elephantine, "archaic," and violent histories of external and internal subalterns. The panopticism of documentary television, like its penological predecessor (Foucault 1978),[11] creates a new cellular intervention that captures and confines disordered and disordering categories of bodies. Staged, mounted, framed, and flattened by a distilling electronic sieve, these icons of the static become moral inversions of the progressively malleable bodies of the ideal American viewer, whose public body is sensualized and mythicized by the orchestration of commercial messages on cosmetics, exercise, automobiles, fashion, dieting, recreation, and travel. This visual polarity between the reformable bodies of the observer and the determined, deformed, and reduced bodies of the observed disseminates for the viewing public a cultural scenario first identified by Hegel's master/slave dialectic: that relations of domination are spatially marked by the increase of perceptual (and thus social) distance from the body of the Other. In turn, this body is essentialized by material constraints that deny it recognizable sentience and historical possibility (Kojéve 1969).[12]

But cultural anesthesia can also disembody subjects, which is what occurred in crucial segments of the televising of Operation Desert Storm. Here the media both pre-empted and merged with the American military arsenal through the video erasure of "Arab" bodies. In order to fuse perceptual dominance with topographic conquest enemy, Oriental bodies were electronically "disappeared" like the troublemakers in Joseph Heller's novel *Catch 22* (1961); Iraqis were magically transmuted into infinitesimal grains of sand that threatened the American war machine. Here the body vanished was a priori the body vanquished. And a mass war against the built environment was mystified as a crusade against the desert as Orientalist topography.

The eulogized smartbombs were prosthetic devices that extended our participant observation in the video occlusion of absented Iraqi bodies. What were these celebrated mechanisms but airborne televisions, visualizing automata, that were hurled down upon the enemy creating his conditions of (non)visibility? Their broadcast images functioned as electronic simulacra that were injected into the collective nervous system of the audience as antibodies that inured the viewer from realizing the human-material consequences of the war. Visual mastery of the campaign pushed all other sensory dimensions outside the perceptual terms of reference. Culturally biased narrations, abetted by information technology historically molded to normative concepts of sensory truth, precluded any scream of pain, any stench of corpse from visiting the American living room.

The spectatorship cultivated by the televising of Desert Storm cannot be reduced to voyeurism as some have suggested (see Stam 1991), for perceptual entanglement with the video simulation of the war was crucial to the manufacturing of consent and, thus, politically and instrumentally implicated the viewing public in the action of violence. When a voyeur acts through a surrogate, it is to avoid material complicity, not to share in it. Yet in Desert Storm, the perceptual tools of the media exploited and elaborated the post-Vietnam political fantasy of American reempowerment. This metanarrative blurred the effective and moral distance between viewing and acting, thereby engendering material complicity on the part of the ideal electronic spectator. Here sensory selection was a productive apparatus fashioning mutual political agency (and not passivity) between those who acted by looking and those whose acts of death were cinematized. Civilian television observation was continuous with the military optics of the fighter pilot and bombardier who were dependent on analogous prosthetic technology and who killed at a distance with the sensory impunity and omniscient vision of the living-room spectator. The combat crews who played with aggressive drives by watching pornographic videos prior to flying missions demonstrated the uniform sensorium between viewing and violence as they up-shifted from one virtual reality to another.

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> It didn't make any sense to me, I couldn't see why they were doing what they were doing. . . . He moved, they hit him. . . . I was trying to look at and view what they were looking at. . . . Evidently they saw something I didn't see. [Los Angeles Police Department Officer Theodore Briseno on the arrest of Rodney Glen King][13]

Less than two months into Operation Desert Storm, the effaced body of the Other reappeared close at hand with the televised beating of Rodney King. Originally visualized outside the prescribed circuits of fact production, this black body broke through the nets of anesthesia. Its shock effect derived not only from long-standing racial scars, but also from the concurrent myth being played out with Desert Storm. The media campaign in the desert succeeded in sterilizing the post-Vietnam violence of the state, but the images of King's beating showed the state making pain. The immediate shock of the televised beating originated in unprogrammed sensory substitution. Even the viewer insulated by race and class could experience the involuntary projection of his or her body to that point of the trajectory marked by the swinging police batons as they came down upon the collective retina that was suddenly rendered tactile. The spectacle of state-manufactured trauma interdicted the visual myth of sanitary violence. King's beating was the skeletal X-ray image flashed upon the technologized surface of state rationality. Desert Storm and the beating of Rodney King evolved into two irreconcilable national narratives. Desert Storm celebrated a triumphalist sense of an ending, while King's beating laid bare another layer of wounding encounters: unfinished history as mise-en-scéne—bound to return in the near future despite all attempts to change channels.[14] Two antagonistic icons of national experience impinged on the public screen of electronic consciousness without resolution, without one set of images offering a coherent account of the other.

It is no coincidence that, a year later, the dominant tropes of Operation Desert Storm seemed to work their way into the juridical reconstruction of King's beating. The trial of the Los Angeles police officers rescripted King's video. This reconstruction successfully returned the violence inflicted upon King to the protective corridors of state rationality. The legal restitution of state violence drew upon the depth structures of neocolonial racial logic that had worked so well in the Desert Storm propaganda: qualification of the body of the Other by geography, disembodiment of the Other's pain, and facilitation of cultural anesthesia for all those who could be rendered directly or indirectly accountable for the pain of the Other.

The actual beating of Rodney King and its subsequent jural reconstruction mobilized a series of spaces within which King's body could be processed as a racial, a disciplinary, and a legal object. Through this metonymy of spaces, explicit and inferred, King achieved a dynamic visibility within which the video of the beating was only a trailer.

Twenty minutes prior to King's car's being stopped by the police, Officer Powell[15] tapped that infamous statement into his communication unit concerning a recent case: "Sounds almost as exciting as our last call, it was right out of 'Gorillas in the Mist' " (Courtroom Television Network 1992). He was referring to a domestic quarrel involving an African-American family, though he later denied any racial connotation to the remark. In gravitating to this image, the media and the prosecution missed its deeper significance by artificially detaching the racist imagery of Powell's remark from the everyday exercise of state power. Beyond and below state formalism, legal codes, and official police procedures, there lies a symbolic logic of the state, animated by empowering micropractices of depersonalization, that is readily fed by and articulated with culturally in-place racist archetypes.

The phrase "Gorillas in the Mist" in this instance, clearly evokes the jungle, the wilderness, the frontier—outside spaces opposed to a civilizational interior. These are presocial, naturalized terrain from which the sanctioned enforcer extracts the disciplinary subject as so-much raw material to be reworked by the state.[16] Likewise, the mythic anti-societal zones from which the disciplinary subject is obtained, mark the latter's embodiment as presocial through the stigma of animality. The bodily alterity of the suspect-as-animal predetermines the material character and physical locus of police action on their captive. Bestial imagery continued to leak into subsequent characterizations of King made by defense witnesses and the accused. King was referred to as "bear-like" (Riley 1992a) and as "getting on his haunches" by Officer Powell in testimony (Courtroom Television Network 1992).[17]

Animal imagery may have informed Officer Powell's project of both taming and caging King within a prescribed spatial perimeter, a practice that has both penal and racial overtones. He made the following statements during his examination by his attorneys and the prosecution:

> I yelled at him [King] to get down on the ground, to lay down on the ground. . . . He repeated the motion again, getting up again. . . . I stopped and evaluated whether he was going to lie there on the ground or whether he was going to get up again. . . . It was a continuing series of him getting back up on his arms, pushing up, sometimes raising to his knees, sometimes getting on his haunches. I commanded him to get down on the ground, and when he wouldn't go for it, I hit him in the arms and tried to knock him back down. [Courtroom Television Network 1992]

At one point, the prosecutor asked: "What was the reason for hitting him?" Powell replied:

> —I didn't want him to get back up.
> —What were you striking at?
> —I was striking at his arms. . . . I was trying to knock him down from the push up position, back down onto the ground where he would be in a safer position. . . . I was scared because he was being told to lie down on the ground; he was getting hit with the baton several times; and he continued to get back up. . . . I was looking up for something else to keep him down on the ground. [Courtroom Television Network 1992]

It took Officer Powell 46 blows with his baton to incarcerate King into the spatial corridor he called "the ground." Officer Powell's geographical perception moved from "jungle" to "the

ground," a provisional and surrogate territory of the state, while King, through violence, was shifted from animality to a subject in compliance. Sergeant Charles Duke, the defense's police procedures expert, described this compliance as viewed from the video:

> [W]hen he was in a flat position, where his feet were not cocked, where they were straight up and down, and where his hands were above his head or at his side, he was not hit. [Courtroom Television Network 1992]

Sergeant Stacey Koon, the presiding officer at the scene of King's beating, also testified to the meaning of this posture and added that at this point King's bodily response *and directed speech* to the officers beating him signaled the final level of compliance. The successful confinement of King—the symmetry of a body lying at attention with the face in the dirt—*and* the acquisition of linguistic reciprocity marked the neutering of the animalized body and its internalization of the will of the state. A "gorilla in the mist," a black "bear" that insisted on rising on its "haunches," was turned by violence into a speaking subject. Official LAPD procedures underwrite this civilizing sequence. Police department directives on the use of violence while performing an arrest locate the subject capable of discourse at the lowest end of the scale of noncompliance and physical intervention. The subject in *logos* is the subject in law. The further removed the arrestee is from language, the closer the suspect is to the body and, thus, closer to escalating violence by the state. It is my suggestion that, for the police who beat him, this violent passage of King from animality and the body to language and compliance intimately involved judgments concerning his capacity to sense and to remember pain.

Rodney King had to be taken to a hospital after his beating. Medical attendants assisting at his treatment testified to the following statements made by Officer Powell (and denied by him) to King, who worked at a sports stadium:

> We played a little hardball tonight. Do you *remember* who was playing? . . . We won and you lost. [Riley 1992a:30, emphasis added]

It is a moment of reflection and summation after the act. King's wounds are being tended at the instruction of the man who beat him. The author of violence, grown intimate after his labors, inquires whether his prisoner can recollect what has passed between them, and whether he recognizes the social relation they have entered. This inquiry presumes King's participation in common cultural ground; a mutuality that exists for Officer Powell only after the beating. Baseball, as a ludic metaphor of male dominance, converts batons into bats. King's recognition of this conversion, the admission of a shared culture of sport, more than being another stage in his socialization, would normalize the violence inflicted on him, thus, placing Powell's acts within the realm of the acceptable.

It is through this dialogue of recognition that the agent of violence retrieves what he has authored through his acts. What is expected to answer him is his creation, his violence, and his body doubled by the logos and submission of the subaltern. Powell's hospital discourse is too deeply anchored in the narratology of torture to have been fabricated (see Feldman 1991a). Artifice follows political life here. In the second volume of Paul Scott's *Raj Quartet* (1978), an analogous encounter takes place between a white English policeman and his Indian prisoner he has just finished beating. The victim, Hari Kumar, describes "the situation"—the creation and acknowledgment of dominance through torture—to an ex post facto government investigation:

> —What in fact was this situation? . . .
> —It was a situation of enactment.
> —These ideas of what you call the situation were the DSP's [District Superintendent of Police] not your own?
> —Yes he wanted them to be clear to me. . . . Otherwise the enactment would be incomplete. . . . The ideas without the enactment lose their significance. He said if people would enact a situation they would understand its significance. . . . He said that up until then our relationship had only been symbolic. It had to become real. . . . He said . . . [it] wasn't enough to say he was English and I was Indian, that he was

ruler and I was one of the ruled. We had to find out what it meant . . . the contempt on his side and the fear on mine. . . . He said . . . we had to enact the situation as it really was, and in a way that would mean neither of us ever *forgetting* [Scott 1978:298–299, emphasis added]

In his own "situation of enactment," Powell confirms the socializing function of his graphic usage of King's body. Through violence, King, like Hari Kumar, is meant to acquire *memory;* a history of who "won" and who "lost." King is asked to recollect hierarchy, its origin, and his position in it. He is progressively shifted from the jungle to the liminality of his beating ground only to come home to a baseball diamond, a preeminent terrain of American normalization (where he is subjected to hardball or becomes one). These qualifying spaces, jungle, ground, baseball field, and their various personae, gorillas, bear, and hardball, trace the incremental objectification of King and the gradated effacement of his subjecthood *and his pain*. King's pain achieves presence only at the end of this progression and solely as an artifact of power; his pain is the affective presence of the state within his body and person.

This is why Officer Powell speaks to King about baseball, memory, and hierarchy at precisely the moment that his victim is receiving medical attention. Police violence assaulted King's body, and police-ordered medical treatment attempts to redress the effaced sensory integrity of that body, thereby crediting the now socialized King with somatic capacities denied to him during the beating (see below). It is at this juncture that Powell asks King to remember through the senses, through the vehicle of recalled pain. Removal and manipulative restoration of the senses facilitates the state's coercive construction of personal memory and identity (see Feldman 1991a:128–138). Hari Kumar, in Scott's novel, identifies the attempted restitution of sensory integrity by his aggressor as the last act of political degradation: "the offer of charity. He gave me water. He bathed the lacerations" (Scott 1978:299).

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The final territorialization of King's body took place at court. Isolated frames of the video were time coded by the prosecution and freeze framed and grid mapped by the defense as if the event were an archaeological site. This reorganization of the video's surface resembled the video grids superimposed upon their targets by the smart bombs of Desert Storm. In the Simi Valley courtroom, fragments of action and isolated body parts achieved visibility as material evidence through analogous optical framing. The grid mapping detached King's limbs from each other in a division of labor that sorted out pertinent parts and actions from inadmissible and irrelevant residues. Visual dissection of King's body provided the defense argument with crucial perceptual fictions that were culturally mediated as objective and real. Thus, cinematized time informed the following typical analysis of King's videotaped postures by Sergeant Duke, the defense's police procedures expert: "It would be a perception that position 336:06 [time code] to be [*sic*] an aggressive position" (Courtroom Television Network 1992). This discourse was possible because of the colonization of King's body by the virtual temporalities of slow motion, fast forward, and freeze frame. With cinematic artifice, King's body was montaged into a purely electronic entity with no inwardness or tangibility. His body became a surface susceptible to endless re-editing and rearrangement, as it suited both the prosecution and the defense. Further, by automatically admitting such cinematic fictions and grammars as *material evidence* and as objective data, the court also collapsed the perceptual and temporal divergence between watching edited video fragments and the in-situ intent and subjectivity of the participants during the action of violence. In this variant of visual realism, the equivalent of a refiguring pictorial perspectivism was created by foregrounding selected body parts and actions and backgrounding others. The narration of authoritative witnesses fabricated, in the present, the formal point of view of the spectator.

These fabrications provided the prosecution, the defense, and the jury with an extraordinary prosthetic penetration to the same extent that the subjective and sensorial side of violence undergone by King was eviscerated. The agency of the participants in the trial was based on

sensory privileges that were denied to King from beating to verdict (King never testified in court). As the accused policemen accounted for their actions that night, they re-viewed and re-cast their violence through the pseudo-exactitude of the technologized eye, thereby flattening the chasm between enactment and testimony (as re-enactment). The reediting of the video juxtaposed temporally and spatially distanced acts, creating a perceptual apparatus of holistic space-time compression that extended to, and empowered, the courtroom vision and discourse of the defendants. By such means, the defense was able to convert the video into a time-motion study in police efficiency.[18] In his "expert" testimony, Sergeant Duke exploited the camera's eye to rationalize the defendants' violence and to exaggerate their visual capacities in the midst of their delivery of over 100 blows to King. Sergeant Duke simply invented a semiotics of King's imminent aggression and indicted the victim through the mindless autonomy of his beaten limbs:

> The suspect has the hand flat on the ground. The arm appears to be cocked. His left leg appears to be bent, coming up in a kneeling position; it appears to be in a rocking position with the other arm flat on the ground in a pushing position. [Courtroom Television Network 1992]

When asked by the prosecution if he considered King to be an animal, Officer Powell replied that King "was acting like one . . . because of his uncontrollable behavior" (Courtroom Television Network 1992). In other words, King was bestial to the extent that he could not feel and therefore could resist the baton blows. Animalistic anesthesia to pain provided a negative aura that retroactively established the sensitized and almost humanistic application of "reasonable violence" by the police. The police and King were distributed along a graded sensory scale. It is the fictionalized visual acuity of the police in assessing the impact of their own violence after the fact that separates them, in a Cartesian fashion, from their own bodies and actions, and which becomes a contributing factor in the jury's verdict. However, King could not be reasonable or lawful, for the police and the jury, because he was submerged in a resistant body, without senses and without corresponding judgment. Confronting his alleged insensate resistance, the police endowed King with affectivity by exploring the levels of pain that could finally register the will of the state on his body.

Narcosis was the final ingredient in the racial stew used to make King's anesthesia. The defendants testified to their certainty that King was under the influence of "PCP" at the time of his arrest. Yet, no physical collaboration was ever provided for this assertion, despite King's medical examination. The powerful combination of racial innuendo and cinematic dismemberment forged the complicity of the jury in the subtraction of King's senses. As one jury member declaimed after the trial:

> I am thoroughly convinced as the others I believe, that Mr. King was in full control of the whole situation at all times. *He was not writhing in pain.* He was moving to get away from the officers and he gave every indication that he was under PCP. [Riley 1992b:116, emphasis added]

King was drugged yet in control. He felt no pain because he was drugged, but he was trying to escape through the massive cordon of police that surrounded him with baton blows that he could not feel. The reciprocal cancellation of these assertions could only be evaded through the alliance of subtextual racist stereotypes and an equally fictitious and decontextualizing micrological optic. Such statements by members of the jury attest to the probity that informed the verdict. Another jury member was able to deliver an auteur theory of the Rodney King movie: "King was directing all the action. . . . [He] was choosing the moment when he wanted to be handcuffed" (Riley 1992b:116). King, drugged and knocked prostrate to the ground from which he tries to crawl upward, presides over the violence to such an extent that it becomes self-inflicted and self-authored.

The defendant's testimony (with the exception of Briseno) smuggled the authorial site of violence from the police and planted it on the victim. This was *embodiment by directed mimesis* and a classic Lacanian "mirror relation" in which an imagined and specular Other is endowed

with ideological attributes by the originating and dissimulating subject who provides the raw material of the refraction, thereby covertly restaging itself in that Other (Lacan 1977). Through racist transcription, the aggression originating in the model (the police) became the qualifying somatic attribute of the copy (King). In transferring the origins of their violence to King, the police inhabit and possess his body in an imaginary relation where the black body becomes protective camouflage for state aggression. Police violence was a *reenactment* of the intrinsic violence "known" to already inhabit King's person. By this mimetic logic, King was the magnetized pole attracting, soliciting, and, therefore, animating the bodies of the police.

The conversion of King from the terminus to the source of aggression was enabled by a series of iconic displacements that embodied him in tandem with the disembodiment of police violence. Blackness, bestiality, narcosis, and anesthesia created both the specularization and the racial density of King's body. King, once invested with these mythemes, functioned like a neocolonial mirror that radiated an autonomous racial miasma that prejustified state violence. Stretched out on the rack of distorted cinematic time and space, King's body could be described by Sergeant Duke as "a *spectrum* of aggressive movements" (Courtroom Television Network 1992, emphasis added). In the logic of the colonial mirror (Taussig 1987, 1992), the body to be colonized is defaced by myth and violence in order to turn it into an empty vessel that can serve as repository for the cultural armature and demonology of the colonizer (Feldman 1991b, 1995). By fashioning the murky density of the Other, the colonial regime succeeds in dematerializing and purifying its own violence in a crucial hegemonic transposition. The colonized mirror creature, though specular, becomes "real" and laden with a negative material gravity in an *exchange* where the violence of the colonizer becomes spiritualized—that is, made rational and lawful. The *dematerialization* of state violence by perceptual technologies contributed to the legitimacy of Operation Desert Storm and was also an important dynamic in the Simi Valley courtroom, as indicated by one juror who stated, "They [the jury] didn't think much damage had been done to King as they looked at the photos [that displayed his bruises]" (Riley 1992b:5).

* * *

> Three little girls were playing tag in the living room, a small white dog was barking happily and Sgt. Stacy Koon was rolling around on the rug, demonstrating the actions of the man who was beaten, Rodney G. King. . . . The large screen television set dominates his living room, and Sergeant Koon cannot seem to stay away from it. . . . "There's 82 seconds of use-of-force on this tape, and there's 30 frames per second," he said. "There's like 2,500 frames on this tape and I've looked at every single one of them not once but a buzillion times and the more I look at the tape the more I see in it. . . . When I started playing this tape and I started blowing it up to 10 inches like I'd blow it up on this wall . . . fill up the whole wall . . . and all of a sudden, this thing came to life! . . . You blow it up to full size for people, or even half size, if you make Rodney King four feet tall in that picture as opposed to three inches, boy you see a whole bunch of stuff. . . . He's like a bobo doll. . . . Ever hit one? Comes back and forth, back and forth. [Mydans 1993:A14]

In this startling interview with Koon, he appears to be taken over by, and obsessed with, the video. Through such reenactments as described above, he creates a physically mimetic bond with King's iconic body. Here, Koon uses his own body to perform King's. It is my suggestion that this ex post facto mimicry not only reflects and extends racial fictions and other constructions in Koon's courtroom testimony, but also echoes the actual police violence that, with each baton blow, simulated and inflicted a mythic black-bestial body on King's. When Sergeant Stacey Koon rolls around on his living room floor imitating, without sensory pain or shock, the man he has beaten, he merely plays the black body that was always his own. This play before the television screen, so reminiscent of the child's improvisations before the Lacanian mirror icon, testifies to that inversion in the (neo)colonial mirror relation when the possessor becomes the possessed and the author his creation (see Lacan 1977; Taussig 1987). Mimetic possession extends also to the somatic/technological interface. Sergeant Koon's quasi-visceral replay of that night is also a human mimicry of the video's capacity for flashback, fast forward, and freeze

frame. Sergeant Koon's body and memory have now become the screen upon which the video is played and replayed "back and forth" like a "bobo doll."

* * *

To critique cultural anesthesia is not to assume that there can be a one-to-one correspondence of the senses to external things, for that formula is inflected by the rationality of objectivism and realism, which historically achieved such perceptual adequations through artifice and fictional supplements. Likewise, in the case of Rodney King, there could not and should not be a return to a pristine, originating event-in-itself. As I have proposed elsewhere, *"The event is not what happens. The event is that which can be narrated"* (Feldman 1991a:14). The realism of the discrete and pristine event was argued for by the defense via the factotum of the partible video and by the prosecution who cited the video unpartitioned. Both parties argued for the video, in one form or another, as the true structure of the event and thereby banished, with minor exceptions, the pre-event and postevent narrative framing of racist myth and other culturally sedimented subtexts. Within the canon of legal realism, the video lens was truer than the human eye and absorbed the latter, because it could be sectioned and rationalized by time codes, slow motion, fast forward, and freeze frame. The video's optic, as reworked by legal argument, epitomized realism's certitude of one-to-one relations between observer and observed, precisely because *its* electronic prosthetics could be subjected to "realist" dissection and observation (see Crary 1991).

Though the defense had initially challenged the prosecution's video as exhaustive depiction, it then proceeded to insert another cinematic framing device, the authoritative voice-over narrative of police experts, and the defendants. Endowed with a soundtrack, the video was brought to cinematic completion, and the jury was given the pleasure of narrative closure and a sense of an ending. As the video and its narrative grafts became the event, Rodney King was deleted from the courtroom and from the video as a legal personality. In their courtroom performance, the once shadowy figures of the police stepped off the screen and appeared and spoke in the flesh, while the mute black figure remained incarcerated by the video and by violence. King only existed at the moment of violence, only in relation to material disorder, never in relation to language, memory, explanation, emotion, and reason, as did the police when they testified; these mediations distanced the police from King's pure physicality.

I began by reflecting on the hierarchy of those who entertain a social and perceptual distance from the body over those who are made to appear as captives of static materiality. This stratification organizes long-standing and seductive strategies for narrating the Other. In the trial, jural formalism acceded to culturally mediated criteria of material evidence and welcomed both unexamined racial and cinematic metaphors of embodied evil; it also gravitated to a technological formalism that enforced perceptual powers for the police and sensory muteness for their victim. Silent premises surrounded the trial, which the court proved incapable of recognizing: archaeologies of racial violence, cinematic rhetoric, and the cultural bias of public memory and perception.

Salvaging sensory alterity in this context would not be a turn to a new realism that could compete with cinematic and legal realism. Rather, as *re-perception*, it would recover relativizing materialities; stratigraphies of pain; and the historical limits, manipulative omissions, and sanitizing censors of media and juridical realism. Sensory deviation can and must leak through cultural censors, as did the ambient distress of the Croatian folklorist in that conference hall. Bearers of sensory alterity have no option but to recover truth in a history of sensory fracture and dispersal that can be re-perceived as the dialogical ground for emergent cultural identities (see Seremetakis 1991:1–5, 1994). Here, truth as fragment and as situated by a world of material discontinuity is the only counterpoint to the identification of truth with the depictive capacity to simulate totality: ideological posture that conflates the technological power to mass produce and consume facts with the ownership of history itself.

When normative institutional procedures, practices, and depictions achieve literality and truth through the denial of their own material consequences and other people's sensory inscription, hegemony is created, and forms of political consent are elicited that bar the Other from being present at the tribunal of historical actuality. Rather than being withdrawn by state monopoly, as Norbert Elias (1982) asserted, the violence of the state can invisibly merge with vernacular experience. Sensory colonization brought about by the articulation of state culture, the media, and the perceptual mythologies (racial, ethnic, and gendered) of modernity, interdicts the structure of the everyday as a semiautonomous zone of historical possibility and life chances. State, legal, and media rationality, separately or combined, can erect a *cordon sanitaire* around "acceptable" or "reasonable" chronic violence to the same extent that they successfully infiltrate social perception to neuter collective trauma, subtract or silence victims, and install public zones of perceptual amnesia that privatize and incarcerate historical memory. In this atomized context "*the memory of the senses*" (Seremetakis 1993, 1994) becomes a vital repository of historical consciousness and, once shared and exchanged, the basis for illicit cultural identities.

Contrapuntal sensory histories can be recovered from the scattered wreckage of the inadmissible: lost biographies, memories, words, pains, glances, and faces that cohere into a vast *secret museum of historical and sensory absence*.

Rodney King was the absent, the invisible man at the trial that exposed his body to the exhaustive optics of advanced technology and racial conclusion. This established his sensory kinship with the Iraqis, whose deaths were electronically deleted from the American conscience. King not only disappeared, but also was replaced by a surrogate, a stand-in, through the mirror dynamics of racist and cinematic fetishism. The defendants and their counsel transformed the Simi Valley courtroom into a transvestite minstrel theater, where whites armed with special effects and archetypal narratives, donned black face, wore blacks masks, mimed a black body and staged a shadow play of domination and law.[19]

notes

Acknowledgments. A version of this article was presented as the opening statement of an invited workshop entitled "Colonizing the Body" at the 1992 Annual Meeting of the Society for Cultural Anthropology in Austin, Texas. I would like to thank Don Brenneis for providing the initial opportunity that allowed me to tackle this subject when my anger was still fresh, and for our discussion of "complicity " in Austin. The theoretical direction of this article stems from my long-standing exchanges with C. Nadia Seremetakis, whose work on sensory crossing and reception has been crucial to this project. Mick Taussig's discussions with me concerning optical tactility and Jonas Frykmann's generosity with his detailed knowledge of Norbert Elias, also provided crucial vantage points.

1. As heard by the author on National Public Radio's "All Things Considered" on July 15, 1992.

2. The Croatian folklorist shall remain anonymous, as she has the right to have her research received independently of my perceptions of how and why she presented or performed her work as she did (see below). I confirmed many of my responses to the talk and the audience's reaction in private conversation with her. For similar reasons, I will not impose on the hospitality of my Swedish hosts by specifying the formal details of the conference. "Sweden" here functions more as a metaphor of the European or Western metropole than as an actual place, as my argument will make clear.

3. See Feldman (1991a) for a discussion of the state's role in Northern Ireland in integrating paramilitarism with popular Loyalist political culture, circa 1921–72. Analogous state practices of democratizing violence by promoting community-based confessional vigilante and/or paramilitary organizations characterizes the escalation of so-called resurgent ethnic violence in ex-Yugoslavia. In both cases, the state's complicity in the refashioning of ethnic identifications through democratized violence, and the militarization of public culture, indicates the expanding capacities of the state for the micromanagement of everyday life structures. These patterns call into question simplistic models of the "return of the repressed" in relation to contemporary ethnic resurgence and aggression.

4. Though I later confirmed many of these perceptions and those that follow with the Croatian folklorist, my responses at the time of her talk also reflected my own unreconciled fieldwork experience in Belfast.

5. I am thinking here of the gendered inflections of ritual mourning in southern Europe (Seremetakis 1991), as well as the work of Hélène Cixoux (1993).

6. In recent anthropological discourse, the term "Other" has been assumed to apply solely to a member of another discrete culture or subculture. But in Hegelian, existentialist, and Lacanian theory, the term denotes relational social forms within the same society without excluding its cross-cultural application. The use of the term in this article is not meant to imply some essentialistic, fixed, homogeneous, or ahistorical condition of an ethnic, religious, or gendered group. The Other is a plural relation and not a monadic entity. This relation emerges from situated practices of domination and social violence. The term is not meant to imply a uniform category, insofar as uniformity itself can be an element of the apparatus of domination, nor is the condition of Otherhood confined to complimentary binary oppositions. It may be thought of as analogous to Robert Hertz's notion of the "left hand" or side—that which can never be definitively named. It is the heterogeneity and instability that marks the limits of monological power as much as it stands for the political aggression of certain acts of naming.

7. Though, in certain instances, pain itself can be objectified or aestheticised and rendered an object of cultural consumption in which subjective noncommodifiable and/or nonaesthetic dimensions would still be excluded.

8. See Williams (1991:57–58) on the connection between race and sensory inadmissibility in truth-claiming situations.

9. Fabian (1983), Stoller (1989), Tyler (1987), and Seremetakis (1991, 1993, 1994) have presented significant discussions of the impact of sensory specialization and stratification on ethnographic perception. The relationship between state violence and sensory manipulation is analyzed in Feldman (1991a:123–137).

10. The concept of historical perception used here is, of course, not limited to textual or even linguistic genres, forms, and practices. It also implies that historical perception is always a re-perception.

11. Foucault's (1978) well-known model of penological visual domination and training, inspired by Bentham's panopticon, frequently refers to the perceptual contributions of proscenium staging and back lighting to cellular surveillance.

12. Kojéve (1969) demarcates the Hegelian master from the slave or bondsman in terms of the former's exclusive engagement with consumption and the latter's immersion in labor. This implies normative sensualization of the master's body and punitive desensualization of the slave's body through alienated labor.

13. From "The Rodney King Case: What the Jury Saw in California versus Powell" (Courtroom Television Network 1992). This and all other citations of Courtroom Television Network are my transcriptions of the commercially released videotape. All ellipses reflect my editing of the transcripts.

14. Much of this unfinished history tends to find expression in violent reenactments of the initiation, ritualized entry, or processing of racial Others by the dominant institutions of white society.

15. LAPD vehicles use a keyboard communications system.

16. Harvey (1989) refers to the reciprocal defining powers of marking certain urban zones as defiling and transgressive as does Williams (1991). This wilderness imagery, which obscures the particularities of community context, from which racial others are subtracted, may well be a devolved variation of what Patterson (1982) identifies as "natal alienation." Natal alienation encompasses the renaming, branding, and degradation practices in enslavement scenarios and may still be a symbolic moment in the "Americanization" of racial others, including African-Americans.

17. See Feldman (1991a:81–84) and Taussig (1987) on the political relation between animal imagery and violence.

18. There is a strong analogy between this re-editing of the video and Lukács's (1971) description of the bifurcation of the body of the assembly-line worker into productive, commodifiable parts and actions and unproductive, economically devalued and "irrational" gestures. From this vantage point, the link between the defense's version of the video and the freeze-frame, time-motion photography of Fordist theoreticians is clear. The defense's discourse on reasonable police violence is the indirect heir of labor-efficiency performance analysis (see Rabinbach 1990).

19. Frantz Fanon (1986), in *Black Skin, White Masks,* identified transvestitism as an essential element of the consciousness of the colonized. I am suggesting that it is crucial to the political prosthetics of the colonizer once the ideological and hegemonic power of the colonial mirror relation is considered.

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