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Introduction: De-centering the Distant Spectator

Scholars have long been wary of the perils of visual rhetorics of violence. It has become a common place that, as Susan Sontag put it, “No ‘we’ should be taken for granted when the subject is looking at other people’s pain” (Regarding 7). Instead, the rhetorical impact of an image and the viewer’s motives for looking must always be suspect. There are many ways in which observing distant suffering can reinscribe violence. There is the oppressive empathy that erases the suffering person’s experience and agency (Hartman), the power inequality that comes from privileging “recognition” of suffering as a precursor to intervention (Hesford), and the possibility that circulating images of suffering will normalize the violence itself (Sontag, Towns). This scholarship suggests that there is violence in “atrocity images” connected but not reducible to the violence the image represents.¹ While circulating an atrocity image may help stop the direct violence that the image represents, the circulation process may also reinforce structures of power that facilitate past and future violence.

Discussions of visual rhetorics of violence have historically focused on one iteration of this problem: how spectators respond to violence from which they are geographically and emotionally detached. This approach makes sense; presumably, people who are close to violence do not need to be convinced that its victims deserve help, and viewers who are not in immediate peril may have more power to assist those in need. Analyzing how and why distant viewers respond to visible violence is an important part of visual rhetoric’s public work. Like any frame, however, it also has limits. Even when scholars critique how distant viewers respond to visible violence is an important part of visual rhetoric’s public work. Like any frame, however, it also has limits. Even when scholars critique how distant viewers respond to visible violence, focusing on those viewers at all maintains their place of privilege and elides the work that communities affected by violence—often communities of color—are doing to cope with and act against violence. A focus on distant spectators can be particularly damaging in pedagogical contexts. By centering the experiences and visual practices of distant spectators, instructors

¹ Fleckenstein, Gage, and Bridgman define atrocity images as “photographs depicting human-against-human violence” (12).
may unwittingly ask students to assume a privileged perspective that clashes with their actual experiences.

This article argues that a turn to multimodal assemblage can de-center the distant spectator and help to construct an ethical and inclusive visual rhetoric pedagogy. Scholars including Ariella Azoulay, Wendy Kozol, and Kristie Fleckenstein, Scott Gage, and Katherine Bridgman have suggested ways of looking that disrupt the violence of the gaze. Building on this work, I argue for methods of multimodal production that destabilize iconic atrocity images as central sources of knowledge about a violent act. Rather than erasing the image entirely, however, a method based in what Kristin L. Arola and Adam Arola call “creative repetition” can acknowledge the image as a powerful but limited crisis point while working actively to imagine new ways of approaching violence. Citing Gilles Deleuze, Arola and Arola explain that, while “bare repetition” assigns a static essence to that which is being repeated, creative repetition acknowledges what has come before while also producing new energy and life (207). I argue that assemblages that foreground creative repetition can help students imagine more life-sustaining ways of looking, even when they are looking at violence.
By arguing for ethical multimodal assemblage as an antiviolence pedagogical tool, I hope to highlight how instructors can unite critical discussion of violent images with the imaginative work of production. Visual production is an integral part of visual rhetoric pedagogy, but, while discussions of visual rhetoric and violence are often intertwined, requiring students to produce images that comment on visual rhetorics of violence can be risky. Dominant rhetorics that privilege distant spectatorship and objectify victims of violence are so widespread that it can be challenging for students to forge new ways of looking, even when they have spent a semester critiquing existing modes. While I discuss these and other risks in more detail below, I also provide a pedagogical framework and assignment structure that asks students to work against both the form and content of these problematic frames. In other words, rather than constructing an alternate frame that is similarly reductive (for example, representing people experiencing violence as “strong survivors” rather than “victims”), students should embrace nuance and changeability in the spirit of creative repetition. An emphasis on rhetorical sovereignty can also push students to consider their relationship to the texts they are collecting and arranging. Ideally, students doing this kind of work will recognize when they are the distant spectators who should no longer be centered in representations of a violent event.

I will first discuss how antiviolence assemblage structured around creative repetition can address many of the issues associated with visual rhetorics of violence. An example, Rajkamal Kahlon’s Did You Kiss the Dead Body?, illustrates how a violence-related assemblage can destabilize dominant modes of viewing and push viewers to look differently. I go on to describe a two-assignment sequence that asks students to think through the dominant visual rhetoric around an event, then construct a new scene of engagement. I conclude by briefly discussing some implications of this argument, as well as directions for future research.

**Productive Anti-violence Assemblage**

Approaching visual rhetorics of violence is challenging in part because dominant ways of looking—including an emphasis on the distant spectator—are so pervasive. The “ocular epistemology” of human rights, in which a detached viewer is supposed to see, feel, and act on distant suffering, is common even in ostensibly anti-violence texts (Hesford 29). An anti-violence visual rhetoric pedagogy, then, requires significant disruption of viewing norms. I argue that an emphasis on creative repetition can help students create visual responses to violence that avoid

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2 Diana George noted the shift toward design in visual communication courses in a 2003 article.
repeating damaging victim/savior tropes and break away from centering the distant spectator. While this method cannot guarantee that students will not duplicate violence, it can complement existing pedagogical approaches by pushing engagement with visual rhetorics of violence into a different sort of productive space.

While scholars agree that looking at atrocity images can create cultural violence, they do not typically suggest that these images should be hidden. Instead, scholars working on visual rhetorics of violence look for ways to engage with images without replicating the power differentials and problematic messages that they transmit. As Wendy Kozol explains, “The profound challenge for viewers and scholars is to balance the social and political value derived from this affective visual economy with recognition of the news media's reliance on spectacular, oversimplified, and often ahistorical representations” (26). Kozol and others argue for more careful, reflective ways of looking. Fleckenstein, Gage, and Bridgman, for example, offer “a pedagogy of rhetorical looking” as a way of asking students to think about how the direct violence they see in an image connects to structural and cultural violence (11). The authors argue for a form of “slow looking, or a thoughtful and conscientious method of interacting with visual representations of human violence,” to better process “both a photograph's image-content and...the perceptual habits by which that content is evoked” (13). This method thus avoids a problematic emphasis on an image's immediate affective impact on distant viewers. Instead of allowing students to rest with immediate reactions, the authors ask them to respond to the direct, structural, and cultural violence associated with the image (29-30).³ They offer an example of two students who, upon looking at a widely circulated image of people injured in the 2013 Boston Marathon bombing, initially determined that punishing the surviving perpetrator was the best response (30). It was only when they researched beyond the image, learning more about the Tsarnev brothers, that they revised their proposed action to address “the ‘why’ of terrorism and self-radicalization” (31). This slow looking process allows students to see the image's limits and think beyond and through them to a broader understanding of violence and its origins.

Critical ways of looking can also be built into visual texts. Kozol describes how visual artists can construct “reparative visualities” that “interrogate the politics of subjectivity in witnessing practices by shifting accountability within, not outside, the spectator’s gaze” (197). Reparative visualities do not erase the dominant politics of looking but rather critique and resist them. For example, for his Best of Life Portfolio,

³ For more on the relationship between direct, structural, and cultural violence, see Galtung.
Vik Muniz drew iconic photographs from memory, including several from the Vietnam War, “then reproduced them through the same half-tone process used by news agencies in the 1970s” (170). The resulting images look “authentic,” but, because they are drawn from memory, omit less-striking parts of each image. Muniz’s reproduction of Nick Ut’s “The Terror of War,” for example, has only Phan Thị Kim Phúc running with a single soldier walking behind her. The erasure of the other children and soldiers highlights “the mediated nature of memory and its exclusive interest in victimization” and thus some of the issues with the dominant visual rhetoric through which many in the United States experienced the Vietnam War (172). As Kozol explains, Muniz’s project mobilizes an ambivalent, skeptical gaze to raise questions about what photojournalism’s mimesis can actually convey (169). Other projects move away from positioning victims of violence as objects for a distant public to consume. Kozol describes Joe Sacco’s *Footnotes in Gaza*, a graphic novel that documents interviews with survivors of a 1956 massacre of Palestinian refugees. Sacco’s work is reparative in that it foregrounds survivors’ accounts of their own experiences, asking the spectator to look *with*, rather than *at*, people experiencing violence. These examples indicate that there are options for critical, resistant modes of image production that document and encourage non-dominant ways of looking.

Instructors can enhance their visual rhetoric pedagogy by asking students to engage in similar practices of reparative visuality. Some of students’ reparative work can occur through observation, discussion, and written reflection, as Fleckenstein, Gage, and Bridgman indicate. However, asking students to *produce* scenes of reparative visuality, similar to those that Kozol discusses, requires a slightly different pedagogical framework. Students need to understand problematic ways of seeing, recognize ways of seeing differently, and produce a space in which others can experience this alternate vision. The life-sustaining critique that Arola and Arola attribute to creative repetition is one possible framework for this kind of composition.

Arola and Arola introduce the concept of creative repetition as a “measuring stick” to distinguish between productive and appropriative assemblages of cultural texts (207). While an assemblage that relies on “bare repetition” of a cultural text suggests that cultures are static and unchanging, creative repetition “requires that one repeat by attending to the specificities of the current milieu, so as to create new ways of thinking and experiencing the present circumstances” (207-208). An assemblage anchored in creative repetition opens up new possibilities for a
people’s shared existence, while an assemblage anchored in bare repetition perpetuates stereotypes and locks peoples into rigid and unchanging identities.

Fig. 2: Adapted from “PPL00208-Rail birds” and Wim Vandenbussche, “in the forest”

While Arola and Arola focus on the symbolic violence of cultural appropriation, many uses of images of direct violence also engage in bare repetition. To motivate distant spectators to act, representations of violence must activate established understandings of who is a “victim” and what constitutes “suffering.” Iconic atrocity images tend to represent narrow versions of victims (“innocent,” suffering from
visible physical harm), detached from any trace of their lives outside of this violent moment. This is a kind of bare repetition in that people experiencing violence are reduced to a static victim “essence” in order to be legible to (and consumable by) distant audiences. Because many forms of violence disproportionately affect people of color, these circulating images can also, over time, reinforce a racist understanding of members of marginalized groups as suffering bodies in need of white saviors. These traveling texts lock viewer and viewed into static roles that cannot possibly fit their actual circumstances, ultimately perpetuating stereotypes and power imbalances that can facilitate future violence.

Anti-violence assemblages based in creative repetition need not pretend to exist entirely apart from dominant visual rhetoric. As in the projects that Kozol describes, there is room to critique existing tropes. But, importantly, it is not enough to point out what is wrong with dominant ways of looking, particularly when these ways of looking are so pervasive. Instead, anti-violence assemblage can engage with violence in differently generative ways; it can also repeat different aspects of encounters with violence, bringing in tropes of resistance and survival. Arola and Arola provide criteria to distinguish between good/productive and appropriative assemblage:

- “A good assemblage is responsive, responding to situations and enacting new functions;
- a good assemblage is innovative and productive;
- a good assemblage is novel, opening up new ways of thinking, seeing, and living; and
- a good assemblage does all of this with a focus on the ‘we’ as opposed to the ‘I,’” always considering, “Whom does this assemblage benefit?” (210)

While these ideas are interconnected, the last two seem especially important for assemblage related to visual rhetorics of violence. The novelty that Sontag describes as essential to “moral outrage” is novelty of content: the distant viewer needs to see a new kind of horror to feel motivated to act (On Photography 19). Arola and Arola instead suggest a structural novelty that reflects the ongoing evolution of all the groups involved. Typical circulations of images of violence often fail to meet this standard. Video of police officers harming Black people, for example, may show a new instance of violence, but does not in itself challenge the cultural violence of presenting Black suffering as a source of information for white viewers.4 “Novelty,” in the sense that Arola and Arola describe, would challenge this

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4 For more on the limits of body camera footage to stop police violence, see Towns.
structure, perhaps foregrounding the structural violence and ongoing mourning that a body camera video excludes. This kind of novelty highlights underrepresented viewing practices and produces a scene of viewing directly counter to a dominant objectifying gaze.

The question, “Whom does this assemblage benefit?” can also facilitate student engagement with the ethics of composition. Many white authors who write “on behalf” of oppressed peoples would probably argue that their work benefits those peoples, but those texts do not maintain oppressed peoples’ rhetorical sovereignty: their right and ability “to determine their own communicative needs and desires” (Lyons, qtd. in Arola and Arola 210). As I discuss in more detail below, part of engaging students in anti-violence assemblage is addressing the relations between those students and the violent scenes into which they wish to intervene. This requirement decenters the distant spectator as the default viewer of violence, but also, ideally, avoids falling into a too-broad claim that we are all related and thus equally entitled to modify or circulate atrocity images. Instead, students can ask whose rhetorical sovereignty is maintained and whose is breached, both in existing iterations of atrocity images and their proposed assemblages.

Fig. 3: Adapted from Kevin Dooley, “making memories of making memories,” and Heather Jonasson, “Red tree”
A productive anti-violence assemblage, then, does not erase violence, but finds ways to engage it that highlight movement and opportunity rather than reinforcing static roles. It enacts ways of seeing that invite different viewers and different relationships between viewer and viewed. If seeing within the ocular epistemology of human rights is constitutive, then, we might imagine anti-violence assemblage as more fluid, emphasizing “becoming” over “being.” By centering creative repetition as a mode of critique, students can begin to reckon with the impact of violence while also mapping strategies for survival.

**Assemblage in Action**

To demonstrate what a productive assemblage around a violent spectacle could be, I turn to artist Rajkamal Kahlon’s project, *Did You Kiss the Dead Body? Did You Kiss the Dead Body?*\(^5\) consists mostly of images that Kahlon created by layering anatomical drawings from Renaissance- and Victorian-era medical texts over the autopsy reports of detainees who died in U.S. facilities during the early years of the War on Terror (340). Kahlon’s collages, inspired by the lack of images in the autopsy reports when they were released to the public, constitute a response to a crisis (torture and other forms of imperial carceral violence) and a visual spectacle that represents that crisis (the photographs of torture at Abu Ghraib prison, the release of which preceded the release of these autopsy reports) (337-8).\(^6\) Rather than directly representing the violence described or implied in the autopsy reports, Kahlon’s images explore the relationship between torture and the cultural and structural violence that undergirds it. In drawing parallels between carceral torture and medical conceptions of the body, Kahlon critiques a clinical gaze that, as she explains, “turns a dead body into a corpse” (338).

Two images, different from each other in important ways, illustrate how *Did You Kiss the Dead Body?* creates new scenes for engagement without erasing the ocular epistemology's structural and cultural violence. One image combines a page from an autopsy report with a drawing of a skeleton standing over a prone man.\(^7\) The image on the autopsy report evokes but does not precisely replicate a widely circulated image of Lynndie England, one of the torturers at Abu Ghraib prison. There is a skeleton with its hip cocked, with a leash draped lightly over its hand. The

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\(^5\) I discuss other aspects of this project in *Ecologies of Harm: Rhetorics of Violence in the United States*, forthcoming from Ohio State University Press.

\(^6\) The autopsy reports became public as the result of a Freedom of Information Act request by the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU). Kahlon created some of the images in *Did You Kiss the Dead Body?* as an artist-in-residence at the ACLU (Kahlon 337).

\(^7\) On Kahlon's website, none of the images have titles, so I will refer to them by description.
other end of the leash is wrapped around the neck of a nude man, lying on his back on the ground. Unlike the skeleton, the man is fleshed. His arms are at his sides and his head is covered in what looks like a burlap sack, cinched at the neck by the leash. The skeleton is looking down at the man, as Lynndie England looks down at the prisoner in the original image.

Fig. 4: Page from an autopsy report with a drawing of a skeleton standing over a prone man.
The image does not directly reflect the content of the autopsy report page on which it is drawn, but, in juxtaposition, the text and image suggest parallel transformations of a person into a thing. The autopsy report page contains basic information about the conditions under which the autopsy was performed. It seems as if the person has not been identified, as there is very little information about him. The body arrived unclothed, with no personal effects, and “moderate decomposition.” There is no information about the circumstances of the person’s death. Even within the genre of autopsy report, which does not invite “extraneous” detail, this report provides minimal information. The result is a text that brings together an overtly dehumanizing carceral gaze with a more subtly dehumanizing medical gaze. On multiple levels, the specifics are irrelevant. While this person was likely not the person that Lynddie England put on a leash, juxtaposing this image with the minimal autopsy report emphasizes that he was entangled in the same system of structural and cultural violence. The use of a skeleton to represent the torturer (a convention that appears in several images) is also anonymizing. While the image evokes this particular incident, it also complicates the very connections that it raises, offering the autopsy report page, devoid of any mention of violence, to counter an apparent emphasis on direct harm.

The skeleton image is unusual among the Did You Kiss the Dead Body? images in its direct reflection of an image from Abu Ghraib prison. Many of the images layered on these autopsy reports are ostensibly innocuous, although obviously rendered less so through the associative logic of Kahlon’s assemblage. Another image combines what appears to be an instructional illustration demonstrating how to take a pulse with a letter from a prison physician regarding a prisoner’s death. In contrast to the image described above, the image layered over this letter does not show overt violence. Two hands are visible, each with some of the forearm visible as well. One hand touches the wrist of another as if taking a pulse. The positioning of the hands suggests that these are separate individuals, rather than someone attempting to take her own pulse. The hand taking the pulse wears a plain ring, possibly a wedding band. The letter, in contrast to the image, provides a brief narrative of a prisoner’s death. The author begins by recounting that “Prisoner w Number [Redacted] was brought to the casualty suffering from fully dilated both pupils and the absences of both heart beats and respiration.” The letter notes that other prisoners told authorities what happened to the prisoner, but the portion of the letter that recounts the prisoners’ testimony is illegible. Near the end of the letter, the author notes that “[t]he real cause of death is unknown.”
The two elements of the image are elliptical in overlapping ways, and together they suggest that a privileging of medical rhetoric brings little substantive information. The narrative of the prisoner’s death, on which a substantial part of the brief letter and the autopsy itself centers, is a conspicuous non-presence. While there is information about the events leading to the prisoner’s death, it is both illegible and devalued by the statement that “[t]he real cause of death is unknown.” The letter indicates that there is not yet a conclusive story of death; presumably, the doctors will construct this story through the autopsy. The context of the prisoner’s death is noted largely to be dismissed. The pulse image is similarly low on context; as is common (and recommended) for an instructional image, it has only the detail

8 The prisoners’ testimony may not have been illegible in the original version of the letter, but in Kahlon’s image, which uses a scanned version of the document, it is.

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deemed necessary to understand the mechanics of taking a pulse, with no background, no full bodies or faces, and no color. The possible wedding band is the only indication that either of these people has a life outside of this moment, and it is significant that it appears on the hand taking the pulse, implicitly that of a medical professional. For the most part, the illustration renders the pursuit of medical information—taking a pulse—as a mechanical task that occurs between two mostly disembodied individuals. Additional detail would only interfere with the information that the medical professional hopes to glean from this procedure.

*Did You Kiss the Dead Body?* repeats a clinical gaze in order to show its limits and push viewers to engage differently. Like *Best of Life Portfolio* and *Footnotes in Gaza*, *DYKTDB?* complicates the search for “evidence.” The logistical details of “what really happened” to any particular prisoner are unavailable in these texts. Instead, the images present evidence of structural violence by suggesting that torture is just one iteration of a widespread, dehumanizing cultural violence. By frustrating clear visual connections to torture and direct access to the bodies of torture victims, *Did You Kiss the Dead Body?* forces viewers to look elsewhere for answers, a process that begins to undo the torture-friendly logic of the body in pain as a source of information.

**Ethical Assemblage in the Visual Rhetoric Classroom**

**Groundwork**

Using assemblage to engage with violence requires students to consider questions about their relationship to structural, direct, and cultural violence. Because these questions can be challenging, the assignments I provide below will work best in a course that is already focused on socially just ways of interacting with the media. Students should be examining how atrocity images circulate and how social and cultural structures reveal and obscure different forms of suffering. The class should also discuss how iconic atrocity images assume a distant viewer, as well as the consequences of that assumption. In my prior Visual Communication courses, we have discussed the fact that many viewers do not need to be made aware of violent events. Instead, they can be haunted and harmed by the repeated circulation of atrocity images.\(^9\) Students who do not fit the “distant viewer” mode may already be engaging with violence differently, but dominant rhetoric erases those practices. By focusing from the beginning on the limits of existing rhetorics (especially ostensibly

\(^9\) See Wolters.
anti-violent uses of violent images), students can ease into practicing alternate ways of seeing and recognizing those that they already practice as valid.

Awareness of viewer positionality also requires the instructor to be judicious in their image use and avoid making assumptions about students’ relationships to the forms of violence under discussion. Instructors can take care not to show atrocity images and/or allow their students to control their experience of them (for example, viewing an image as homework before discussing it in class). Instructors can also approach violent events through less explicitly violent representations and leave the option open for students to find the more iconic images on their own if they choose. When my Visual Communication class was discussing Emmett Till, for example, we did not view the famous photograph of Till’s body at his funeral. We discussed the choice as a class. While Till’s mother, Mamie Till, wanted her son’s body to be visible in order to shame a white supremacist nation into acknowledging his murder, that choice does not translate to an ongoing license for anyone to look into Till’s open casket. We talked about what we gain from looking directly at images of violence, as well as what we are typically told we gain (for example, the claim that there is an ethical obligation to look at violence, even or especially when it is painful to do so). We also discussed how my choice not to ask students to view the image was imperfect; by hiding the image, I could indirectly encourage students to seek it out as an object of surprise and horror. We also read scholarly work that described the image, and while images of violence are often described as singularly affecting, a description can also initiate or reactive trauma. The class discussed other pictures associated with Till’s life and death, including Jason Lazarus’s 2005 photograph, Standing at the Grave of Emmett Till, Day of Exhumation, June 1st, 2005. These images, along with discussion of the unseen image of Till in his casket, offer an opportunity to think about multiple ways of conveying loss and injustice. Atrocity images are often positioned as necessary evidence, and, in a legal sense, they can be. But this version of “evidence” again assumes a viewer who needs to be convinced that something terrible has happened. Recognizing and, if necessary, moving away from these assumptions can help students be better prepared to engage in practices of reparative visuality.

**Assignments**

A two-assignment sequence can help students to engage with visual representations of violence in an ethical and generative way. The first assignment, the Image Ecology Project, provides a baseline for creative repetition and

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10 For a discussion of this photograph, see Smith.
reimagining by asking students to trace the public life of a single atrocity image using adapted iconographic tracking methods (Gries 109). Students choose an iconic atrocity image and track the ways that the image has been reused and transformed, then place those images into conversation with less widely circulated visual and nonvisual representations of the same event. Students compile the representations in a single document, providing brief analysis of each and a larger analysis of their relationship to each other. The research required for this assignment can be challenging; depending on the event and their relationship to it, students may struggle to find representations other than the dominant iconic image. However, the assignment attempts to balance this challenge by asking little of students in terms of arrangement. Students only catalog and analyze the representations; they are not yet required to stage new ways of viewing the incident or practice in question.

Fig. 6: Hewitt, “35 mm”
The Image Ecology Project thus asks students to engage with the limits and opportunities of existing representations of a violent event or practice. Tracing the public life of an iconic atrocity image can push students to think through the nuances of appropriation and critique. Like images in general, many atrocity images take on unusual forms as they move through digital spaces. For example, a briefly famous photograph of a police officer pepper spraying protesters at the University of California, Davis, became a meme that users engaged in surprising (recreated with gingerbread people) and not-so-surprising (altered so the officer is spray painting over the Constitution) ways. Additionally, while searching for non-iconic representations may be more challenging, that potential challenge offers an opportunity for structural critique. Students can consider why it is harder for them to locate some perspectives than others, as well as what gives iconic atrocity images their appeal and mobility. They may also consider how their experience of an event or practice differs from some or all of these representations.

In the Reparative Visuality Project, students stage a different, reparative way of viewing a violent event or practice. Rather than analyzing existing ways of seeing, the final product of the Reparative Visuality Project is a multimodal text that structures the viewer’s gaze to offer a new or frequently obscured perspective. While the exact format is open (and need not be digital), students must consider both the ways of looking that they catalogued in the Image Ecology Project and the criteria for “good assemblage” that Arola and Arola provide. How might an engagement with violence “[open] up new ways of thinking, seeing, and living,” particularly given that many representations of violence foreclose options (210)? What would an “innovative and productive” engagement with violence be like? Students also submit a reflection explaining their process, their design choices, and how their final product relates to the broader ecology around a violent event or practice.

The Reparative Visuality Project thus builds on the Image Ecology Project’s account of dominant and obscured ways of representing a violent event. The Image Ecology Project provides a nuanced baseline for creative repetition. Through that project, students catalog an event or practice, groups of affected and otherwise involved people, and responses from and for different groups. Even in a dominant perspective on violence, there is likely something that is worth engaging and re-presenting: pain, responsibility, causality. The Reparative Visuality Project can approach these existing themes differently, supporting richer viewer understandings of (for example) what it means to be responsible for violence. The nondominant perspectives that the student identified may offer alternative
understandings that can also be reiterated and transformed in the Reparative Visuality Project. In this project, then, students deploy a kind of creative repetition to build something novel and productive out of and beyond an existing ecology. The project asks students to stay with an extant history and set of challenges while still imagining new options. By building a space to experience a different perspective, students also move a step beyond critique to actualize (if only in a limited way) some of its implications.

Challenges

There are a number of challenges associated with these projects, some of which can be mitigated through careful preparation. Most of these challenges are connected to issues of rhetorical sovereignty. As I noted above, Arola and Arola connect good/productive assemblage to rhetorical sovereignty: if a good/productive assemblage is to further a group’s ongoing process of culturing, it makes sense for that assemblage to be by, rather than just for, members of the group (211). An emphasis on rhetorical sovereignty can also help de-center the distant spectator and help students avoid falling into reiterations of reductive claims about violence and victimhood. Pedagogically, however, the result may be that students can only work on violence to which they are somehow connected, and, while this practice would certainly decenter distant spectatorship, it also brings risks. Of greatest concern is the risk that asking students to dwell with violence in these ways can result in retraumatization, secondary traumatization, or other forms of serious harm. The distant spectator framework tends to assume that viewers need to be “shocked” out of complacency because they have no existing relationship to violence. Moving away from this framework requires a more nuanced and careful understanding of the varied experiences that students bring to their encounters with violence. While research into violence always presents a chance of unexpected trauma (for example, stumbling across a triggering image or text in an archive), building a classroom that prioritizes student safety over all else can mitigate this risk. Giving students options for how and what forms of violence to engage can maintain some level of student control. Instructors can also enact classroom policies that acknowledge and validate students’ emotional responses (including trigger or content warnings) and build in breaks and opportunities for self-care. Along with practicing critical engagement with dominant ways of looking, creating a safe classroom space is a necessary precursor to anti-violence work.

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11 Retraumatization “refers to the triggering or reactivation of trauma-related symptoms originating in earlier traumatic life events.” Secondary or vicarious traumatization is a risk for anyone who tries to attend with empathy to the traumas of others (Carello and Butler 156).
Less dangerous but still problematic is the risk that privileged students will push against the frame of rhetorical sovereignty. Students may attempt to assert connection through a distant spectator framework (that is, “I am connected to this violence because I have the power and privilege to do something about it”) or through generalizations that erase the specificity of experience (for example, “As a woman, I am connected to any form of violence affecting women anywhere”). The specificity of rhetorical sovereignty as a concept can help instructors complicate these claims; while we are all “connected” in various ways, rhetorical sovereignty is about more than connection. Engaging students in discussions about whose sovereignty is maintained in various rhetorical situations, as well as having them engage those questions in the Image Ecology Project, may help minimize this kind of issue.

**Conclusion**

This article has argued that methods of ethical assemblage based in creative repetition can help students stage productive ways of viewing violence. While
approaching violence through assemblage is risky, the work of destabilizing dominant ways of looking cannot happen solely through written analysis. Visual production offers different ways of knowing for both maker and spectator, and violence is too prevalent and significant a problem to lay aside any tools available to reckon with it. Importantly, though, a move to production, even carefully orchestrated, does not guarantee that students will not make something harmful. This kind of work is challenging, and even well-intentioned students may struggle to imagine different ways of approaching violence. Additionally, these methods may work better in some classrooms than others. Students who fit neatly into the “distant spectator” role may struggle to construct a different relationship between themselves and the violence around them.

I have argued that conversations about visual rhetorics of violence—a substantial part of the field—have focused too much on the emotional involvement (or lack thereof) of distant spectators. This structural deficit has particular relevance for pedagogy, since any classroom is likely to contain some spectators for whom the violence under discussion is anything but distant. I argue that the research process described above can do more than just decenter the distant spectator. Instead, through generative assemblage, this process can create new spaces for engagement with violence and make less recognized spaces more accessible. This kind of work is never free from the image, nor should it be. Instead, researchers recognize the cultural structures that privilege certain atrocity images as sources of information while actively working against the limits of this framework. While the approach I have described is focused on visual rhetoric, a pedagogy focused on socially just inquiry and assemblage could also be helpful for instructors teaching about any public crisis, regardless of whether the course has a visual focus. The question of “how to get people to care” permeates many public crises, so considering the limits of that framework can be transformative in those contexts as well.

In proposing a movement away from the “distant spectator” framework, this article also furthers ongoing conversations about what kind of community teachers and scholars are acknowledging, inviting, and creating through our pedagogies and compositions. As I noted above, Susan Sontag argues that “[n]o ‘we’ should be taken for granted when the subject is looking at other people's pain” (7). When viewed in a pedagogical context, the “we” assumed in many discussions of the visual rhetoric of violence is just a particular version of a common erasure of student experience. By changing how we approach these scenes of crisis, we can
better ensure that our classes recognize the many ways in which students are already reckoning with the world around them.

Fig. 8: Kollage Kid, “Weekly Dose”

WORKS CITED:


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