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“Cover Your Ass”: Individual Accountability, Visual Documentation, and Everyday Policing in Miami

In the context of police violence and the proliferation of cameras, a growing body of anthropological scholarship has sought to understand the role of photography and its relationship to everyday policing. While scholarly attention has been given to how cameras can intensify a racialized visuality of crime and justify violent policing practices, this article discusses how police officers themselves understand and use cameras in their daily work. Police officers can act as if they have a high level of impunity and a broad sense of righteousness, yet still feel that their work is surrounded by procedural and bureaucratic uncertainties. Based on extensive research with police departments in Miami, Florida, I discuss how police officers document their professionalism and integrity. When making sense of and navigating their societal role and the scrutiny that comes with it, US police officers use cameras to record themselves to capture visual and legal-looking actions of what they understand is exemplary of good policing. In the eyes and hands of police officers, cameras are used to document state violence and racialized policing as individual performances, highlighting officer accountability and misconduct while obscuring institutional responsibility. [policing, cameras, racism, accountability, United States]

I accompanied a group of police recruits during a community tour in Miami, Florida, and the instructors had selected to walk through Overtown, a predominantly African American low-income neighborhood adjacent to the central police station in Downtown Miami. Dressed in formal office attire, the thirty-six recruits walked in the blistering heat, the sweat starting to show on their faces and through their clothing. Earlier at the station, an instructor explained the purpose of such community walks: “Don’t expect real police work if you don’t integrate yourself!” Police recruits seemed to acknowledge the importance of building relationships with the communities they worked in, yet for different reasons. “You never know what might happen,” one recruit told me during the walk, “when a firefight might take place, and who can help you. If you meet the right people, they can actually help you instead of stealing your radio when you are pinned down and away from your car. You never know who you’ll need.”

Residents had mixed feelings about the intrusive presence of the large group of aspiring police officers in their neighborhood. Several men approached the recruits and thanked and blessed them for their service. Others shouted “Fuck the police” from a distance. One resident threw a plastic baseball from a balcony that landed in an empty parking lot on the opposite side of the street. According to the three police instructors who accompanied the recruits, policing is about creating a sense of responsibility and reciprocity, and learning

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how to treat people equally, whether they wear a suit or grimy clothes. One instructor reminded them, “Some people here made bad decisions or had bad things happen to them. You are not better than they are.” The I-95 overpass was constructed directly through Over-town, displacing thousands of residents in the 1960s. At this underpass, the group came to a halt. Instructor Hernandez,¹ a muscular and bald man in his forties, addressed the group by asking who among the recruits had ever worked a “real job,” by which he meant working long hours at minimum wage. Many recruits raised their hands. “Good, you will have a better understanding of the lives of some of the residents here,” he told them. These recruits, Hernandez implied, would be able to understand and hopefully respond better to community members’ needs. During the tour, one recruit pulled out a granola bar and gave it to a man who had a pile of belongings in a shopping cart and scattered on the sidewalk.

At the end of the tour, commanding officers instructed the recruits to stand in a circle in front of a building that housed various community projects. Hernandez stood in the middle and shared an experience he had during patrol in the neighborhood a few years ago. Hernandez and his colleagues had received a distress call about a man who was harassing project staff members and had refused to leave. As soon as the officers arrived, Hernandez explained, the man began to “disrespect” them. Although Hernandez felt increasingly agitated with this man’s behavior and attitude, his own demeanor remained calm and he maintained his composure. One of his colleagues, however, became aggressive to the point that he repeatedly used physical force to restrain and eventually arrest the man. Taking a moment, Hernandez added, “In the end, it is about treating people with respect: Yes, sir. No, sir. Sure, if they disrespect you, you can change your attitude.” He paused to look at several aspiring police officers in the eye. “But if you are a bad cop, you *will* develop a reputation soon, and you *will* get me on your back with a bullshit complaint or a real issue that will cost you your job.” Hernandez, pointing toward himself, added, “I managed to get this position here because I followed the book. If you see another officer doing something bad—back off; *cover your ass*. If you develop bad habits, you’re on your own.”

Drawn by popular imaginaries of its crime, opulence, and inequality, I came to Miami to study the broader social and political concerns about police violence and racial injustice that are part of the national public conversation in the United States right now. Miami is a city where such inequalities have become particularly visible as well as contested. In 2015 and 2016, I conducted eleven months of ethnographic research with police officers, private security guards, and residents. As a civilian observer, I joined patrol officers at the Miami Police Department (MPD) and the Miami Beach Police Department (MBPD) during so-called ride-alongs during both day and night shifts for a total of one hundred hours. “Riding shotgun,” that is, sitting in the front passenger seat (in Miami there is only one officer per police car), allowed me to closely observe how police officers do their work and how they communicate and interact with other police officers during their patrols shifts. Both within and beyond their working environment, I spoke with police officers about their professional and private lives. I listened to officers discuss how they had dealt with issues they encountered in their work, and I greeted recruits who saluted me in the morning when I visited their classrooms.

Based on these ethnographic encounters, I found *cover your ass* (CYA) to be a central premise of policing encounters in Miami. More specifically, it captures how notions of individual accountability are grounded in police cultures and translated into practices and performances of police and state power. Writing about a Central Intelligence Agency covert operation during the Reagan administration in 1987, *New York Times* columnist William Safire drew attention to the military-bureaucratic term. In a more recent publication, he defined CYA as “the bureaucratic technique of averting future accusations of policy error or

wrongdoing by deflecting responsibility in advance” (Safire 2008, 163). Since then, CYA has been adopted in a broad range of professional settings to refer to the ways individuals can “cover” themselves from foreseeable costs and harms. Similarly, police officers in Miami understand their work to be surrounded by procedural and bureaucratic uncertainties, yet they do not necessarily expect their employers to protect them; they feel responsible for identifying and addressing these issues as individuals and documenting their practices accordingly.

Of course, the idea that the police institution—or in this case, Instructor Hernandez—is capable, let alone willing, to hold officers accountable when they do not “follow the book” is not by any means representative of actual formal repertoires and responses to police violence. On the contrary, police officers have systematically violated civil rights across the United States and still—or because of it—enjoy widespread political support, legal protection, social endorsement, and yearly increasing budgets (Neocleous 2000; Ralph 2020; Vitale 2017). Scholarship on policing and institutionalized racism within the police remains critical, but it tends to overlook how the police institution itself is fraught with contradictions and ambiguities that manifest in customary policing encounters as social practices (Jauregui 2016; Karpiak 2013). What has been largely left out of these debates is how police officers navigate and respond to issues of individual accountability considering these perceived insecurities. Indeed, the use of CYA within police culture and practice demonstrates how the racist and violent police institution has created complexities and perceived dangers for individual officers, who are expected to figure out how to keep themselves sane and safe in their daily work.

Exploring these uncertainties as lived realities seems particularly relevant in the context of the proliferation of cameras and the heated public debate surrounding police violence. Where victims of police violence and others supportive of their claims see disproportional and unjustified violence, many officers and their supporters see their actions as done in self-defense or in simply following protocols. When Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin killed George Floyd in May 2020, he looked into the cameras that recorded him, suggesting that he believed he was doing his job and that these visual testimonies would not make him vulnerable to prosecution. While this recording led to Chauvin being sentenced to more than twenty years in prison, there have been numerous instances of police officers whose violent actions were recorded but who were not convicted, leaving victims and their families with feelings of injustice, disillusionment, and emotional distress (Jackson 2015; Sarat 2017; Stone 2015). Moreover, visualizing technologies have also reproduced existing racist representations of crimes that claim to justify violent policing practices and state power. Following police killings and the mediatized afterlife of Black Lives Matter outrage, Shanti Parikh and Jong Bum Kwon (2020) point out how the state maintains control over the imagery of Black bodies. The authors argue that the racialized power that controls visualizing technologies displays police killings as a “mastery of domination” (131) by focusing on state presence (e.g., tanks, dogs, etc.) and angry protestors instead of on the killing itself, state-sanctioned murder, and dead bodies. Cameras are used to make violence against communities of color visible while making violence by Whites and the state “a show of strength through disposability” (137). Yet to fully understand how visualizing technologies shape police violence and performance, I suggest it is necessary to consider the experiences and perspectives of police officers when it comes to their control over cameras.

In this article, I examine how police officers understand and use cameras to cover their asses, showing how and where cameras empower them, how it shapes police subjectivities, and what this means for their understanding of transgressions of law and order. I found that

police officers often worked from the assumption that they need cameras to strengthen society's perception of professional law enforcement because police performances and legal and bureaucratic reasonings increasingly become the same (Göpfert 2013). Here, cameras reproduce notions and performances of individual accountability—such as CYA—that are central to many late capitalist societies and police cultures, allowing an “incident” of police violence to be decontextualized from the larger racist and violent ideologies that inform policing practices and protocol (Beutin 2017). How police officers interact with citizens, and especially whether they engage in violent and racist acts, becomes more about individual accountability and violent actions that *look* or *appear* legal. In the eyes and hands of police officers, cameras do not necessarily make police violence less visible. Rather, they capture a visibility of state violence as an individual performance, recorded as a matter of officer accountability and (mis)conduct, while obscuring collective guilt and institutional responsibility (Clarke 2009).

Policing, Photography, and Evidence

Recent scholarship on policing contends that contemporary police practices in America are a modern extension of colonial logics and White supremacy (Ralph 2019; Steinmetz, Schaefer, and Henderson 2016). The function of policing, as Orisanmi Burton (2015, 38) makes clear, is “to protect and serve *whiteness*”: it has always been about “the protection of whiteness and the regulation of black life” (39). It is important to underline, especially in light of Miami's Latinx population, that whiteness here does not exclusively refer to white people and bodies but can be constituted as an affective and often desired position on top of the racial order. Disenfranchised residents understand police incursions into their neighborhoods as threatening not just because of the way the police behave and criminalize residents of these neighborhoods but also because the police are well-funded and omnipresent: it is the main state institution that is persistently present in their lives and neighborhoods (Goffman 2014; Hall et al. 1978; Ture and Gualteri 2017; Vitale 2017). Nevertheless, law enforcement agencies in the United States have successfully defended themselves over decades against accusations and visual testimonies. Pointing the finger at individual officers, police departments, US presidents, and many others continues to invoke the so-called bad apple explanation (Punch 2003), suggesting that only a few officers use exceptional violence, and that this is mainly a problem of character and personal decision making that can be addressed at an individual level.

By examining the relationship between the police and violence in more detail, an anthropology of policing has shifted our attention to the multiplicity of perspectives and experiences part of everyday encounters (Manning 2018). Here, scholars are critical of traditional divisions between “state” and “society” and provide ethnographic accounts of policing that go beyond the police as a monolithic representative of the former. Based on research with the police in India, Beatrice Jauregui (2016) argues that policing is “provisional.” She analyzes “expressions of police authority that were in dialogue, and often in direct competition, with both commands and demands from various sources and subjects” (15). While police officers may use violence in their line of work, they also experience their working conditions as highly precarious and fraught with danger. For police officers, then, policing is about maintaining boundaries and differentiating between good and bad guys and danger and safety—boundaries that are simultaneously “unstable and full of contradictions.”²

By the time I began my fieldwork, regional policy makers and local activists suggested that it was only a matter of time before body-worn cameras would become mandatory for police officers in Miami. The MBPD launched a three-month pilot program with thirty

motorcycle officers in May 2015. Since these officers frequently conducted traffic stops that involved verbal and face-to-face encounters, the higher-ups reasoned that these officers offered a good test case for the technology. A month earlier, the regional police force of Miami-Dade County had allotted US\$1 million of its budget to body cameras. It should be noted that police officers have also turned their cameras to record themselves or others while on duty, for reasons like those of citizens, but mostly to protect and validate their personal and professional integrity.

The belief that cameras empower their users persists, as illustrated by the contemporary use and frequently stated need for more cameras, even as this is not necessarily supported by the desired juridical proceedings. Cameras have enabled imagined relationships between visual evidence and juridical proceedings to become rooted in everyday policing, as well as in markets, policies, and laws, as government agencies, corporations, activist organizations, and individuals alike rely on visual documentation of their practices as a form of legal insurance and a mode of showing transparency and professionalism (Ristovska 2021). Indeed, the visual documentation of policing practices increasingly supersedes written documentation and testimonials. Often used to record and produce evidence, the widespread use of cameras in policing resonates with what John Tagg refers to as the establishment of a “new regime of truth” (1988, 61), as government agencies and international companies developed a proliferating system that stressed the importance of collecting and saving evidence. This use of cameras as an objective eyewitness account is strongly connected to the workings of the US legal system, broader litigiousness, and people’s and organizations’ experiences and understandings of the workings of law and justice (Fuller 1994; Newell 2021; Rosen 2006; Sarat 1990). The nexus between visuality and law shapes, or “colonizes” (Tavolari 2018, 96), the way people and organizations see daily encounters and relationships. John Jackson notes, “There is something about how we fetishize these kinds of videos.” He writes about recordings of police violence “that speaks to how naïve we all continue to be about the empirical self-evidentiality of visual ‘proof’” (2015, 6).

When it comes to the adoption of cameras in police work, however, scholars seem understandably concerned with causality and outcome in terms of whether police officers use less or more excessive force when they are being recorded. Researching a body-worn camera project in the Seattle (Washington) Police Department, Meg Stalcup and Charles Hahn (2016.) discuss the possibilities and pitfalls of capturing systemic civil rights abuses in policing. Analyzing how cameras produce various “socio-techno subjectivities” (482), the authors position themselves between techno-optimism (i.e., cameras will create more ethical police officers) and techno-pessimism (i.e., the images produced by cameras will intensify an already racialized way of seeing). As the authors point out in their conclusion, cameras have become part of the ways that recruits and police officers are socialized, what techniques they learn, and what “good policing” means to them. Extending debates on photography to an anthropology of policing, I aim to advance our understanding of usual policing encounters as a social practice and performance of state power, carried out by police officers who look to navigate among their professional duty, police subjectivities, and individual accountability. In the next section, I will discuss my methodology in more detail, and thereafter explain how police officers in Miami understood their societal role and the scrutiny it is afforded—especially when they are recorded.

A “European” Ethnography of Policing

For my first ride-along with a Miami police officer, I opted for a patrol in Miami Beach on a Friday night. As the city is internationally known for its nightlife and entertainment,

I figured that a weekend night between 10 p.m. and 8 a.m. in Miami Beach would give me an interesting and diverse experience of police work in the city. After signing multiple waivers and legal documents—basically declaring that the police department could not be held liable if I sustained any injury or died during the ride—I was guided upstairs, where I was asked to sit at a desk in a cubicle and wait for the patrol officer to pick me up. Trying to follow the official dress code for “civilian observers,” I was wearing formal business attire with slightly pointy-toed gray leather shoes. I could not see any officers present in the office, but I heard them talking about my appearance. As a relatively tall man dressed in clothes I had brought from the Netherlands, I immediately stood out, and two officers joked that I had on “clown shoes.” I was unsure whether I was supposed to hear this banter or not. They peeked around the cubicle and greeted me, interested to know who I was and why I wanted to join a patrol officer in Miami, which was so far away from my home.

“Europe, eh?” one police officer summarized my response to his curiosity about where I lived. “So, how do you protect yourself, when, you know, you’re in danger?”

I had no direct answer to his question. I said something along the lines of, “I just hope I won’t be in the wrong place at the wrong time, that nobody targets me.”

The officer sniffed and gave me a tightlipped smile. I felt naïve. “Boss,” he addressed me, “when I get in trouble, I have this.” He partially unbuttoned his shirt, revealing a necklace with a leather case attached to it, decorated with a large Christian cross. It holstered a knife. “And these,” he went on, removing another knife from a holster attached to his ankle, and a third from his belt. After returning the knives to their holsters and tidying his collar, he wished me a good and eventful ride-along with the patrol officer.

This brief interaction with the MBPD officer was indicative of the relationships I would develop with Miami’s police officers and other respondents during my fieldwork. Because of my appearance as a white European man, some police officers were more willing to explain their perspectives to me and were more forgiving of my different interpretation of police work. Many officers appeared open to the idea of having a researcher present, watching and talking to them during their work, and some even tried to involve me in their interactions with residents. While I remained open about my work as a graduate student and researcher, officers still thought that I was learning to become a police officer myself. This gave me the impression that my access as a non-police officer, as well as non-US citizen, was quite unusual. Nevertheless, I participated in classes with recruits, interviewed commanding officers, observed community policing projects in various neighborhoods and homeless outreach programs, trained for SWAT swimming courses in a heavy scuba wet-suit, visited holding cells with arrestees, joined meetings with local residents, observed small-scale drug dealing on a corner while hiding in the bushes across the street, participated in various courses for US citizens (e.g., bystander training), and followed police training such as crime scene investigation. Other officers considered my views to be naïve and saw Europeans as mostly a “bunch of liberals” who did not understand the daily reality of policing, especially not in the United States, let alone in Miami.

It was difficult for me to find a balance between distancing myself from their statements and stigmatizing beliefs, on the one hand, while maintaining a good working relationship with them, on the other. During the few moments I witnessed physical encounters and the use of force, I stood back and joined the ranks of other bystanders, where I often was the only one who did not use my cellphone to record police use of force. I remained silent after observing aggressive actions when I did not know what to say, or casually asked the police officers involved to reflect on what had just happened. I never left the scene, however. My

work with the police often stirred up a personal mix of emotions, including excitement (when they raced through the city using sirens) and fear (when they drew their weapon or became anxious themselves), and I often felt myself unable to objectively assess what was happening, especially during intense and busy patrols.

Recording the Police

Police officers frequently stressed that they are part of society, that “there shouldn’t be a distinction between the public and the police department,” as one commanding officer stated to me. “I also live in a neighborhood where I feel responsible for safety: I want the same as they do.” At the same time, and considering threats made against the police on social media as well as actual coverage of violence against police officers, some officers expressed their support for Blue Lives Matter, a countermovement to Black Lives Matter. Founded after two officers were shot and killed in New York City in 2014, Blue Lives Matter advocates argue that police officers are at risk throughout the United States and are often targeted by the public, although the number of police officers killed on duty is actually in decline (White, Dario, and Shjarback 2019). During one meeting prior to an upcoming patrol—a “roll call” in police jargon—the MPD sergeant shared a printed screenshot of a social media post, which claimed that the “Black Lives Matter movement did a radio broadcast telling their supporters/followers to kill any cops they see working alone on Friday September 11th.” The media poster recommended to “spread the word to all your supervisors and cops to be extremely vigilant and cognizant of their surroundings.”

Later that night, I accompanied Mark, a police officer with the MPD, on a ride-along during his patrol. It had been a relatively uneventful shift, but while driving through the streets of Downtown Miami, he received a request from the police dispatcher. A 911 call had come in from a security guard who had just been punched by a man in a park in Downtown Miami. It was a Code 4 call, meaning that Mark should use sirens and alarm lights in order to arrive as soon as possible. When we arrived on the scene, several officers were attempting to arrest a man, while numerous park visitors had gathered around the scene and were recording the struggle with their cell phones. The three officers were unable to get him into a police car, and Mark used his baton to hit the man on his legs. Illuminated by a street light, punctuated by the flickering of the red and blue police lights, and surrounded by dozens of bystanders, the man shouted, “Read me my Miranda rights!” He kept repeating the sentence, louder and louder, before he finally succumbed to the officers’ pressure and beating. The door of the police car slammed shut. The car began to bounce, and you could hear the man shouting inside and trying to kick his way out. “He’s gonna break it,” one officer predicted. She was right. The tinted window came flying and the man showed his head, directing his speech at the audience. “Read me my Miranda rights!”

The man whom Mark and his colleagues sought to arrest made sure to let the audience know that he felt the police officers were violating his rights. He demanded that they read him his Miranda rights out loud, speaking to the inconsistencies between police practices and legal rights. As every viewer of police procedural shows knows, officers are supposed to read the standardized lines of legal rights and responsibilities to the person under arrest—but, legally speaking, only before a verbal interrogation. In turn, the police officers seemed to consciously follow the exact procedures for making the arrest, as they were very repetitive in their actions and the use of physical force. They consulted their increasing use of force with superior officers as the man refused to cooperate. Almost every bystander held up a cell phone, silently following and capturing the scene through their

digital screens. Not much later, police officers used leg cuffs to lock the legs of the man behind his back, and moved him into a different car. Mark stood next to me, wiping the sweat from his forehead. Looking at the numerous flashlights of cell phone cameras lighting up in the dark, he commented: “I’m here on the floor fighting for my safety, and their protection, and they’re just standing over me with a phone, recording it.” He shook his head, adding, “They only do that to use it against us.” Mark later explained to me they sought to proceed with the arrest “in a calm manner.” In addition, they made use of specific attributes, such as alarm lights, weapons, and uniforms, to rule out any perception that they were not in fact professional law enforcement officers and that their actions could not be justified to the growing crowd. “In order to uphold the illusion of law being omnipresent and effective,” as Thomas Blom Hansen notes, “law enforcement must appear as predictable, procedural, regulated, and above all, visible to the public” (2006, 282).

Monitoring police activity, however, is not necessarily new. Organized groups and networks such as CopWatch have existed in the United States since at least the 1960s, when the Black Panthers organized armed patrols that observed and documented police practices from a distance. While government agencies sought to repress such organized efforts, “cop-watch groups have risen up in recent years, spurred by controversies over police killings, and the spread of cell phone cameras among rich and poor” (Fan 2019, 65). In her work on photography, Susan Sontag (2003) explains that cameras have the unique characteristic of combining an “objective” record with a personal testimony. A personal testimony recorded by a mobile camera, in particular a cell phone camera, is easily seen as more authentic than a professionally shot image. Often shot by amateurs, these videos lack proper lighting, composition, and appear spontaneous, unstaged, and unmanipulated. They could therefore be interpreted by a larger audience that was not present at the scene itself to be an exact representation of “what really happened.” Images have increasingly acquired a general authority over the imagination, superseding the printed and spoken word. Sontag explains that, in a way, the photographic image has become hyperreal, more real than reality, blurring the difference between “a faithful copy or transcription of an actual moment of reality and an interpretation of that reality” (26). Recent developments in consumer technology and legal precedent have enabled greater numbers of people to capture police violence and racial injustice in more detail and to circulate these videos and images globally.

Various governmental policies and corporate efforts have strengthened the perceived relationship between visual evidence and juridical proceedings in the broader use of visualizing technologies. In a rather bizarre and ironic twist, decades after the Rodney King incident, the same company that manufactured the electric stun-gun that the officers used against King (Taser, now a worldwide supplier of the technology), has begun to promote the use of body cameras. An advertisement targeting police officers that I saw hanging in Miami police stations conveyed the message that officers themselves are responsible for capturing the visual evidence necessary to protect themselves from any unwarranted juridical proceedings. The advertisement depicts a generic-looking police officer, either public or private, with a small camera attached to glasses sold by Taser. The tagline reads: “Testimony is interesting. Video is compelling.” Here, Taser literally places the significance of an individual visual account above that of a verbal one for police officers. After George Floyd’s murder and the ensuing protests across America in 2020, Taser’s founder tweeted how the company’s visualizing technology “helps eradicate racism and excessive force in the justice system.”³

Aware of the potential societal and legal consequences of camera recordings, Miami police officers often referred to the controversial and sensational blogger Al Crespo and his website's links to the national organization PINAC (Photography Is Not A Crime).⁴ Both Crespo's and PINAC's websites displayed numerous videos in which police officers and public officials aggressively respond to cameras and the people using them, as both sides accused each other of breaking the law. These sites are indicative of how much the use of cameras in public space has been debated, in particular when it comes their supposed interference with police work. In addition, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) developed a mobile phone application through which civilians can record police officers and directly upload this material to the organization's servers. During Memorial Day weekend in Miami in 2015, I joined several ACLU volunteers who walked around as "legal observers," prepared to capture violent police practices with their cell phones. The human rights organization writes that legal observers can act as eye witnesses and document "any incidents of police misconduct" or any violations of civil rights. These observers are trained to be "as objective as possible so that their documentation can be used as evidence if police misconduct or obstructions to constitutionally protected free speech are challenged in court."⁵ Despite this, the police did not appear to mind or feel threatened by these legal observers, and they even seemed comfortable when speaking to us during the weekend.

Some police officers told me that they feared that body cameras would impair their use of force and prevent them from following their intuition. Officers often described police work as a "legal gray area" that required officers to approach "out-of-place-looking" individuals, sometimes without any apparent reason other than intuition. The body camera recording, however, might force them to prove probable cause, the reasonable grounds to believe that a particular person has committed a crime or is about to violate the law. Probable cause affords police legal permission to stop and search people or their vehicles.

Somewhat ironically and apparently unbeknownst to these officers, their argument regarding the potential effects of body cameras on their policing behavior supported proponents' reasoning. Officers themselves suggested that they would no longer be able rely on their "intuition" but would have to follow the letter of the law whenever they interacted with civilians, which was exactly what activists in Miami sought to achieve. Although acting without probable cause always made a police officer susceptible to legal prosecution, the body camera caused many officers to frame their work in more explicitly juridical terms. Some officers, facing the looming "threat" of having to wear a body camera, switched jobs and became instructors at the police academy rather than engaging in police work that involved encounters with the public. As one instructor explained to me, "It wasn't the time for officers like us to walk the streets." To him, the fact that body cameras were deemed necessary to check and control the actions of individual officers meant that he could not work in the way he considered most effective. These police officers' initial responses suggested that body cameras could decenter the importance of "personal experience" (and its relation to racial profiling) within police work, in favor of more juridical interpretations.

However, I also encountered many police officers who saw potential benefits to wearing a body camera. During a short stop on the streets of Miami Beach, one officer walked around slamming his hands on his large chest, protected by body armor. "Bring 'em on," he said. "Everything will be on tape, so whenever I tell that motherfucker to take a seat, eight fucking times, and he doesn't do it, I have to force him down, what's he gonna do?" This was his emotional response to the amount of complaints and internal investigations that he and many police officers in Miami were dealing with, a frustrating and time-consuming

hassle, which many found stressful as it could potentially affect their future careers as law enforcement officers. Online searches using the names of the officers whom I met indicated that most of them had been involved in legal issues. Some had even been suspended or re-assigned to an administrative task. Officers were thus often consciously aware of how the public perceived them and were actively concerned with preventing civilians from complaining to their superiors about their behavior. In the next section, I explain that they believed that body cameras could lower the number of complaints, because the technology would prove that they had been adhering to the law and formal policies.

The Cherry on Top

After my drug and alcohol tests came back negative, I was allowed to join a “homeless outreach” organized by the Housing Assistance Center (HAC) in Miami Beach as an official intern. Traveling in a large van with two HAC employees and two Miami Beach police officers, we drove around late at night looking for people sleeping outside. Sometimes we parked and walked around. The police officers appeared visibly annoyed with their task, and their shift in attitude (from calm to aggressive) suggested to me they were uncertain about which approach worked best with people who appear unresponsive or intoxicated but who otherwise appeared to be no threat.

Just before we headed back to the HAC office, we entered Lummus Park, which is where many people who are homeless sleep and where residents who live nearby often complain about it to the police. We found five people sleeping on the beach, directly outside the park. Officially, they were not trespassing the park. The police officers debated whether the beach was “open” because the sun was not completely up—the beach is closed from dusk to dawn, otherwise the police would have to patrol it at night as well. The officers woke up the people and inquired whether they want to be admitted to the Medication-Assisted Treatment program. Most of them did not want to and left the area as soon as they packed their belongings. There was one resident from across the street who frequently called the MBPD about the presence of these people. This time, however, he opened his window on the second floor and gave a thumbs-up. The police officers appeared relieved; they will not receive any complaints from him today.

Police officers in general seem concerned about public complaints and feel a strong need to “document everything to cover our tracks”; they referred to CYA primarily to protect themselves from litigation as well as appear professional in front of a judge. This was important to them, as in their view it could affect the extent to which legal professionals took their arrests and cases seriously.

Police officers with whom I spoke acknowledged that cameras allowed them to capture their perspectives whenever they felt it was necessary. In many cases, police officers also used their own cell phone cameras to record or share a video that the officers themselves could save and always access, unlike the official body-worn cameras over which they had much less control. The use of personal cameras is increasingly popular among police officers, and the cell phone is an essential part of an officer’s tactical belt, where it is locked in place alongside a handgun, a Taser, a flashlight, and ammunition.

On another ride-along, immediately after we left the MPD station and greeted the private security guard at the gate, Sergeant Elrond got a call on his cell phone. His new lieutenant requested his presence at the entrance of Bayside Park in Downtown Miami. There was no rush, so no need for him to use the alarm lights and sirens. After a short ride, we parked behind three other police cars, all with their blue and red lights flickering. Next to them was a large SUV attached to a tow truck, with a woman still sitting in the driver’s seat, refusing to leave her car, which she had parked illegally. The police officers waited patiently, as

requested by the lieutenant, the highest ranking officer present. After thirty minutes or so, and after all verbal attempts to get the woman out of her car had failed, the officers agreed that it was time to make an arrest. The lieutenant instructed Elrond, a member of the SWAT team and the most muscular officer there, to handcuff the woman. The lieutenant seemed worried, however, and ordered another sergeant to “stand by” with his cell phone to record the arrest. The woman sitting behind the wheel was Black, and I assumed that this heightened the lieutenant’s anxiety and perhaps partly explained why she wanted the arrest recorded.

Elrond reached inside the car and grabbed the forearms of the woman, who resisted verbally but obeyed physically. The sergeant recorded the whole interaction, and only stopped recording when the backdoor of Elrond’s police car slammed shut behind the handcuffed woman. With the video saved to its memory card, the phone was returned to the holder on the sergeant’s tactical belt, behind his gun. “It’s the cherry on top of the cake,” explained Elrond as we drove to the City of Miami holding cells, located at the back of the MPD station. In case the woman filed a complaint against one of the officers, they could show the recording made by the sergeant that day. It did not take Elrond much time to fill out the report, but during the rest of his shift his mind wandered over why the woman had not left her car by herself. In his view, it was not worth getting arrested over.

Scholars have emphasized that policing can be understood as a dramaturgical performance. As Peter writes, “Much of policing action is an attempt on the part of the police to dramatize their actions and to conceal or make less than salient their other more frequent but less impressive activities” (1978, 487). Drawing on this approach, Julia Hornberger (2011) analyzes police performances in terms of a “front” and “back” stage. She explains that these stages reflect different realms of policing, with the front stage being the legalistic appearance, and the back stage the visible and tangible violence that overrides the law. Hornberger concludes that few officers are actually able to transform their performance into something that is in accordance with the law; as a result, everyday policing continues to involve violent and extra-legal practices.

Cameras do not necessarily prevent officers from performing illegal and violent practices. In fact, they might even accentuate a legal reading of an otherwise blatantly unjust encounter, for instance when a police officer is acquitted despite disturbing footage. By eliciting such performances, cameras emphasize a legal and bureaucratic reading of policing—its front stage—and in doing so, overexpose individual accountability in a context of institutionalized violence. A *New York Times* short documentary called “With Rise of Body Cameras, New Tests of Transparency and Trust” (McDonald and Bachelder 2017) also illustrates how police body cameras speak to notions of individual accountability and legal reasonings. The documentary shows footage of a Chicago police officer shooting Paul O’Neal, an unarmed Black man, in 2016. We see in the video that directly after the shooting, the officer panics and turns to a colleague for comfort. The colleague does not want to talk to him, however, and points with her index finger to the body camera on her uniform. What she expresses with this gesture is a reminder that everything he says will be recorded, and can and will be used against him during police and legal investigations. The shooting was horrendous and an unarmed man was shot and killed. The camera did not prevent it from happening. It did prevent empathetic interaction, as the officer was left alone after shooting an unarmed man. Although body cameras were not yet standardized equipment at the time of the NYT publication, the documentary illustrates how the technology affects both interpersonal interaction and solidarity.

Conclusion

Cameras enable a close reading of policing encounters, and the recorded videos can be used to share feelings of victimhood and moments of collectivity. Yet a focus on what cameras capture, imagined as a form of visual evidence, comes with the tendency to shift attention away from the embodied feelings of insecurity and inequality. Nevertheless, this focus has created exponential growth in the use of visualizing technologies.

Although police officers can often act as if they have an elevated level of impunity and a broad sense of righteousness, they still emphasize the precarious nature of their work and emphasize officer safety (Herbert 2001; Jauregui 2016). By examining the workings of these perceived insecurities, however, my aim is not to create empathy for police officers. Rather, it is to further unpack the provisional nature of policing and police authority: how police officers make sense of a multiplicity of demands, expectations, and individual needs in their encounters. These are not just personal experiences. As Stuart Schrader (2021) points out, these “lies” of police insecurity and professionalism have been integral to the institution through which the police “proclaim themselves indispensable.” CYA reminds police officers to protect themselves from legal prosecution and bureaucratic intricacies, and they increasingly rely on cameras to do so. First, these practices of documentation shape police experiences and performances, in particular by framing common policing encounters in terms of their own individual accountability. Second, the use of visualizing technologies and the imagery it enables informs a broader societal understanding of and response to police violence and institutionalized racism.

Much like the focus on state power and Black outrage in the aftermath of police killings that Parikh and Bum Kwon (2020) discuss in their work, cameras in the eyes and hands of police officers sustain and intensify a select and racist visuality of violence. This is, however, not only because cameras are used to expose Black crime and display “a well-rehearsed drama” of state power (132) but also because it allows police officers to capture their personal experiences and perspectives. While officers might be primarily concerned with their own accountability and integrity, their efforts to visually document police work tend to overwrite the institutionalized nature of racist police practice with an individual performance, one that can even be considered exemplary of good policing practice.

This also allows people to envision juridical proceedings and opportunities to sue individuals for their wrongdoing. Kamari Maxine Clarke calls this the fictions of justice: “The reassignment of criminal responsibility to the individual and the myth of legal pluralism as a viable way to address violence through both international and national mechanisms” (2009, 4). While the production of these fictions warrants critical scholarship, we should also be concerned with how cameras are used to apply imagined workings of the juridical system in visualizations of standard policing encounters. This is especially true with how law enforcement agencies purposefully document legal-looking performances that reflect and sustain a state-mediated gaze through which racialized and violent policing practices are legitimized. This is not to say that legal prosecution does not matter or is always ineffective but to highlight the political implications of a visualizing technology that privileges individual accountability to institutional responsibility.

A better understanding of how police officers navigate their professional duty and perceived insecurities seems urgent, given the convictions of the three police officers who did nothing while their colleague, Derek Chauvin, murdered George Floyd. In the wake of Floyd’s death, state institutions claim that they hold officers accountable for failing to respond to the duty to stop a colleague who uses excessive force. While programs that attempt to “break the silence” within police departments have long been overdue, it is unlikely that bystander training and calls for increased liability will amount to any institutional change.

If anything, the adoption of CYA and the use of cameras by police officers speak to how articulations of individual accountability have been purposefully taught, trained, and applied in everyday police work.

Notes

1. All names are pseudonyms.
2. Patrick Blanchfield, "The Cops Who Touched Fentanyl," interview by Alex Pereene and Laura Marsh, *The Politics of Everything*, Newrepublic.com, podcast, September 29, 2021, <https://newrepublic.com/article/163801/police-fentanyl-overdose>.
3. Taser Self-Defense (@taserdefense), "A statement from our founder and CEO Rick Smith," Twitter, June 3, 2020, 7:57 p.m., <https://twitter.com/tasercivilian/status/1268331018454355973/photo/1>.
4. Al Crespo died on August 21, 2022. His site was www.thecrespogramnews.com. PINAC is at <https://pinacnews.com>.
5. ACLU, <https://www.aclu-wi.org/en/community-engagement/legal-observer-training>.

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