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Epistemology of *The Moment of Truth*

On January 23, 2008, Fox premiered *The Moment of Truth*, an American reality game show in search of the proverbial “honest person left in America.”¹ The show was a hybrid brain-child of Howard Schultz and Mike Darnell, two veritable juggernauts of the American reality mediascape whose joint productive forces fomented a televisual sensation.² The first episode of *The Moment of Truth* garnered 23 million viewers; the show maintained an 8.6 million weekly viewership over the course of its elaboration on Fox, and quickly joined the ranks of the nation’s most popular and lucrative nonfiction programming enterprises. According to Nielsen, fifty percent of the top-rated television programs in 2008 were classifiable as reality television: *American Idol* ranks first, *Survivor* ranks fifteenth, and *The Moment of Truth* ranks as the thirteenth most popular program across all prime time network and cable television offerings in the only year of its life on national television.³

The program’s host, Mark L. Walberg, articulates the logic of the competition as follows: “Prior to tonight’s show, all of our contestants have undergone a rigorous polygraph exam. They don’t know the results of that test, but if they tell the truth, they can win up to half a million dollars.” Behind the scenes of Walberg’s seductively simplistic imperative—“tell the truth”—*The Moment of Truth* hired three staff psychologists to perform private investigations and interrogations of each of their American contestants.⁴ Between the contestant’s televised

¹ “The Moment of Truth - Episode 1,” Lighthearted Entertainment, Youtube, uploaded April 15, 2014. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fDG8knUL-oo>

² The former is creator of *Extreme Makeover*, and the latter executive producer of *American Idol*, *Hell’s Kitchen*, and *Are You Smarter Than a Fifth Grader?*. James Hibberd, “Darnell in Defense of the Truth: Fox executive talks about the Networks Controversial Lie-Detector Show,” AdAge, published November 27, 2007 <https://adage.com/article/media/darnell-defense-truth/122228>

³ Tim Brooks, “Top Rated TV Programs By Season (2007-2019),” last updated September 19, 2019 <https://timbrooks.net/ratings/>.

⁴ Staff psychologists include Dr. Catharine Sheldon, who is perhaps best known for her work as primary psychological consultant for *The Bachelor*, *The Bachelorette*, and *Bachelor in Paradise*. “The Moment of Truth:

confessionals and *The Moment of Truth*'s technologized claims to knowledge, the Truth was depicted, first, as essentially related to, if not locatable on and through the body of the American citizen. By attaching the threat of elimination to the technical detection of deception, the Truth was mythologized, as well, as a discursive substitute for a more general power to punish.

A brief return to *the invention of reality television* shall illuminate the structural contiguities between mass media and the prison industrial complex undergirding this distinctly American apparatus of visual knowledge-power. To start, we must identify *Cops*, which premiered on Fox in 1989, as the first, longest running, and most successful reality television show in the history of form. Presently, *Cops* is in its thirty-second season of production, and its estimated net worth is over \$500 million. Furthermore, and crucially, *Cops* animates and reifies the symbolic dimensions of the prison industrial complex, an institution of state power best defined by Angela Y. Davis as a reincarnation of racial slavery whereby “ideologies of racism and the pursuit of profit” coalesce with the rise of neoliberal governmentality such to authorize, incentivize, and rationalize “the transformation of imprisoned people... into sources of profit.”⁵

Following Davis, as well as Ruth Wilson Gilmore, Beth Ritchie, and Dylan Rodríguez,⁶ among other indispensable theorists of the American carceral regime, if we conceptualize the “War on Drugs” as a political vector undergirding the magnitudinous expansion and intensification of the prison industrial complex between the 1980s and the present, *Cops*

Full Cast and Crew,” IMDB, accessed January 4, 2019,
https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1166919/fullcredits?ref_=tt_cl_sm#cast

⁵ Angela Y. Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2003) 84, 88. For a critical elaboration of the neoliberal-carceral state, see Stephen Dillon, *Fugitive Life: The Queer Politics of the Prison State* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018).

⁶ See especially Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007); Beth Ritchie, *Arrested Justice: Black Women, Violence, and America's Prison Nation* (New York: NYU Press, 2012); and Dillon Rodríguez, *Forced Passages: Imprisoned Radical Intellectuals and the U.S. Prison Regime* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).

metonymizes an abstract modality of American hegemony that sutures anti-black iconography with the vernacular signposts of national citizenship. Emerging from the theoretical penumbra cast by Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle*, *Cops*, and much American reality television that follows, postures "the total justification of the existing system's conditions and goals."⁷

As the "one-celled amoeba"⁸ from which all subsequent reality television proceeds, *Cops* lends a structural base from which we can theorize the most general function of reality television. We shall charge reality television with fairly consistent reproductions of the neoliberal-carceral state's primary symbolic currency: whiteness as citizenship, blackness as criminal-captivity, and the prison as an indispensable hinge between late capital accumulation and the carceral state's regime of racial terror in the present era of mass incarceration. As such, I do not conceptualize reality television as a genre. Rather, I understand reality television as a structural coordination and consolidation between state/media apparatuses of visual knowledge-power.

Towards an adequate theoretical language for conceptualizing reality television as an apparatus of state power, I've termed the *neoliberal-carceral continuum* to conjure the symbolic dimensions through which the production of reality television reconciles the ideological needs of the carceral state with the dominant signs and common-sense signifiers of neoliberal citizenship. Rather than cleaving our analysis of *Cops* from *The Moment of Truth*, the neoliberal-carceral continuum helps posture these texts as transmedial nodes within a broader symbolic net cast by the disciplinary (re)production of reality television.

Turning here to an analysis of *The Moment of Truth*'s assemblage of panoptic technologies—psychiatric interrogation, polygraph exam, and confessional—what do we make

⁷ Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, 1967.

⁸ *Cops*' executive producer, Stephen Chao, quoted by Dan Taberski, *Running from COPS* (New York: Headlong Media, 2019).

of this *promise or arrangement of total knowledge* undergirding this program's epistemological operation? Although the lie detector's Truth-claims are specious at best,⁹ the polygraph is contemporaneously associated with, and authorized by agents of US law enforcement—such as the police, the FBI, the CIA, etc.—who marshal the lie detector as an extension of state power.¹⁰ Subtending *The Moment of Truth's* arbitration of confessional speech-acts, then, is the deployment of a technology whose efficacy is primarily symbolic, whereas its invocation, *qua* Truth, is disciplinary. Much as *Cops* is inscribed within a broader institutional framework of carceral punishment, *The Moment of Truth* delimits a discursive economy of American discipline, in part through the polygraph's symbolic proximity to state power.

It is worth mentioning, here, that there were no outright winners of *The Moment of Truth's* short duration on Fox;¹¹ season one identified no *truly honest* person in America—at least, not according to the reality show's twenty-one question rubric. In light of the reality show's successful national reception, Fox renewed *The Moment of Truth* for a second season, green-flagged production to begin shooting, and set a return date for Season 2 to premiere in early September 2009.¹²

⁹ “Most psychologists and other scientists agree that there is little basis for the validity of polygraph tests... because of its inherent unreliability.” “The Truth About Lie Detectors (aka Polygraph Tests),” American Psychological Association, published August 5, 2004 <https://www.apa.org/research/action/polygraph>

¹⁰ For example, see *Unbelievable* (Netflix, 2019).

¹¹ Over the course of twenty-five episodes, instead of answering twenty-one questions and winning \$500,000, twelve contestants featured in the first twenty-five episodes of the program exchanged fifteen truthful confessions for \$100,000, and two contestants exchanged eleven truthful confessions for \$25,000.

¹² Trevor Kimball, “*The Moment of Truth: FOX Losing Confidence in Lie Detector Show*,” TV Series Finale, August 7, 2008. <https://tvseriesfinale.com/tv-show/the-moment-of-truth-fox-losing-confidence-in-lie-detector-show/> Kimball states: “*Truth* was renewed for a second season and was set to return on September 4th with a two-hour episode. FOX has now pushed *Truth's* return back to mid-season, replacing it with yet another game show, one called *Hole in the Wall*... With the series' decline in ratings, it's likely that *Truth* wouldn't have performed very well on the competitive Thursday night schedule this Fall. FOX is likely hoping that viewers just need a break from the series and will start watching again when it returns in early 2009.”

And then something happened. *The Moment of Truth* was eventually cancelled. By the end of 2009, “the show everyone in America ha[d] been talking about” was suddenly and uncontroversially obviated from national consciousness.

In spite of its dominant cancellation, the second season of *The Moment of Truth* exists, and is publically accessible on Youtube. This partial archive includes the shocking footage in which an ordinary American—the *only* contestant in *The Moment of Truth*’s short history—successfully answers all twenty-one questions “with the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.” Indeed, at the top of the tenth episode of *The Moment of Truth*’s unaired second season, Melanie Williams, a white woman contestant, is awarded \$500,000 for answering “yes” to the question, “Do you believe your father, as an adult, has ever had sexual relations with a minor?”¹³

Leading up to the proverbial ‘moment of truth,’ we learn that the Williams are a polygamist family; we learn, in its aftermath, that “one of [Melanie’s father’s] wives was not eighteen”—but fourteen—“when he married her.” Walberg turns to congratulate his winner, but Melanie is still broken with tears. “It happens all the time,” Melanie insists—to Walberg’s outright shock and bewilderment— “It happens all the time.” Walberg turns, now, to Melanie’s father: “Gosh,” he starts, “I’m not sure when I did this I knew what a minor was. That was a long time ago.” And so on. Walberg proceeds to his final address: “Well, we have found a truly honest person in American and her name is Melanie Williams... What she has revealed, how you feel about what she’s revealed, how I feel about it will take some time to get our heads around. But the fact remains, she answered our twenty-one questions and she has won \$500,000.”

¹³ “The Moment of Truth Season 2 Episode 10 Part 1,” mo’aiyed Al Balushi, Youtube, uploaded March 24, 2018. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=10_9UzAM_Ow

Partial archives are like memory gaps, or stress dreams, or hysterical symptoms, at least insofar as such materials form the ephemeral bases for attempting to apprehend the subject of sexual violence within a history of the present. Neoliberal-carceral styles of knowledge strive to bury those subjects, like Melanie Williams, whose claims to know sexual violence—not within the body of the Criminal, but within the body of the Father and the Law—betray the most rudimentary tenets of white nationalism, neoliberal citizenship, and heteropatriarchal futurity. Hence, this paper—this speech-act, a critical membrane between the ““seen” and “unseen” footage of *The Moment of Truth*—this queer theory seeks to identify and to analyze the limits of representation within the national Imaginary. The structural silencing of Melanie Williams elaborates the subject of sexual violence as one of profound unknowability. To draw from Judith Butler, perhaps we shall ask, “what has this non-happening done to the question of truth?”¹⁴

The disciplinary gears of unknowing generate an absence thick with presence, an appearance of lapse or lack that is itself a sign of the will to forget the collateral damages of the State’s monopoly over legitimate violence. At any rate, the cultural common sense that maintains prison and rape as nearly-synonymous signifiers reveals the State’s vested stakes in the use of sexual violence as a technique of racialized-and-gendered punishment and domination. One of the urgent tasks of anti-carceral feminism, then, necessitates an intervention into the realm of popular meaning-making: *The State itself is the unary locus of sexual harm. The prison is not a solution, but rather a guarantor of sexual violence as structural violence, and abolition is the only ethical response to rape.*

¹⁴ Judith Butler, “Quandaries on the Incest Taboo,” in *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004) 156.