

Calling Dick Tracy! or, Cellphone Use, Progress, and a Racial Paradigm¹

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Abstract: The hero and phone-watch from *Dick Tracy* are evoked regularly in news and studies of cellphone use. This paper argues that the racial paradigm of White law enforcer and Dark law-breaker in the comic strip resonates in contemporary evocations and in discussions of cellphone use and crime. Representations of mobile communication and racialized criminality in *Dick Tracy* were inspired by the 1930s “war on crime” that intersected with wireless innovations and with lynching. This paper interprets that repeated evocation of the comic strip is a “perverse nostalgia” for an old-fashioned form of law and order premised on racialized violence and viewing.

Keywords: Cultural analysis

Résumé : Les études et nouvelles sur l'utilisation du téléphone cellulaire font souvent référence au détective de bande dessinée *Dick Tracy* et à sa montre téléphonique. Cet article soutient que les évocations et discussions contemporaines sur l'utilisation criminelle du cellulaire reflètent le paradigme racial du policier blanc et du malfaiteur noir évoqué dans la bande dessinée. C'est la « guerre contre le crime » des années 30 influencée par les innovations sans fil et le lynchage de l'époque qui a influencé comment cette bande dessinée représente la communication mobile et la criminalité raciale. Cet article soutient que l'évocation récurrente de *Dick Tracy* qui a lieu aujourd'hui démontre une « nostalgie perverse » pour une forme ancienne de maintien de l'ordre fondée sur une violence et une lecture raciales.

Mots clés : Analyse culturelle

Chester Gould originally conceived *Dick Tracy* as a barometer of the American experience. His invention flourishes on this and on other levels to this day. Vivid grotesqueness, heinous crime, and hard-core melodrama are effectively combined to communicate a message of high morality to the American people in this grand-daddy of detective stories and adventure comic strips. Herein, beliefs, values and attitudes regarding truth, jus-

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tice, and the American way are reinforced, reflected, and shaped, and in a time where heroes are scarce and ephemeral at best, the legend lives on. “Calling Dick Tracy, Calling Dick Tracy!” (Roberts, 1993, p. 14)

We are still calling Dick Tracy even in this era of widespread cellphone use, which begs the question: why? The comic-strip detective appears on the homepage of Tom Farley’s oft-quoted website of mobile and cellular telephone history (Farley, 1995).² Dick, who was created by Chester Gould in 1931, appears in profile, wearing a fedora, head cocked to one side as he speaks into his phone-watch. Farley’s website parses innovations in telegraphy, radio, and telephony from the late nineteenth century through mid-twentieth-century experiments with radio-phone service in cars and on trains; the 1973 invention of the cellphone; the mid-1980s launch of analog, or first-generation (1G), cellular service in the U.S., Canada, and much of the West; to the 1990s launch of digital, or second-generation (2G), cellular service. Farley stops short of recounting the launch of broadband, or third-generation (3G), cellular service in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Halfway through his technical history, Farley makes the following declaration:

In 1965, miniaturization let mobile telephony accomplish its greatest achievement to date: the fully mobile shoe phone, aptly demonstrated by Don Adams in the hit television show of the day, ‘Get Smart.’ Some argue that the 1966 mobile Batphone . . . was more remarkable, but . . . it remained solidly anchored to the Batmobile, limiting Batman and Robin to vehicle based communications. (Farley, 1995; www.privateline.com/PCS/history.htm)

A photo of the bumbling Maxwell Smart using the shoe phone echoes the earlier image of Dick using the phone-watch. Farley quips in the next line, “For kids researching papers, this section is a joke! ;-)” (1995). No rejoinder or emoticon follows his homepage homage to Gould’s hook-nosed hero, though Dick is as fictional as the inept Cold War spy played by Adams from 1965 to 1970 and the caped crusaders played by Adam West and Burt Ward in the first *Batman* TV series of the late 1960s.

Farley’s blend of technical facts and popular fiction could be dismissed as the mixed-up musings of a technology enthusiast if this identical blend did not also appear in other popular and scholarly studies. For example, Paul Levinson contends in *Cellphone: The Story of the World’s Most Mobile Medium and How It Has Transformed Everything!* (2004) that the cellphone makes “its best-known, most memorable appearance in popular fiction—certainly surpassing Dick Tracy by the twenty-first century—in the little beeping ‘communicators’ used by Captain Kirk, Mr. Spock, and the crew of the Starship Enterprise” (p. 31). In “America’s Cellular Telephone Obsession: New Geographies of Personal Communication” (2001), Thomas Wilke argues that representations of wireless telephony in pop culture artifacts demonstrate how

[t]he promise of a mobile device for personal communication has captured the imagination of Americans for years. Comic book character Dick Tracy used a tiny wristwatch phone to communicate while Don

Adams on TV's *Get Smart* popularized the "shoe phone." More closely resembling today's flip-open cellular phones were hand-held communicators used on the TV series *Star Trek*. (p. 123)

As evident in the quotes above, references to representations of wireless telephony are usually drawn from three visual artifacts of American popular culture.³ In a conference paper that I presented to the National Communication Association in 2003, entitled "From *Dick Tracy* to *Star Trek*: How Fantasy and Fiction Made the Mobile Phone," I contended that first among the artifacts cited was *Dick Tracy*, followed by *Star Trek* and *Get Smart*. Considering how frequently representations in these artifacts, and Dick's phone-watch use in particular, are still evoked, I now believe that they warrant further explanation beyond the claim that they function as benign old promises about the imagined future of mobile communication in North America.

Back to the future

Representations of wireless telephony in the three artifacts are cited as milestones in a narrative of progress that runs from the "pre-cellular" era of wired telephony and radio in North America to the current era, in which cellphone use has been made synecdochic of mobile communication. Fiction and technical fact are blended in the narrative. For example, Jon Agar declares in *Constant Touch: A Global History of the Mobile Phone* (2003) that wireless two-way communication became a reality following demonstrations of "radio handsets" and other forms of wireless communication at the 1939 World's Fair in New York. Though some functional phone-watches have been marketed (rather unsuccessfully) (see Jana, 1998; Stern, 2003), futuristic features of the portable wireless phones depicted in *Dick Tracy*, *Star Trek*, and *Get Smart*, and cited in the narrative of progress, remain in the realm of fiction.

The narrative appears repeatedly in news as well, frequently with a dose of humour or irony that highlights the centrality of the American cultural artifacts. For example, as the 35th anniversary of the cellphone's invention approached recently, it was reported that when Motorola engineers were creating the first cellphone in the 1970s, they initially called it the "Shoe Phone," because that was the only other wireless phone they had to compare it with (Cauley, 2007). In another example from a few years ago, a news report detailed the holdings of "spy archives" created by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), (Quattlebaum, 2006). The archives house a collection of "Hollywood gadgetry and memorabilia that romanticized the spy business in its cold-war heyday" ("Get Smart's shoe phone now a CIA secret," 2000). Included is Agent 99's shoe phone. In Canada, a photo of actor William Shatner accompanied a newspaper report on the launch of a video calling service by Rogers Wireless ("Rogers beams up Shatner," 2007). The Canadian-born actor was shown holding a cellphone at face level as if it were the futuristic communicator he used on *Star Trek* in his role as the swashbuckling Captain Kirk in the late 1960s and in subsequent movie spin-offs of the popular science fiction series.

Of the three artifacts, and the heroes and wireless phones associated with each in the narrative of progress about mobile communication, Dick and his phone-watch are evoked far more often than Agent 99 and his shoe phone or *Star*

Trek's intergalactic police and hand-held communicators.⁴ This frequency is evident despite *Star Trek's* many TV and film spin-offs and despite the fact that *Get Smart* was cited frequently on the occasion of Adams' death in 2005 (see Rose, 2005), released on DVD in 2006 (Fields, 2006), and remade as a film in 2008 (Breznican, 2007; Williamson, 2007).

Dick has been made a central figure, and his phone-watch an iconic prototype of the cellphone, in the narrative of progress. For example, Louis Galambos and Eric John Abrahamson write in *Anytime, Anywhere: Entrepreneurship and the Creation of a Wireless World* (2002) that Gould's addition of a phone-watch to Dick's arsenal in 1946 "enabled the ace crime fighter to blast away at public enemies while calling for help" (p. 28). Galambos & Abrahamson note that Gould created the phone-watch one decade after the introduction of two-way radio dispatch in police cars, shortly after testing and use of the portable Handie-Talkie wireless radio by American soldiers in World War II, one year before engineers at Bell Labs announced that they had pioneered the idea for cellular communication, and three decades before a working cellphone was invented in the U.S. in 1973 by Canadian researcher Martin Cooper and his team of engineers at Motorola.

Galambos & Abrahamson's juxtaposition of innovations and *Dick Tracy*, which occurs over the span of several pages, traces the narrative of progress from radio to cellular communication (2002). Though the cellphone is often referred to as a telephone without the wire (see Cooper, 2002; Dutton & Nainoa, 2002; Katz, 1997; Rakow & Navarro, 1993; Townsend, 2000), cellular communication is a form of wireless radio that uses antennas placed in overlapping zones to transmit cellphone calls (see Gow & Smith, 2006). By juxtaposing innovations and *Dick Tracy*, Galambos & Abrahamson add Gould to a genealogy of European and American "founding fathers" (Steinbock, 2003, p. 66), such as Guglielmo Marconi, Alexander Graham Bell, Lars Magnus Ericsson, Samuel Morse, Lee De Forest, and Paul Galvin, who are credited with pioneering telegraphy, telephony, and radio from early to mid-century (see Agar, 2003; Garrard, 1998; Goggin, 2006; Gow & Smith, 2006). Dick is added to a revered group of law enforcers, namely, American soldiers and police in Detroit and New Jersey who are credited respectively with testing innovations in wireless radio during World War II and during the 1930s "war on crime" in American cities. These innovators and users ostensibly paved the way for the invention of the cellphone decades later, which would result in Cooper being dubbed "father of the cellular phone" (Galambos & Abrahamson, 2002, p. 32; Steinbock, 2005, p. 44).

Dick's phone-watch use anchors the narrative of progress, though in the same year that the first cellphone was unveiled, *Dick Tracy* was described as an "old-fashioned strip" with an "oppressive ambience" (Berger, 1973, pp. 123, 132). A scan of news databases yields numerous references to Dick's phone-watch use, largely in Canadian and American publications,⁵ even now that the number of cellphone users among the American population of over 300 million is 83 per 100 people; among the Canadian population of over 32 million, 57 per 100 people; and among the worldwide population of over 6 billion, 49 per 100 people (International Telecommunication Union, 2007).

References to Dick also appear in studies of cellphone use. For example, Adriana de Souza e Silva declares in "Interfaces of Hybrid Spaces" (2006) that the "wrist phone used by the cartoon character Dick Tracy included features like video streaming that are only now being implemented in cell phones" (p. 32). In news and in studies on cellphone use, Dick's phone-watch use has been made an iconic representation of cellphone use in North America, and thus synecdochic of mobile communication in the narrative of progress. What is the enduring allure of Gould's fictional detective and his phone-watch? What unique cultural resonances are generated for cellphone use in North America because of Dick's prominence in the narrative of progress about mobile communication?

Law and order and the phone-watch

While *Dick Tracy*, *Star Trek*, and *Get Smart* are evoked, jokingly or otherwise, to suggest that imagination preceded or inspired innovation, they take me back to the future in the narrative of progress, where mostly White, male heroes used pre-cellular devices in the name of American law and order.⁶ *Get Smart's* lampooning of American law and order and the political tensions of the Cold War involved pitting a foreign spy agency, named KAOS, against an American spy agency, named CONTROL (see Breznican, 2007). With its multiracial cast, the first *Star Trek* series idealized American law and order as the Civil Rights movement cooled down and the race for outer-space exploration heated up (see Bernardi, 1998; Pounds, 1999). Beginning in the 1930s during the war on crime in American cities, and continuing into current times, Dick meted out a brutal brand of American law and order in a comic strip that has been described as a work of "apoplectic Puritanism, bursting at the seams with an uncontrollable and 'righteous' fury" (Rosemont, 1987, p. 131). Garyn G. Roberts asserts that the "primary convention in *Dick Tracy* is the repeated ultimate success of law and order" (1993, p. 10). A related convention in the strip is Gould's adherence to the visual trope of "retributive justice" (Broes, 1992, p. 112). Ron Goulart (1975) gives these examples of the trope's appearance in the strip during the 1930s and 40s:

[S]muggled aliens were sunk in the ocean with their own chains as anchors, rival crooks were doused with cleaning fluid and set afire, midget crooks were roasted in steam baths. There were also, of course, more conventional shootings. . . floggings, throttlings, bludgeonings, and an occasional amputation. (pp. 73-74)

Gould relished depicting Dick as "indestructible" (Berger, 1973, p. 125) while representing public punishment as the best penalty for criminal behaviour. Gould admitted in interviews that he wanted readers of *Dick Tracy* to "identify with and emulate the good guys" in the war on crime (Roberts, 1993, p. 1). Gould's vision of law and order was inspired by a fierce war on crime in which the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI)⁷ targeted Blacks and immigrants. In *Dick Tracy*, the theme of law and order and the trope of retributive justice were premised on a racial paradigm of White law enforcers struggling to immobilize Dark and immigrant law-breakers in American cities. This paper illuminates the darker side of the paradigm and trope and interprets how they intersect with the narrative of progress about mobile communication in North America.

I interpret the original allure of Dick and his phone-watch as attributable in part to Gould's violent vision of who could use a wireless phone, albeit a fictional one, to do what to whom in the name of American law and order. I examine the context of the war on crime in which Gould created his sadistic, racist, and xenophobic comic strip and in which early wireless innovations in the narrative of progress about mobile communication are situated. I argue that the racialized violence of the war on crime, which intersected with the continued practice of lynching, bled into *Dick Tracy*. I interpret the abiding allure of Gould's strip and its righteous hero as a "perverse nostalgia" (Fusco, 2003, p. 44) for an old-fashioned vision of American law and order premised on racialized violence and viewing.

Some researchers of cellphone use may counter that this inquiry has little to do with the burgeoning scholarly canon, which has been shaped recently through references to certain earlier studies that began to be published in the 1990s. The scholarly canon is credited with shifting research focus toward social and cultural aspects of cellphone use (see Goggin, 2006; Gow & Smith, 2006; Harper, Brown, & Green, 2002; Katz, 2005; Katz & Aakhus, 2002; Ling & Pedersen, 2005). Scholarly studies can purportedly be distinguished from popular studies that offer trivia, humour, and advice on the etiquette of cellphone use while eschewing references and rigorous research.⁸ Scholarly studies can purportedly also be distinguished from industry histories that recount the development of the cellphone or the wireless cellular industry by reciting copious technical facts or the vainglorious corporate achievements of certain male entrepreneurs.⁹ Despite efforts to distinguish a scholarly canon, I contend that the canon overlaps ever more with popular and technical studies because of Dick's evocation across a variety of studies and because of the unacknowledged resonance of the racial paradigm of White law enforcer and Dark law-breaker in some studies of cellphone use in North America.

Progress and punishment

Dick Tracy premiered in the *Detroit Mirror* on October 4, 1931, in the midst of the Great Depression and the war on crime (Harvey, 1994; Maeder, 1990; Roberts, 1993). It has been described as a strip that portrayed the adventures of a "plainclothes police detective," or in the gangster language of the times, a "dick," who brought "the toughest and vilest criminals to justice and who never wavered in his cause" (Roberts, 1993, p. 6; cf. Broes, 1992). By the 1940s, the strip appeared in over 400 newspapers and had an estimated readership of 90,000,000 (Roberts, 1993). In subsequent decades, Dick Tracy toys and gadgets were marketed (Powers, 1983), and the strip was adapted and parodied in other comic strips, on radio, and in the forms of a novel, a TV show, an animated TV cartoon, a painting, and a 1990 film (Roberts, 1993). As space exploration intensified in the 1960s and Gould briefly sent Dick to the moon to maintain law and order (Broes, 1992; Maeder, 1990; Roberts, 1993), *Dick Tracy* was published in over 600 newspapers worldwide (Roberts, 1993). Gould authored the strip until his retirement in 1977 (Horn, 1996; Maeder, 1990). After his death in 1985, authorship was taken over by various other artists and writers (Roberts, 1993).

When Dick Tracy is evoked now in conjunction with cellphone use, it is forever 1946, when Gould created the phone-watch. On Farley's website, the cap-

tion below the image of the fictional detective reads, "Dick Tracy in 1946 wearing a voice activated video phone" (Farley, 1995). Galambos & Abrahamson (2002) also cite 1946 when they insert Gould and Dick into the genealogy of inventors and users of early innovations. Rarely mentioned are the war on crime that inspired the strip's theme of law and order, the paradigm of White law enforcer and Dark law-breaker, and the trope of retributive justice.

The war on crime, which stretched from the 1920s into the 1930s, was a conjuncture. It was, in other words, "a moment defined by an accumulation/condensation of contradictions, a fusion of different currents or circumstances" (Grossberg, 2006, p. 5). Contemporary references to Dick's 1940s phone-watch use gloss contradictions regarding progress and mobile communication in the conjuncture in which Gould created *Dick Tracy* and in which pre-cellular innovations in the narrative of progress are situated.

This gloss is discernable, for example, in Agar's (2003) claim that examples of wireless communication at the 1939 World's Fair inspired Gould's creation of the phone-watch. Agar ignores the fact that World Fairs (like subsequent world wars) were occasions for promoting Western ideals of democracy and progress. Richard Dyer (1988) writes that "progress" is often naturalized as a logical path that is followed by White Westerners. At World Fairs, technological innovations from the West were exhibited alongside the "primitive" tools and people of Polynesia, Africa, and elsewhere for predominantly White audiences (see Shohat & Stam, 2002; Smith, 2004). Dyer (2003) argues that in Western history, "whites are overwhelmingly and disproportionately predominant, have the central and elaborated roles, and above all are placed as the norm, the ordinary, the standard" (p. 303). This naturalization is implied, along with a presumption of benign use, in Agar's claim.

New technological innovations were not used only for benign purposes. For example, radio and the wired telephone, the putative progenitors of the cellphone, were used in the U.S. to organize mobs during the era of "spectacle lynchings" (Hale, 1998, p. 216). The continued practice of lynching was a blatant contradiction to the idea of progress in the U.S. Lynching targeted mostly Black males but was essentially an ongoing war on Black people, which escalated between the 1880s and 1930s for a variety of economic, political, and social reasons (see Apel, 2004). Light and telephone poles that were erected in the nineteenth century for communication were used as hanging posts for some victims of lynching in the following decades (see Allen, 2000). The war on Blacks overlapped with the war on crime, which also targeted Black people, as well as immigrants. In a further blatant contradiction to the narrative of progress, the first portable Kodak camera, released in 1888, was used to make both family photos and souvenir photos of lynching (Apel, 2004). The early Kodak camera is now being called a figurative ancestor of the camera-enabled cellphone (Gye, 2007; Hjorth, 2007), which challenges the technological determinism implied in the narrative of progress that runs primarily from the wired telephone to the cellphone.

The use of the camera and wired telephone to mediate lynching illustrates that while technological innovations were celebrated as evidence of progress, they were used also to differentiate White from racialized Other. Coco Fusco

(2003) argues that photography in particular has been used since the nineteenth century to mediate an association between Whiteness and “the spirit of enterprise” (p. 37). This presumptive “power to organize the material world” (p. 37) is discernable still in archival photos of inventors and their wireless innovations that illustrate the narrative of progress in studies of the cellphone’s development and use. This presumptive power underpins Agar’s (2003) claim, which also invokes, but leaves unacknowledged, the racial binary of White and Other that has historically circumscribed American and Canadian identity (see Fusco, 2003; Gagnon, 2000; Jiwani, 2006; Razack, 2004).

Sites where the racial binary has been discernable in North America include World Fairs, popular culture, and the spectacle of public punishment. The latter has been reserved largely for racialized Others, from as early as 1634, when Black Portuguese slave Marie Joseph Angélique was publicly tortured and hanged and her body burned as penalty for setting a fire in her bid to escape that destroyed much of Montréal (see Cooper, 2006), to Africans and their descendants who were tortured publicly before and after the abolishment of slavery in the nineteenth century (Litwack, 2000), to a variety of other racialized offenders, including Native Americans, Mexicans, and Jewish, Asian, and Irish immigrants, who were also lynched in the U.S. for a variety of alleged crimes, mostly in the last century (see Apel, 2004; Litwack, 2000). Evocations of Dick’s phone-watch use from the 1940s overlook how the conjuncture of the war on crime inspired *Dick Tracy* and, consequently, how Gould’s representations of public punishment, racialized criminality, and mobile communication marked racial, intellectual, and technological boundaries between Dick, a “vaguely aristocratic” White law enforcer (O’Sullivan, 1990, p. 64), and the Dark foes he battled.

In the following sections, I aim to produce a “critical understanding” (Grossberg, 2006, p. 4) of the conjuncture of the war on crime by articulating the narrative of progress that Dick’s phone-watch use anchors to instances of racialized viewing and violence in North America. This articulation or foregrounding of “the structure and play of power that entail in relations of dominance and subordination” (Slack, 1996, p. 112) has become possible particularly in light of a renewed focus on lynching imagery, some of which was produced in the conjuncture of the war on crime (see Allen, 2000; Apel, 2004; Apel & Smith, 2007).

Physiognomy, phrenology, and a racial paradigm

Under the leadership of one of its most notorious directors, J. Edgar Hoover, the FBI declared an unofficial war on crime in the 1920s as part of its efforts to assist local law enforcement in curbing interstate kidnappings, assassinations, trafficking in alcohol, and bank robberies (Potter, 1998; Powers, 1983). Local police were struggling to keep up with criminals who used new technologies such as the railroad, car, and telephone to plan and carry out crimes across state lines (Broes, 1992; Hay & Packer, 2004; Sekula, 1986; Steinbock, 2003).

Dan Steinbock (2003) writes that during the “Roaring Twenties,” police realized that “foot patrols and bicycles” (p. 74) could no longer be used to respond quickly enough to crimes carried out by gangsters using their own cars to make a fast getaway. He notes that “Prohibition provided gangsters with a lucrative business, which also allowed them to purchase high-powered cars and prompted

police to put cops on wheels across the country” (p. 74). By the 1930s, police were using automobiles and wireless radio to pursue gangsters, who sometimes sought to escape to Canada (see Steinke, 2003). Gould associated Dick with this form of mobile communication, or “automobility.” John Urry (2004) writes that automobility “captures a double sense, both of the humanist self as in the notion of autobiography, and of objects or machines that possess a capacity for movement, as in automatic and automaton” (p. 26; cf. Hay & Packer, 2004). With automobility comes a degree of agency and power.

While thousands of Americans used cars and trains to traverse the country in search of jobs and other opportunities during the Depression and gangsters used cars to make a quick getaway, automobility was also associated with the White mob’s capacity for movement. Mobs used cars and trains to transport thousands of spectators to lynchings (Hale, 1998; Raiford, 2003). Gould admitted that he found his particular inspiration for *Dick Tracy* in the news stories and photos of “gang wars and the pervasive corruption Prohibition had engendered” (Horn, 1996, p. 95). He likely also found inspiration for his representations of automobility in such news stories and photos. Arthur T. Broes writes that Dick was “often seen driving or riding in automobiles in the early years of the strip, Gould apparently wishing to identify him with the speed and power they suggested” (1992, p. 100).

So intense was Gould’s alleged contempt for gangsters and his admiration for police that he spent time with police in Chicago getting “firsthand information from police technicians, as well as from lawmen on patrol” (Roberts, 1993, p. 9) in order to better represent police techniques in his comic strip (cf. Broes, 1992; Harvey, 1994). He also hired a retired police officer to keep him up to date on new police techniques (Harvey, 1994; Storr, 2005). Gould reportedly also did some unspecified work for the FBI in the 1930s (Roberts, 1993).

The unofficial declaration of war on crime in the 1920s was followed by an official declaration in 1934 with the passing of the first omnibus crime bill in the U.S. (Potter, 1998). The war’s end was declared in 1936 (Potter, 1998). The crime bill gave the FBI wider federal policing power to combat interstate crime, with one glaring exception. Claire Bond Potter notes that despite promises from President Franklin Roosevelt, the bill did not cover one of the most long-running and heinous interstate crimes of the era: lynching. She writes that the bill largely “capitalized on preexisting anticrime sentiment among middle-class white voters” (p. 110). Based on the racial and ethnic hierarchies of the conjuncture, dominant sentiments implied that the underclass of public enemies was largely immigrant or Black. These sentiments were reflected in the culture of the FBI and in Gould’s representations of race, justice, and mobile communication.

Carol Stable (2006) writes that “[h]owever repressed the link between blacks and crime may have been in newspapers during this era, institutions like the FBI continued to *act* on the racist beliefs that had made such a link possible in the first place” (p. 126, italics in original). This was in part the legacy of pseudoscientific taxonomies, namely, physiognomy and phrenology, which had converged in Europe and North America in the nineteenth century with photography, penal discourse, and the nascent field of criminology. According to Allan Sekula (1986), phrenology “sought to discern correspondences between the topography of the

skull and what were thought to be specific localized mental faculties within the brain” (p. 11). Physiognomy “analytically isolated the profile of the head and the various anatomic features of the head and face, assigning a characterological significance to each element: forehead, eyes, ears, nose, chin, etc. Individual character was judged through the loose concatenation of these readings” (p. 11). The pseudosciences of phrenology and physiognomy extended the pathologization of criminality in North America, which has occurred historically in conjunction with the notion that the criminal is physically, morally, and intellectually malformed (Dumm, 1993; Sekula, 1986). Physiognomy and phrenology were used to “produce visibly identifiable categories of the abnormal (the criminal or the insane) that could be subject to corrective action in advance of any deviant behavior” (Fiske, 1998, p. 84; cf. Fusco, 2003, Sekula, 1986, Smith, 2004). With reference to Michel Foucault’s work on archives and on criminality, Sekula argues that images of moral exemplars were defined in conjunction with a “shadow archive” containing images of criminals or those who were deemed to be criminal types because of race, ethnicity, gender, disability or various factors that were used for the purpose of “Othering” (Sekula, 1986, p. 10). Physiognomy and phrenology promulgated a form of racial profiling.

During the war on crime, racial profiling was reflected in attitudes at the FBI. Potter (1998) claims that “throughout [Hoover’s] career, the director consistently, secretly, and often illegally promoted as ‘national security’ a series of reactionary, antidemocratic, and racist agendas that mirrored his own beliefs and those of his political allies” (p. 3). Likewise, Stabile (2006) writes that Hoover’s “private hatred of African Americans was legendary” (p. 126). It is little wonder then that *Dick Tracy* reportedly became a favourite of Hoover’s (Powers, 1983; Roberts, 1993); Hoover also ventured into the comics in 1939 by hiring writers and artists to create *War on Crime*, a short-lived comic strip (Roberts, 1993).

During the war on crime, racial profiling also materialized visibly in the continued practice of lynching. Nearly 5,000 Black men, other people of colour, and immigrants were lynched, mostly in the U.S. South, from the 1880s well into the Civil Rights era (see Apel, 2004; Litwack, 2000). Victims were hanged, burned, shot, stabbed, and/or tied to cars and dragged to death (Apel, 2004). Lynching was sanctioned by ordinary people as well as by law enforcers, who turned a blind eye to the barbaric practice framed as retributive justice. At the height of spectacle lynchings around the turn of the twentieth century, lynching was often carried out under the presumption that Black men, in particular, were prone to criminal activities, especially sexual assault of White women, theft, and murder (see Hale, 1998; Litwack, 2000). Stabile argues that the FBI’s “long-standing practice of recruiting agents heavily from southern states guaranteed that racist attitudes would not be challenged within the agency” (2006, p. 127). Prejudicial attitudes were not only the privilege of Southern folks; they were also evident in the North and in *Dick Tracy*.

In the context of poverty and other hardships caused by the Depression, Potter contends that ordinary folks regarded some gangsters, particularly White, American-born gangsters, as “Robin Hood” bandits (1998), and not as public enemies, who according to dominant sentiments were Black or immigrant.

During the war on crime, the exploits of bandits were covered regularly in the news and as a result some, such as Alphonse Capone, John Dillinger, and Bonnie and Clyde, became “celebrity bandits” (Potter, 1998, p. 77). While the public and media gave celebrity bandits names that celebrated their daring deeds, Gould gave his villains, who were caricatures of real-life gangsters, names that “condemned their physiognomies and actions” (Roberts, 1993, p. 5; cf. Broes, 1992; Horn, 1996; Walker, 2004).

In an interview, Gould said, “I wanted my villains to stand out definitively so that there would be no mistake who the villain was” (O’Sullivan, 1990, p. 65). Gould created Alphonse Big Boy Caprice, a caricature of Al Capone who “was named for his fat, slovenly, bullying ways” (Roberts, 1993, p. 5). Other memorable villains in subsequent years and decades included “the cadaverous Mrs. Pruneface[;] . . . the Mole . . . [who] burrowed through the earth[;] . . . the Blank, a man who literally had no face; the revoltingly skin-blemished Wormy; the immensely obese Oodles; the malodorous Flyface[;] . . . [and] Rhodent, a loathsome, rat-like little man” (Maeder, 1990, pp. 97-98).

Interpretations of *Dick Tracy* usually characterize the strip’s villains as a “rogues’ gallery” (see Horn, 1996, p. 96; O’Sullivan, 1990, p. 64), a term that was used early in the century to refer to police photos of criminals (see Smith, 2004). When we also consider how the trope of retributive justice intersected with representations of rogues and Dick as the moral exemplar in *Dick Tracy* during the conjuncture of the war on crime, these villains seem more like racialized types profiled using physiognomy and phrenology.

Justice and blood-splashed cruelty

Robert Storr writes that in comparison with the foes Dick Tracy battled at the start, the detective seemed like “the perfect anti-dote for a nation spooked by the economic and political dislocations of the 1930s and the nefarious forces that they seemed to have unleashed” (2005, p. 209). Though Dick was a local detective, working in a city that was a thinly veiled version of Chicago (Horn, 1996; Maeder, 1990), he was a caricature of FBI agents, who became known as “Government Men” or “G-men” (O’Sullivan, 1990; Storr, 2005). This designation was the result of Hoover’s efforts. He had pushed for the war on crime in part to rehabilitate the FBI’s reputation as a corrupt agency (Potter, 1998; Powers, 1983). His strategy included establishing codes of conduct for agents, standard investigative procedures, and a recognizable dress code of dark suits, which was meant to make agents identifiable as federal law enforcers (Potter, 1998; Stabile, 2006). Dick’s legend now is that of an exemplary G-man and mobile communicator. This reputation was shaped in conjunction with Gould’s racist depictions of buffoonery and criminality.

Broes (1992) writes that stereotypical characters such as “Oklahoma Indian Chief Yellowpony,” a “Stepin Fetchit-like Memphis Smith,” and “Karpse, a demonic foreigner,” (pp. 102; 107) provided humour in the strip in the 1930s and 40s. Dick’s sidekicks were also sources of humour. Pat Patton and Sam Catchem were “exaggerated stereotypes of the Irish and Jewish respectively” (Roberts, 1993, p. 9). In defence of Gould’s depiction of non-Whites, Roberts writes that “Gould provided ‘good’ Asians and ‘Yellow Perils’ alike . . . [and] likewise filled his sto-

ries with blacks who found themselves on both sides of the law, and who often worked as valets, cooks, housekeepers, and other types of servants” (1993, p. 79).

In the context of lynching, the era’s other prejudices, and the proliferation of racist and xenophobic stereotypes in theatre, in the cinema, and on radio (see Bogle, 2001; Everett, 2001; Ewen & Ewen, 2006), such depictions in popular culture were hardly benign. Stuart Hall writes that popular culture is “the arena of consent and resistance . . . where hegemony arises, and where it is secured” (1981, p. 239). Stereotypes in *Dick Tracy* reflected the racial hierarchy of White and Other in popular culture during the conjuncture of war on crime. These dated representations are not mentioned now when the strip is recalled.

Dick Tracy is generally regarded now as a long-running story of cops and gangsters. Bradford Collins argues, however, that the strip was a vehicle for Gould to write “morality plays grounded in a conservative Christian vision of the world as sinful and corrupt. . . . Tracy, an agent of a stern, judgmental God, does not solve mysteries—he roots out evil” (2001, p. 70; cf. Rosemont, 1987). Gould used physiognomic distortions to represent evil. It has been argued that such representation dates back to the morality plays of the Middle Ages (Broes, 1992; O’Sullivan, 1990; Storr, 2005). Joe Kraus argues, however, that physiognomic distortion in *Dick Tracy* was premised on a conflation of race and criminality that “harken[ed] to a larger cultural anxiety about identifying the criminal and clarifying the line between law-abiding citizen and the gangster” (1997, p. 537). In *Dick Tracy*, criminals invariably bore a marker of race (Kraus, 1997).

In the conjuncture of war on crime, physiognomic distortion in *Dick Tracy* mirrored the pseudo-sciences of physiognomy and phrenology. Gould depicted villains as “monsterlike and fundamentally inhuman” (Broes, 1992, p. 114). Arthur Asa Berger writes that the “various grotesques who populate[d] the strip, making it a veritable bestiary of criminal monstrosity, [were] graphically represented demons whose physical ugliness show[ed] their moral ugliness” (1973, p. 121). Dick, with his “shovel-chinned, box-nosed, slash-mouthed” face (Maeder, 1990, p. 98), was also a grotesque character. However, though Dick was odd-looking, he was not portrayed as slovenly or diseased. Dick wore a neat, dark suit. He also had a proper name, an adopted son, and a girlfriend, all of whom he would rescue from time to time along with his trusty sidekicks. In comparison with the criminals Dick battled, Gould portrayed his hero as “full of warmth, humor, high spirits, and simple, heartland Christian fellowship” (p. 98).

Gould further distinguished Dick by giving him the ability to “read the signs of the criminal” on the face of his malformed foes (Kraus, 1997, p. 539) and by giving him the power of mobile communication, represented by access to auto-mobility, phone-watch use, and other futuristic technologies he invented for Dick, including the “Atom Light” and “Teleguard Camera” (Horn, 1996; Maeder, 1990). In Fusco’s words, these technologies gave Dick the power to organize the material world. In the narrative of progress about mobile communication, the phone-watch is regarded now as a kind of prototype cellphone, or like actual innovations pioneered from early to mid-century. In the world of the comic strip, the phone-watch, which only Dick used, further distinguished the White law enforcer from the Dark law-breakers he sought to immobilize. However, in spite

of the intellectual, racial, and technological demarcations that Gould created, the boundary in *Dick Tracy* between law enforcer and law-breaker was porous.

Despite being on the side of law and order, Dick was as violent as his foes, if not more so. The fictional detective has been described as a “nice-guy vigilante” (Goulart, 1975, p. 73) in a comic strip permeated by violence. Gould made Dick’s original motivation to fight crime his desire to avenge the murder of his sweetheart’s father, which occurs early in the strip (Powers, 1983). Berger writes that in spite of Dick’s use of advanced technologies, “he generally [was] obliged to punch the criminals in the nose or to shoot them through the head” (1973, p. 123). Jay Maeder describes the strip’s violence in the following way:

[It] was defined by fast-action story lines that could kick the breath out of you, arrestingly stylized artwork that was both super-realistic and weirdly cartoonish, a famous rogues’ gallery of villains, an unrelievedly grim Calvinist conscience that informed every move every one of its characters ever made—and always the pathological mayhem. The strip was a dark and perverse and vicious thing, sensationally full of blood-splashed cruelty from its first week, the single most spectacularly gruesome feature the comics had ever known; there has never been another newspaper strip so full of the batterings, shootings, knifings, drownings, torchings, crushings, gurglings, gaspings, shriekings, pleadings and bleatings that Chester Gould gleefully served up as often as he possibly could. (Maeder quoted in Walker, 2004, p. 226)

It has been suggested that the “gangsters versus G-men” films of the era, which drew heavily from the war on crime, also inspired the trope of violent retributive justice and Gould’s representation of mobile communication in the form of automobility and phone-watch use, as well as the strip’s filmic aesthetics (see Broes, 1992; Roberts, 1993). Broes argues that *Dick Tracy* quickly became popular because Gould provided, “like the classic gangster films of the early thirties, fast-paced, action-filled narratives . . . that gave the reader a generally accurate and informative, if somewhat simplified account of the lives and activities of gangsters, about whom it seemed the public could never know enough” (1992, p. 117; cf. Kraus, 1997). Gould was purportedly both an avid film fan and a voracious reader of newspapers (Goulart, 1975; Roberts, 1993). *Dick Tracy* has been described in other filmic terms as invoking

“the brutal unspooling of a newsreel. . . . Duplicating the abstract space of the movie screen, each panel alternated close-ups, long shots, angle views, and more in quick succession, forcing a feeling of irresistible forward motion upon the reader” (Horn, 1996, p. 96).

The strip has been likened additionally to “a sort of silent film without subtitles” (Roberts, 1993, p. 9).

I want to suggest that the racialization of criminality in *Dick Tracy* and the close-up and mediated view of retributive justice as public punishment were inspired also by one of the most blatant examples of racialized spectatorship and violence that existed concurrently with the war on crime. In lynching and in *Dick Tracy*, a correlation was established between racial dominance, spectatorship, and

mobile communication that now make contemporary evocations of Dick Tracy resonate as a perverse nostalgia for racialized viewing, or the demarcation of a White “us” and Dark “them” through violence and visual representation. Fusco asks, if “visual tropes from earlier periods have retained their allure, is it because our society has not changed? Or is the recycling of racial paradigms a perverse form of nostalgia. . .?” (2003, p. 44). The racial paradigm of White law enforcer and Dark law-breaker from the war on crime appears openly in *Dick Tracy* and appears implicitly in some studies of cellphone use that discuss crime in the U.S.

Murder and fun

The last major lynching spectacle was organized three years after *Dick Tracy* premiered. Leon Litwack notes that lynchings “decreased significantly after 1930 but did not cease” (2000, p. 32). He contends that lynchings of Blacks became “strikingly new and different in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century [because of] the sadism and exhibitionism that characterized white violence” (2000, p. 13). The 1934 lynching in Florida of Claude Neal, who was accused of sexually assaulting and murdering Lola Cannidy, was “advertised in advance to almost the entire nation via the Associated Press and commercial radio stations” (Apel, 2004, p. 136). Neal reportedly did indeed murder Cannidy, a White woman who was his lover (Apel, 2004; Hale, 1998).

By foot, car, and train, a crowd of over 3000 gathered to watch and participate in Neal’s lynching (Apel, 2004). As with previous lynchings, news of the impending event was likely also spread via phone in the region (Hale, 1998). Neal was tortured for days before he was hanged. In an echo of other lynchings that were punishment for the sexual assault of a White woman, Neal’s fingers, toes, testicles, and penis were cut off. The latter were stuffed into his mouth (Hale, 1998). He was burned with hot irons, choked, and hanged. After his corpse was taken down, it was stomped on, urinated on, and run over with a car (Apel, 2004). Neal’s brutal immobilization was in sharp contrast with the mobility of the mob, which was mediated by phone, train, car, and camera.

Photos of Neal’s lynching were later sold in the same courthouse where his sham trial had been held (Apel, 2004). Spectators also shot souvenir photos using their own Kodak cameras (Apel, 2004). Some photos were published subsequently in mainstream newspapers and in Black newsletters (Apel, 2004; Hale, 1998). Dora Apel (2004) contends that the gruesomeness and visual documentation of Neal’s torture can be credited in part for motivating the introduction of anti-lynching legislation, which despite previous government promises (Potter, 1998) was not included in the crime bill unveiled in the same year that Neal was lynched and the war on crime was launched officially.

Though Gould was a vociferous reader of newspapers, there is no way to know now whether he ever learned of Neal’s lynching, saw photos of it, or saw other lynching images reproduced in newspapers in which his comic strip was also published. Even if Gould learned of the lynching, I am not suggesting that he supported it or that he used *Dick Tracy* to promote lynching. I am arguing that *Dick Tracy* and lynching, which existed concurrently in the conjuncture of war on crime, similarly mediated a paradoxical mix of racialized murder and fun for readers and spectators. When *Dick Tracy* is referenced now in news and in stud-

ies of cellphone use, the war on crime is glossed, and phone-watch use from the 1940s is cited to anchor the narrative of progress about mobile communication. The war on crime that inspired Gould is overlooked, and thus also glossed are the legacies of the conjuncture, particularly associations between Whiteness and mobile communication, that contribute to making Dick's phone-watch use so resonant in North America during the 1980s and 90s "war on drugs" and the current "war on terror."

Race, crime, and mobile communication

Potter contends that the war on crime "produced lasting changes in the ways Americans would come to understand crime as a national problem, police power as socially positive, and crime control as a federal responsibility" (Potter, 1998, p. 4; cf. Stabile, 2006). In effect, the "war on drugs" and the "war on terror" reprise the war on crime. The war on drugs began unofficially in the 1970s with President Nixon's declaration of a "war on heroin," and it was officially declared during the presidency of Ronald Reagan (Inciardi, 2002). It has been extended into current times through the passing of subsequent anti-drug legislation in the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000, which have successively augmented federal policing powers in the U.S. (Inciardi, 2002).

Race, crime, and mobile communication intersected in two of the most notable incidents from the war on drugs. In March 1991, African-American motorist Rodney King was dragged from his car and immobilized by a swarm of Los Angeles police, who were subsequently charged and acquitted of assault (see Dumm, 1993; Tomasulo, 1996). King was stopped after he sped through an affluent White neighbourhood (Dumm, 1993). Police suspected that he was driving while high on drugs. A bystander recorded King's assault using a hand-held camcorder, which was still a relatively new mobile communication technology. The recording mediated a spectacle of public punishment when it was replayed repeatedly on the news in North America and worldwide (see Tomasulo, 1996). In the second memorable incident, African-American ex-athlete O. J. Simpson was tracked via cellphone and television cameras in June 1994 as he fled along a highway in an unsuccessful bid to avoid turning himself in to face charges of murdering his ex-wife and her companion (Fiske, 1998). A jury eventually ruled that Simpson was not guilty.

The launch of wireless cellular service occurred during the war on drugs, and Dick began to be evoked widely. Noah Arceneaux (2005) notes that before studies on cellphone use began to be produced in the 1990s, news and commentaries in North American newspapers and magazines often mentioned Dick's phone-watch use as a default example for explaining differences between cellphone use and wired phone use. During the war on drugs, concurrent references to Black male criminality and to Dick, the imitable law enforcer and mobile communicator, reprised the racial paradigm of Dark law-breaker and White law enforcer at a time when most cellphone users were White, the cellphone was touted as a useful technology for safety in the city (see Burgess, 2004; Katz & Aspden, 1999; Robbins & Turner, 2002; Townsend, 2000), and Black men were racially profiled by police and in Hollywood blockbuster films as criminals (Heckman, 2006).

In the 1980s and 90s, before cellphone use was popularized widely in North America, a cellphone was considered to be a “rich man’s toy” (Katz & Aspden, 1999, p. 49) or a “business technology” (Katz, 1997, p. 236; Rakow & Navarro, 1993, p. 148). “Early adopters” were those who could pass a stringent credit check and afford to pay \$3,000 or more for a cellphone and also high service fees (Galambos & Abrahamson, 2002; Gow & Smith, 2006; Murray, 2001; Robbins & Turner, 2002). Users were “yuppies,” businessmen, and other well-heeled individuals. They were also mostly White, as suggested in initial studies of cellphone use, which asserted that financial barriers had created a “digital divide” between early adopters and non-cellphone users (see Katz & Aspden, 1999; Rakow & Navarro, 1993; Robbins & Turner, 2002). The digital divide was based on class, gender, and race (see Castells, Fernández-Ardèvol, Qiu, & Sey, 2007; Rakow & Navarro, 1993). The divide waned in the late 1990s as the cost of cellphones and service dropped (Castells et al., 2007). With the uptake of cellphone use by a variety of people, researchers turned to examining cellphone use by women and youth and, in recent years, use by poor people, migrants, and people with disabilities (see Castells et al., 2007; Green, 2003; Goggin, 2006; Harper & Hamill, 2005; Horst & Miller, 2006; Ito, Okabe, & Matsuda, 2005; Lycett & Dunbar, 2000; Plant, 2002; Rakow & Navarro, 1993; Shade, 2007).

With few exceptions, race and the racial paradigm are not discussed in studies of cellphone use. Rather than discussing race, researchers are more likely to focus on how cellphone users distinguish themselves as “tribes” who favour, for example, text messaging over talking (see Cooper, 2002; Reid & Reid, 2005; Rheingold, 2003; Taylor & Vincent, 2005; Townsend, 2000) or on cellphone use in a particular national or cultural context (see Harper, Brown, & Green, 2002; Horst & Miller, 2006; Katz, 2008; Katz & Aakhus, 2002), especially Japan (see Ito, Okabe, & Matsuda, 2005; Gye, 2007; Hjorth, 2007; Rivière, 2005). An aura of “techno-orientalism,” (Ito, Okabe, & Matsuda, 2005, p. 2) that is, a fear of and fascination with Japanese electronics and management, wafts through some studies by non-Japanese researchers that examine cross-cultural differences between Japanese users and European or North American users.

Some exceptions to the oversight of the racial paradigm in North America include Davin Heckman’s (2006) interpretation of racialized representations of cellphone use in Hollywood films and Lana F. Rakow & Vija Navarro’s (1993) interpretation of how gender and race intersect in early ads for cellphones in the U.S. These studies notably examine representations of the racial paradigm, rather than cellphone use by particular ethnic or racial groups (see Castells et al., 2007; Leonardi, 2003).

Dyer asserts that race “is never not a factor, never not in play” (2003, p. 31). He contends that “since race in itself—insofar as it is anything in itself—refers to some intrinsically insignificant geographical/physical differences between people, it is the imagery of race that is in play” (p. 31). Imagery of race is in play in discussions of cellphone use and crime that extrapolate from popular culture, where the racial paradigm of Dark law-breaker and White law enforcer has played out in North America through photography, film, TV, and, as I have been arguing, *Dick Tracy* also. For example, at a time when cellphone use was still

relatively expensive, James E. Katz & Philip Aspden wrote that overwhelming numbers of the rich owned cellular phones. The authors wrote that in contrast, “black and Hispanic respondents were much more likely to own either a pager or both a pager and cellphone than were whites” (1999, p. 65). The latter combination allowed users to choose when to use the more expensive device, the cellphone. Katz & Aspden noted that “beepers are currently identified in the mass media as belonging to teens, and are often associated with drug dealing” (1999, p. 47). The authors stray from interpreting survey results to extrapolate from mass media representations. Similarly, in *Wireless Nation: The Frenzied Launch of the Cellular Revolution in America* (Murray, 2001), the author quotes from a *New York Times* article, which states that “when cellular mobile telephones were introduced four years ago, they were gadgets only of the rich and powerful. Now everyone from drug dealers in Miami to the taco vendor in Rockefeller Plaza has one” (p. 211). In both examples, the racial paradigm is illuminated but left unacknowledged in studies that otherwise offer useful information about the history of cellphone use in the U.S.

During the war on terror, the paradigm is implied in references comparing cellphone use by religious fundamentalists, before and during their deadly attacks in the U.S. on September 11, 2001, with cellphone use by 9/11 “heroes” and rescuers (see Dutton & Nainoa, 2002; Katz & Rice, 2002). Following the attacks, President George W. Bush declared a war on terror and sent the American military into Iraq and Afghanistan, ostensibly to immobilize terrorists who threatened the U.S. Following the 9/11 attacks, cellphone use increased and began to be considered “a ‘lifeline’ in the case of an emergency” (Dutton & Nainoa, 2002, p. 244). Cellphone use has since burgeoned in North America (Castells et al., 2007).

The war on crime and the war on drugs resonate in the war on terror, where Muslim and Arab men, in addition to people of colour, are racially profiled as criminals, while Dick’s phone-watch use continues to be evoked. In the Canadian-made documentary *Cell Phone: The Ring Heard Around the World* (CBC, 2008), Levinson says, “[I]t was actually Dick Tracy who invented the cellphone.” It is little wonder that upon seeing images of torture made by American soldiers stationed at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq, it seemed to me that Dick had gone to Iraq with a phone-watch-turned-camphone. The soldiers used camera-enabled cellphones to make and circulate photos that showed them torturing Iraq detainees (see Apel, 2005; Razack, 2005; Sontag, 2004).

Dick appears in the war on crime, war on drugs, and war on terror. These are moments in which the racial paradigm is discernable. For people of colour in North America, these moments of “war on . . .” were and are also moments of “racial terror” (Gilroy, 1993; Raiford, 2003). It is with good reason that Hazel Carby contends, “There is a direct, but hidden, line connecting Abu Ghraib, the Rodney King video, and the photographs and ‘postcards’ of lynchings which circulated widely in the early 20th century” (Carby, 2004, p. 2; cf. Apel, 2005; Gordon, 2006; Mirzoeff, 2006; Razack, 2005; Sontag, 2004). The line seems hidden because it is wireless. In each of the moments that Carby names, the theme of law and order, racial paradigm of White law enforcer and Dark law-breaker,

and trope of retributive justice intersect with notable instances in the narrative of progress about wireless and mobile communication.

Wireless innovations were pioneered during the war on crime and cellular services were launched and popularized during the war on drugs and war on terror. Wireless technologies of mobile communication, namely, camphones and digital cameras, a camcorder, and the early Kodak camera, were used to mediate racialized viewing and violence. Though the terror in these moments was carried out by Americans, Canadians have also felt the effects because of our cultural proximity to the U.S. Canadians have also witnessed similar moments, such as the 1993 Somalia Affair, which has been called “Canada’s own Abu Ghraib” (Razack, 2005, p. 345). Canadian peacekeepers serving with the United Nations in Somalia used a camera to document their torture and murder of a Somali teenager, whom they accused of theft (Desbarats, 1997; Razack, 2004). The murder was likened to a lynching (Razack, 2004). The peacekeepers’ “trophy photos” mediated a spectacle of public punishment when they were published and broadcast during the royal commission into the murder (see Razack, 2004). In the war on drugs and war on terror, continued evocations of Dick’s phone-watch use reprise the racial paradigm and circumscribe cellphone use, and mobile communication in general, as the domain of White masculine law enforcers.

Hangin’ up on Dick

In response to the question “Who were your heroes?” American visual artist Andy Warhol reportedly responded in the 1990s, “Dick Tracy. I . . . taped his photograph on the bedroom wall. . . . I fantasized about Dick’s dick” (Collins, 2001, pp. 54-56). Years earlier, Warhol had re-framed the buddy relationship between Dick Tracy and Sam Catchem in a painting, which Collins writes has been interpreted as evidence of Warhol’s “fey but ferocious . . . war against the exclusion of swishiness and fagginess from the repertory of visual art” (p. 54). Collins argues that for Warhol, Dick was “both his ethical and amorous ideal” (p. 76). In the narrative of progress about mobile communication in North America, Dick remains a moral, if not amorous, exemplar of the White masculine law enforcer and mobile communicator in three times of “war.”

I have argued that contemporary references to Dick and his phone-watch are more than just benign old promises about the future of mobile communication. From the start, the fictional detective was more “prick” than “dick.” By interpreting how the theme of law and order, the racial paradigm of White and Dark Other, and the trope of retributive justice intersect with the narrative of progress about mobile communication, this paper argues that the abiding allure of *Dick Tracy* is a perverse nostalgia premised on racialized viewing and violence. It is time to hang up on Dick and to challenge how race and racism shape the history and study of cellphone use and mobile communication in North America.

Notes

1. Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the Canadian Communication Association conference (University of British Columbia, Vancouver) on June 4, 2008, and at Consoling Passions: An International Conference on Television, Audio, Video, New Media and Feminism (University of California, Santa Barbara) on April 26, 2008. I am grateful for feedback provided by participants at these conferences, by two anonymous reviewers, and by Dr. Kim Sawchuk, Dr. Sheryl Hamilton, and Dr. Barbara Crow.

2. The word “cellphone” is used in this paper instead of “mobile phone.” “Cellphone” and “cell” are used more commonly in North America, while “mobile phone” is preferred in much of the rest of the world where English is spoken (see Goggin, 2006; Horst & Miller, 2006; Kavoori & Arceneaux, 2006; Plant, 2002; Townsend, 2000). Length restrictions limit exploration of how the notion of “cellular” communication characterizes or structures ways of interpreting cellphone use, but this paper suggests that traces of this structuring are discernable in references to Dick Tracy. Note that “cellphone” has not replaced “mobile phone” in quotations.
3. Occasionally, reference is made also to wireless gadgets used by the fictional British spy James Bond, who was spoofed as Agent 86 in *Get Smart* (see Smith, 1966).
4. References to *Star Trek*, *Get Smart*, and cellphone use in North America include Breznican, 2007; Cauley, 2007; McLean, 2006; Schulz, 2004; Stross, 2004; Tilley, 2007; Vizard, 1996.
5. References to Dick’s phone-watch, in North American publications only, span the 1980s to today (see, for example, Burgess, 1990; Chartrand, 1993; DiChristina & Scott, 1996; Hartley-Brewer, 1999; Hopkins, 2001; Kalnz, 1995; Passell, 1984; Richtel, 1999; Riga, 1999; Shaw, 2001; Stern, 2003; Strassel & Naik, 1997).
6. Judith O’Sullivan writes that “according to some sources,” Dick was the model for Batman (1990, p. 64; cf. Powers, 1983).
7. The name “Federal Bureau of Investigation” is used in this paper though, as Claire Bond Potter explains, the FBI was renamed twice early in the century: “From its founding in 1908 to the spring of 1934, it was known as the Bureau of Investigation; between 1934 and the fall of 1935, it was known as the Division of Investigation; and after 1935, it was called the Federal Bureau of Investigation” (1998, p. xi).
8. Examples of popular studies include Hayson & Tiver (1997); Rippon & Ward, 2000; and Sinclair, 1999.
9. Examples of corporate histories and biographies include Corr, 2000; Fusaro, 2002; Galambos & Abrahamson, 2002; Merriden, 2003; Steinbock, 2001; and Surtees, 1994.

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