

# The Tragedy of Being Michael Brown

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Michael Brown, an unarmed African-American teenager, was shot dead by police in Ferguson, Missouri on August 9. Two of the more problematic reactions to the tragedy of Michael Brown's death rest upon a shared association between the value of the "raced" victim's life, or lack thereof, and his supposed "success" or "failure." These reactions, which I call the "no-angel" and the "degree" approaches, although different, both stem from the dominant worldview of today's capitalist societies which judge people's life worth on the basis of their success or failure, of being good or bad people.



## The No-Angel Approach

One mainstream media's reaction to the recent tragedy was "Michael Brown was no angel," implying that, at least in some instances, he could be perceived as a bad person, a failure, or a criminal.[1] The mainstream media's no-angel approach was also employed in the case of Trayvon Martin and many others. The mainstream media's "no-angel" approach often rests on an unofficial archive of the victim's transgressions of legal and cultural norms. The archive draws on an investigation of friends, family members, victim's photos, etc., and is employed in an informal media-based court that implicitly justifies the verdict of police brutality. In fact, the media and their audiences only learn about the "raced" victims of police brutality after their lives have already been lost, subsequent to which their lives are reduced to a series of selected events and idiosyncrasies. The excavation of the victim's failures (or deviations from social norms) replaces the actual vivid scene of murder and doesn't let "the sooty details of the scene [rise], thrusting themselves between the world and [audiences]," as Richard Wright wrote in his poem "Between the World and Me." The implicit interpretation of the no-angel approach is that the raced victim must be an angel in order for his life to be worthy. Hence, the victim's life counts as no life, or less deserving of grief, due to snapshots deemed to demonstrate the individual's failures.

From the perspective of this record-keeping mindset not only is the idea of a "second chance" given to "wrongdoers" nullified, but also the murder of a raced victim is justified through archival snapshots of the victim's life. There is a common belief that the U.S. is in its post race and racism era; consequently, police brutality, in this colorblind worldview, is blamed on the victim being a "bad" person who had deviated from the law, dominant social values, or simply failing to be successful. The basis for police impunity and right-less-ness of the raced victims is their criminality, given that the mainstream media associates the police killing with the raced victims' former transgression of law or dominant social values. Hence, the language of criminality, instead of race, is used for relegating the life of the raced victim to unworthy of protection and his social status as non-citizen. As Michelle Alexander states in *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, "In the era of colorblindness, it is no longer socially permissible to use race, explicitly, as a justification for discrimination, exclusion, and social contempt.... Rather than rely on race, we use our criminal justice system to label people of color 'criminals' and then engage in all the practices we supposedly left behind....Once you're labeled a felon, the old forms of discrimination ... are suddenly legal....One in three young African American men is currently under the control of the criminal justice system." [2]

The police violence in the no-angel approach was excused on the grounds of the victim's former transgressions of the law—or of sociocultural norms—in order to claim that the victim was a danger to the police at the scene, or against society in the future. Hence the police, together with sections of the mainstream media, exploit society's fear of the "dangerous" raced other, already criminalized through racialization, to suggest that if the victims had remained alive they could have killed the police officer (even if the victim was unarmed), and would subject society to harm in the future. The wrong or right of the killing of the raced person becomes dependent on the social status and criminal history of the victim, as opposed to the evidence and story revealed at the scene. The worthiness of a raced person's life is equated with being perceived as successful. Even if the mourners, by citing the victim's educational credentials, prove that the victim had been successful, this success is often challenged by the mainstream media based on the victim's wearing a hoodie, doing rap, making gestures, or body size. In order to deny the existence of race and racial injustice in the U.S., the no-angel approach constructs an image of the raced victims to blame police brutality on the victims themselves.

### **The Degree Approach**

There is another approach that portrays Brown's life as valuable, and his death as being worthy of mourning, by noting his completion of high school, his prospects of earning a college degree, and his being an overall good and successful person with the potential for playing a constructive social role in the future.[3] While the no-angel approach reduces victims to a number of criminal biographical events that are transformed into the whole reality of the psychohistory and the interior meaning of the lost lives, the degree approach challenges the mainstream media's demonization of raced victims. However, the strategy of highlighting raced people's educational credentials in order to challenge police harassment or to dismantle society's racist imagination of the dangerous raced person does not fully address the race-based injustice against "unsuccessful" raced victims or those who happen to have a recorded history of criminality. As Lanre Akinkunle states in his recent *Gawker* article, "At best, I was reducing my humanity—my right to not get shot by a police officer—to a giveaway received during freshman orientation. At worst, I was just delaying what is now starting to feel inevitable."

As Judith Halberstam says in *The Queer Art of Failure*, success in a capitalist society "equates too easily to specific forms of reproductive maturity combined with wealth accumulation." [4] Hence, one's life is a failure if one avoids conforming to the disciplinary power of success and propriety, and refuses to submit to regulations that would lead to a predictable adult life.

### **The interrelatedness of the two approaches**

The degree approach inadvertently differentiates lives and assigns values to them, similar to the no-angel approach, as it does not challenge the ungrievability of the "unsuccessful" raced victims. In effect, the emphasis on victim's successes (the degree approach) implies that the depth of tragedy of the victim's loss of life is measured by the individual's accomplishments. This logically implies the conclusion that if the loss of a life does not spur grief, and a life has not been worthy of protection, then the victim lacks success and must have had social failures. Consequently an investigation of failures follows in order to make sense of the victim's life not being recognized as a true life whose loss is worthy of mourning (the no-angel approach). The no-angel investigation of failures takes place instead of examining the sociopolitical conditions that led to the victim's life not being considered as life and worthy of protection and the violence against it as violence. On the other hand, the degree approach draws attention to the victim's successes in order to counteract the mainstream media's demonization of the victim and to claim that the victim's life (full of hopes for success in the future) was worthy of protection against destruction and death, instead of questioning the equation made between life worth and success and the mainstream media's approach of blaming

police brutality on the raced victims' recorded history and position in society.

### **The ungrivable deaths and the ideology of success**

The raced community is collectively criminalized and is perceived as homogenous in terms of lifestyle and social status. "And so it is not I who make a meaning for myself, but it is the meaning that was already there, pre-existing, waiting for me,"[5] Frantz Fanon tells us about the pre-determined meaning imposed on each raced person in a society that suffers from racial prejudices. It is in such conditions that some of the raced people try to lessen their race-based criminalization. But how about those members who do not have college or high school graduation photos, or who might have a recorded history of criminality? As Judith Butler states, "Some lives are grievable, and others are not; the differential allocation of grievability that decides what kind of subject is and must be grieved, and which kind of subject must not, operates to produce and maintain certain exclusionary conceptions of who is normatively human: what counts as a livable life and a grievable death?"[6] The degree approach does not challenge the dehumanization of those without a degree, for it implies, in Akinsiku's words, that "yes, some of us deserve to be shot in the street, but this ID proves that I'm not one of them."

The ideology of success in a capitalist society blames failure on individuals, as opposed to socio-political structures, and assigns success to being a good person who makes the right decisions and has the right attitude.[7] The emphasis on the educational credentials of a victim, to illustrate them as a successful member of society with the potential of moving higher up the social strata, challenges the equation between being raced and being a predetermined failure and a threat to the socio-political order and its standards. Failure in this instance is defined as not submitting to the dominant and hegemonic norms or cultural standards of society. The degree approach employs symbols of success intending to challenge the image the media would typically construct of blackness equated with failure when a raced victim is subjected to police brutality. However, the strategy unfortunately reinforces capitalist notions of success and life worth. Members of society who are underprivileged in terms of their social class and status and are perceived as failures, are posited as not worthy, given the linkage made between life worth and one's ability to comply with social norms and standards. The death of a promiscuous raced person (that is, an individual who does not follow normative sociosexual standards), or one who lacks a standard education or a good paying job, and thus is unlikely to accumulate wealth, is perceived as less noteworthy, or tragic, than the deaths of successful members of society. That is the reason that Fox News asked the Vatterott Educational Centers to confirm whether Michael Brown was enrolled at college, suggesting that if he was not enrolled, it would explain away the heartbreaking injustice imposed on him.

In 2000, when another unarmed African-American man, Patrick Dorismond, was killed by police, Mayor Rudolph Giuliani tried to undermine the case against the police by discrediting Dorismond as "no altar boy." It turned out that in fact, Dorismond had been an altar boy at Holy Cross Church in Brooklyn, which had also been Giuliani's church. How about if Patrick Dorismond was really "no altar boy"? The point is that making a precondition of the victim being an altar boy or college-bound for condemning police shooting makes the death of "no altar boys" and "no angels" ungrivable and their lives as unworthy.

I agree with Jasmine Banks when she says in her essay, "Black Kids Don't Have to Be College-Bound for Their Deaths to Be Tragic," "I wouldn't have cared if Mike, Trayvon and John all sagged their pants down to their ankles and if the only images of them depicted them smoking pot and throwing gang signs. I wouldn't have cared if they'd been high school dropouts who fought and tagged walls. Their lives would have been every bit as valuable, and their losses every bit as infuriating and sad."

If your socioeconomic success is dependent on someone else's failure, then using proof of your

success to claim that you are not dangerous and are worthy of life is an implicit confession of complicity in the system of exploitation. As bell hooks states, “Those of us black people who have the opportunity to further our economic status willingly surrender our rage....As individual black people increase their class power, live in comfort...[we] come to see both the society and white people differently. We experience the world as infinitely less hostile to blackness than it actually is.”[8] As a result, one’s privileged social class status leads the society to see one as more assimilated into the dominant norms and values and consequently having less class rage and being less dangerous. A raced person is assumed to be bad and sinful unless proven otherwise through a display of success and submission to standards of propriety.

### **“Identification with the suffering itself”**

We need to form ideas to challenge the demonization of failure, rather than trying to show raced people’s compatibility with bourgeois respectability, in order to defend their right to live without being subjected to police brutality. We need to question the intersection of race and class that forms the dangerous raced other for the society against whom police forces have impunity. It is the value of life and humanity of the underclass raced person that must be defended in order for us to confront race-based injustices. We need to create a space of counter hegemony against the capitalist ideology of success. The position we assume to oppose race-based injustice must be where the most rage and discrimination are felt. As hooks states, “Today degrees and intensities of black rage seem to be overdetermined by the politics of location—by class privilege.”[9]

The protagonist in Richard Wright’s poem “Between the World and Me” comes across the bones and ashes that remain after a lynching. He does not know anything about the victim’s social history except for the suffering and the violence imposed on him. Nevertheless that lack of knowledge doesn’t lead him to deny the loss as a true loss or the life as a true and real life. He excavates the history, stands in the woods as a witness to the trauma of lynching, and mourns while transforming from a sympathetic observer to one who feels on his own body the degradation and violence imposed on the victim. The protagonist moves from “my mind was frozen within cold pity for the life that was gone” to “the dry bones ... melting themselves into my bones/ The grey ashes formed flesh ... entering into my flesh/ ... now I am dry bones and my face a stony skull staring in yellow surprise at the sun...” It is through the vicarious experience of violence and injustice along with the victim, “[developing] a point of identification with suffering itself”[10], that the victim’s educational credentials and transgression of social norms become irrelevant.

Our assumptions about angelic versus bad victims need to be reassessed so that we observe the “differential allocation of grievability” reproduced in the obituaries we write for the tragic losses. It is through such a lens that a better message than the victim’s success-based ones seems to be: Police impunity and brutality must end not only against those victims considered as successful and good, but also against those victims who are high school dropouts working a minimum waged job, or have a recorded history of criminality, or whose styles of body posing, or singing, or clothing are not compatible with dominant aesthetic standards, and cannot have a facade of bourgeois respectability.

### **Notes**

[1] *New York Times*: “Michael Brown, 18, due to be buried on Monday, was no angel [...]. Shortly before his encounter with Officer Wilson, the police say he was caught on a security camera stealing a box of cigars, pushing the clerk of a convenience store into a display case. He lived in a community that had rough patches, and he dabbled in drugs and alcohol. He had taken to rapping in recent months, producing lyrics that were by turns contemplative and vulgar. He got into at least one

scuffle with a neighbor.”

[2] Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: New Press, 2011), 2.

[3] Here is an example: CNN Wire: “A Missouri community is angry and distraught after a Ferguson police officer killed a college-bound teen, Michael Brown, who a friend and witnesses said was unarmed and had his hands in the air.”

[4] Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 2.

[5] Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 134.

[6] Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2003), xiv.

[7] Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 3.

[8] bell hooks, *Killing Rage: Ending Racism* (New York: H. Holt and Co., 1995), 14.

[9] *Ibid.*, 13.

[10] Butler, *Precarious Life*, 30.

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