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BETWEEN THE WORLD AND FERGUSON



By **Jelani Cobb** August 26, 2014

When I was eighteen, I stumbled across Richard Wright’s poem “Between the World and Me.” The poem, a retelling of a lynching, shook me, because while the narrator relays the details in the first person, the actual victim of that brutish ritual is another man, unknown to him and unknown to us. The poem is about the way in which history is an animate force, and how we are witnesses to the past, even to that portion of it that transpired before we were born. He writes,

darkness screamed with thirsty voices; and the witnesses rose and
lived:

The dry bones stirred, rattled, lifted, melting themselves
into my bones.

The grey ashes formed flesh firm and black, entering into
my flesh.

Nothing save random fortune separated the fate of the man who died from that of the one telling the story. Errin Whack and Isabel Wilkerson have both written compellingly about the long shadow of lynching. It is, too often, a deliberately forgotten element of the American past—one that is nonetheless felt everywhere in Ferguson, Missouri, where protests followed the shooting of

Michael Brown, who was eighteen years old, by a police officer. One can't make sense of how Brown's community perceived those events without first understanding the way that neglected history has survived among black people—a traumatic memory handed down, a Jim Crow inheritance.

It took sixteen days for Brown's body to be buried, an extended postscript that included three separate autopsies, the emergence of duelling interpretations of his last moments, and the resolution of precisely nothing about how race, media, and policing operate in the United States. A year ago, people gathered in anticipation of a verdict in the trial of George Zimmerman, the man who killed Trayvon Martin. During that case, images of people wearing hoodies, as Martin had when he was shot, proliferated on social media. This month, it has been portraits of people with their hands raised, in recognition of a number of witness accounts that Brown tried to surrender before being shot by police officer Darren Wilson. (Wilson, according to press reports, has told people that Brown was running at him.) The idea, in both instances, is that, like Wright's narrator, any of us could be Martin, Brown, or one of the hundreds of others who have died under questionable circumstances. There is a disturbing sense that this is how we spend our summers now, submerged in outrage, demonstrating, yet again, the hard parameters of public sympathy and the damnable, tiresome burden of racism.

In the days after 9/11, it was common to hear people say that it was the first time Americans had really experienced terrorism on their own soil. Those sentiments were historically wrong, and willfully put aside acts that were organized on a large scale, had a political goal, and were committed with the specific intention of being nightmarishly memorable. The death cult that was lynching furnished this country with such spectacles for a half century. (The tallies vary, but, by some estimates, there were thirty-three hundred lynchings in

the decades between the end of Reconstruction and the civil-rights era.) We know intuitively, not abstractly, about terrorism's theatrical intent. The sight of Michael Brown, sprawled on Canfield Drive for four hours in the August sun, dead at the hands of an officer who was unnamed for a week, recalled that memory. It had the effect of reminding that crowd of spontaneous mourners of their own refuted humanity. A single death can be understood as a collective threat. The media didn't whip up these concerns among the black population; history did that.

For fifteen days this month, people marched in heat and thunderstorms, amid tear gas, despite the warnings of police styled as a militia, undeterred by the tear gas or the obstinacy of the local bureaucracy. They persisted despite the taint that opportunistic violence and looting imposed upon their efforts.

Linda Chavez wondered on Fox News whether "the 'unarmed teen' mantra" really fit Brown, who was six feet four and nearly three hundred pounds and had been caught on video shoplifting—and, it perhaps bears repeating, was a teen, and was unarmed. Chavez was roundly criticized, but she was really only guilty of saying aloud what many others have thought. Whatever happened or did not happen between Michael Brown and Darren Wilson on a winding side street, in the middle of the afternoon, in a non-descript outpost on the edge of a midsized city, whatever we imagine we know of the teen-ager, the salient fact is that he did not live long enough to cultivate his own answers.

I spent eight days in Ferguson, and in that time I developed a kind of between-the-world-and-Ferguson view of the events surrounding Brown's death. I was once a linebacker-sized eighteen-year-old, too. What I knew then, what black people have been required to know, is that there are few things more dangerous than the perception that one *is* a danger. I'm embarrassed to recall that my

adolescent love of words doubled as a strategy to assuage those fears; it was both a pitiable desire for acceptance and a practical necessity for survival. I know, to this day, the element of inadvertent intimidation that colors the most innocuous interactions, particularly with white people. There are protocols for this. I sometimes let slip that I'm a professor or that I'm scarcely even familiar with the rules of football, minor biographical facts that stand in for a broader, unspoken statement of reassurance: there is no danger here. And the result is civil small talk and feeble smiles and a sense of having compromised. Other times, in an elevator or crossing a darkened parking lot, when I am six feet away but the world remains between us, I remain silent and simply let whatever miasma of stereotype or fear might be there fill the void.

Fuck you, I think. If I don't get to feel safe here, why should you?



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