

Chapter 1

Michael Brown, Dignity, and Déjà Vu: From Slavery to Ferguson and Beyond

Christopher Alan Bracey

There is a rhythm to the destruction of black lives by American law enforcement. Each death or episode of brutality strikes at the core of our humanity—a vicious and tragically familiar downbeat. Next is the incendiary cocktail of emotion—anger, sadness, outrage, guilt, and fantasies of retribution. The burst of emotion transitions into exhaustion amid a crescendo of cries for justice. These calls rarely elicit a meaningful response, but instead are routinely met with deflections, or an effort to blame the victim, or worse yet, a deafening silence—a long pause that yields to a familiar lamentation to systemic inaction, a begrudging, tacit acceptance of the status quo, and a swelling sense of racial resentment. Then the universe delivers another downbeat, and the cycle begins anew.

Situated within this rhythm of destruction is the killing of Michael Brown, an unarmed 18-year-old, by Ferguson police officer Darren Wilson and its aftermath—a tragic turn of events that is remarkable and, on a deeper level, entirely unremarkable. Nothing has proven more corrosive to American race relations than the manner in which African Americans are stopped, detained, arrested, defiled, killed, and incarcerated more than any other racial group. The killing of Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner, James Crawford III, Michael Brown, Tamir Rice, Rekia Boyd, Walter Scott, Freddie Gray, Sandra Bland, Samuel DuBose, Laquan McDonald and others and the institutional and popular responses represent only the most recent and publicized incidents through which this rhythm of destruction has played out.¹ It is important to remember that this cycle of brutality, outrage, and inaction is a

rhythm of racial oppression that has been pounded into our social conscience, week after week, generation after generation. For nearly half of a millennium, racial oppression has played out through the ritual destruction or defilement of black bodies by law enforcement officials.

The events in Ferguson cannot be dismissed as a social anomaly—a blip on an otherwise steady radar of the post-civil-rights era of racial equality. To the contrary, the shooting of Michael Brown is reflective of a much older and deeper pathology that lies at the core of our shared national identity. The U.S. Constitution declared Americans free from the confines of English aristocracy, and signaled a fundamental commitment to freedom, equality, justice, and prosperity for all.² Yet at the time of its ratification, Negro chattel slavery had existed in America for more than a century.³ America, the world's beacon of light for freedom and equality, was also the home of one of the most devastating modes of racial oppression the world has ever witnessed—a most peculiar institution committed to the simultaneous valuation, devaluation, commodification, and destruction of black bodies.⁴ In short, a core founding principle of this nation was the belief held by whites that blacks did not possess equal humanity and therefore did not deserve equal treatment—that they could be thoroughly objectified, exiled from civil society, and enslaved for benefit of whites.⁵

This widely accepted percept of American culture, rooted in the ritualistic denial of basic dignity and equal humanity, underlies a great deal of historical racial interactions in American life. It reveals itself in the killing of Michael Brown as well, which may explain in part why his death cut so deeply into the American cultural consciousness. For many of us, but especially perhaps for African Americans, these events are acutely tragic because they repeatedly strike us precisely where we have come to expect it—in that place where our serial racial wounds, from the minute to the magnificent, never seem to receive sufficient time to heal. Officer Wilson may not have committed an offense for which he can be prosecuted under federal civil rights laws. However, the cultural context in which he performed his law enforcement function that resulted in the death of a black child has been revealed as one powerfully shaped by racist attitudes and racially disparate treatment.

For this reason, Michael Brown's death becomes part of that familiar rhythm. Whether blacks lives are snuffed out by an officer's bullet, choked out by an officer's bare hands, or defiled by an officer's nightstick, the message delivered and received is the same now as it has

been before: black lives are not worthy of equal dignity. Once again, African Americans find themselves in the absurd yet familiar position of having to plead their equal humanity—to proclaim that “Black Lives Matter.”⁶

The connection between the Ferguson shooting and our racial past does not end there. Indeed, one cannot fully appreciate what happened in Ferguson without reference to the epic struggle for racial equality in American life. This chapter provides both the theoretical and historiographical grounding for a deepened discussion about the shooting of Michael Brown, the popular and institutional reaction, and the prospect of emancipation from the rhythmic destruction of black lives.

The Theoretical Lens: Racial Oppression as Dignity Expropriation

The fact that African Americans once again demand to be treated with basic human dignity—nearly 150 years after the ratification of the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Amendments to the Constitution, 50 years after the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and nearly a decade after the first African American President of the United States was inaugurated—is a sad but not unsurprising development when the struggle in Ferguson is understood as simply yet another redux of the never-ending struggle to overcome the legacy of attitudes, assumptions, and beliefs about the status of blacks in American life. Put differently, racial oppression, including racially discriminatory law enforcement, is at its core a dignity expropriation enterprise.

By dignity expropriation I mean that racial oppression, particularly when enabled or carried out by the state, is at its most fundamental level an effort to deny the basic dignity and equal humanity of others simply because they are of a different, socially disfavored race.⁷ Like any other act of expropriation, racial oppression seeks to strip away or modify an element of central importance to the individual—basic human dignity—in service of some larger agenda. The means to accomplish this end can be individualized or structural, physical or sociocultural, transient or permanent. Importantly, the act of expropriation is understood, from the perspective of the taker, as entirely justifiable on political, social, or moral grounds. This notion of racial oppression as dignity expropriation is of transhistorical significance because it helps us understand and comprehend more fully all modes