CODA

Black Futurity in the Shadow of Premature Death

Growing up in the DC suburb of Prince George's County in the late 1970s, the only identification photo I remember was an image taken in 1978 of a 15-year-old black teenager who, at the time, was just a year older than me. It's a photo that feels like it was seared into my memory like one of those select few images one recalls involuntarily and usually with visceral effects. I remember it as a mug shot: an austere arrest photo of a beautiful brown-skinned boy with wavy hair and hazel eyes. His name was Terrance Johnson.

Stopped with his older brother while driving to the movies because they forget to turn on their headlights, Johnson and his brother were taken into custody because their car was identified in connection with a robbery committed earlier in the day, when his brother had stolen $29.75 from a nearby laundromat. They were taken to a police station less than ten-minutes away from my childhood home, where the younger Johnson was separated from his brother, handcuffed to a chair, interrogated, and in the process, brutalized by police. He was then arrested and moved to a processing room to be fingerprinted, where he testified that the beating continued. Fearing for his life after an officer reportedly placed him in a chokehold and slammed his head against a wall, he grabbed the policeman's gun from his holster and shot and killed him and another officer before being captured attempting to flee. Johnson was tried as an adult on two counts of murder and additional charges related to the deaths of the two officers. He was acquitted of both murder charges, but found guilty of two counts of manslaughter. Johnson was sentenced to twenty-five years in prison.

When I began researching the convict photos from the Breakwater prison, I was reminded of the mug shot I remembered so vividly of Terrence Johnson from my youth.

But I couldn't find the photo anywhere. I searched for it on and off over the two years I spent researching and writing this book. I searched archives and databases of newspapers and periodicals, and scoured article after painful article describing the events of June 26th 1978. Reading those articles brought back the anguish I felt at the time, and I found myself wincing as I read each one. When I described the photo to my aunt in Maryland, she offered to reach out to church friends and extended family members with contacts in the media to see if anyone could find the image I remembered so clearly. She said she remembered it as well, but her search was as fruitless as my own.

Some time later, I found the photo I was looking for, but it was nothing like I remembered it. It was not a mug shot. It was a black-and-white newspaper photo of a tearful and desperate 15-year-old in handcuffs and a jumpsuit in the backseat of a police car on his way to jail for killing two police officers. The mug shot I remembered so vividly was a creation of my emotional and affective attachment to a boy whose short life shaped much of my early political consciousness.

$1 Million Bond Set in Slayings of 2 Police Officers

By John Feinstein
Washington Post Staff Writer

A Prince George's County district court judge set bond at $1 million yesterday for Terrance G. Johnson, the 15-year-old Bladensburg youth accused of fatally shooting two Prince George's County police officers.

Following an emotional 45-minute bond hearing in which Assistant State's Attorney Robert Tobin called Johnson "a cold, calculating killer," and Johnson's attorney described him as "an average 15-year-old child," Judge Louis Ditrani gave his reasons for the bond.

"This crime is so shocking it has left the community in a state of disbelief. Two men who were supposed to protect us from ourselves have been snuffed out.

"If the court sounds emotional," he added, "that is because this is an emotional moment. Mr. Johnson is innocent until proved guilty but I would be derelict if it did not note the seriousness of this crime.

"He has every reason to run. I have no doubt in my mind if he were released on personal bond (as Johnson's attorney Victor Houlon had asked) we would never see him again.

"I sympathize with his family but I also sympathize with the officers' families. The community must be assured that the court understands the shock of these crimes. I'm going to set bond at $500,000 for each life that was lost."

Earlier Johnson had told the judge that he would be afraid to sleep in a jail. His voice cracking, he said, "I didn't mean to do what I did, or what they say I did. I didn't."

Johnson's mother, Helen, with whom he lives at 4241 58th Ave. in Bladensburg, told the judge that her son was "mindful and obedient," in asking that he be released in her care.

Mrs. Johnson sat with her divorced husband, Robert M. Johnson, and three of their children during the hearing. All five brushed tears from their eyes periodically. When Johnson was led past his family as he was leaving the courtroom, he burst into tears.

In asking that Johnson be released on personal bond to his mother's custody, Houlon argued at length that the boy must have been provoked before he acted.

"It is just not logical that an average 15-year-old boy would shoot two police officers," he said. "This is a great tragedy for all of us but something extraordinary must have happened. There must have been extenuating circumstances."

At one point Ditrani broke in, angrily asking Houlon, "are you trying to justify this crime?"

After the hearing, Houlon said the

See OFFICERS, B4, Col. 1

Photos by John McDonnell—The Washington Post.

Helen Johnson, left, mother of suspect; Terrance Johnson, the murder suspect, middle, slain officers: top right, Albert Claggett; bottom, James Swart.

Prince George's Police Weigh Strike or Slowdown

By John Feinstein
Washington Post Staff Writer

After working without a contract for nearly a year, Prince George's County police officers threatened yesterday to strike or stage a work slowdown starting Saturday.

With major contract issues still unresolved, talk of a wildcat strike was fueled yesterday by anger over the recent firing of an officer for shooting an escaping shoplifting suspect, and the shooting deaths of two police officers on Monday.

Police representatives and county officials began round-the-clock bargaining at 2 p.m. yesterday in an effort to reach an agreement. Saturday is the anniversary of the expiration of the contract with the Fraternal Order of Police, the officers' collective bargaining organization.

"We're working for a settlement and we expect one," said Col. Vincent duCellier, aide to Police Chief John W. Rhoads. "This is an extremely emotional time for all of us. You can't expect the men to be happy when the administration is forced to dismiss an officer and then two officers are shot and killed. That has to have an impact on morale."

Disagreement over retirement benefits remains the major issue to be resolved in the contract talks, police officers said yesterday. The officers seek to be able to retire on a full pension after 20 years, instead of the current requirement of 25 years. Full pension benefits amount to 50 percent of a police officer's final salary.

A fact-finding commission of federal mediators agreed Thursday with the police organization's contention that its officers should receive full pension benefits after 20 years.

Asked if the county would go along with the recommendations of the federal mediators, County Executive Winfield M. Kelly Jr. said yesterday, "That was a pretty high recommendation. I don't think we'll go that high."

Kelly said, "I think we're going to have it resolved... Right now I'm very confident that there'll be a settlement."

See POLICE, B4, Col. 4

Police revealed yesterday evidence in the murders of three women in Dale City. *Story on B5.*

As a 14-year old girl, this image affected me deeply. Terrence Johnson could have been any of the boys I had grown up or gone to school with. PG County, as we called it, had a well-documented history of police brutality and in the fluid borders that traversed DC, Maryland and Virginia, it was the place black folks never wanted to get stopped by what my Dad to this day still calls 'John Law'. My sister and I went to protest marches and vigils demanding justice for Terrence Johnson. Our church organized carpools to rallies and demonstrations at the courthouse and police station to show our support for Johnson and his family throughout the trial. Our pastor organized the Terrance Johnson Defense Fund, which led to a cross being burned on the lawn of the church. And we kept photos and clippings (some even made scrapbooks) of Terrance Johnson – a boy we saw as tragic, but'so fine'.

* * *

This book was written in a particular place and a particular time that shapes it in profound ways. Each chapter is intended as an exercise in feminist theory, method and politics, yet they also emerge in relation to an accumulation of memories and impressions, affiliations and associations with identification photos like those that produced my false memory of an arrest photo of Terrence Johnson – photos that remind us of how photography is mobilized by, as well as against, black communities. I began writing these essays at a historical moment that reanimated my memory of Johnson and brought our early struggle for justice for this young black teen back into my consciousness. I started the first of them in 2013, in the summer following the murder of an unarmed black teenager two years older than Johnson in Sanford, Florida, while he was walking home from a convenience store where he'd just bought candy. The photo of the soft face and doe-like eyes of that 17-year-old looking out from a light grey hoodie emblazoned posters and fliers calling for justice for his killing and the prosecution of his assailant. Despite the efforts of his hoodie-clad supporters who rallied and marched across the country with his photo in hand or on t-shirts, his assailant was acquitted and justice for Trayvon Martin remains elusive.

In the two years since, a series of horrifically similar murders of unarmed black men unfolded before our eyes at the hands or in the custody of police. The context in which this book was composed is important. It is the chilling backdrop of Sanford, Staten Island, Ferguson, North Charleston, and Baltimore. It is the refrain of a string of names that will echo forward in time for decade. Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner, Michael Brown, Walter Scott, Freddie Gray – the lives lost in these cities stand in for countless other lives lost, yet willfully overlooked. Their loss has mobilized thousands in protest and galvanized demands for justice, dignity and respect for black lives treated as disposable. It has catalyzed a collective refusal to never again look away.

While each of the preceding chapters explored different tenses and frequencies of futurity, it is impossible for me to conclude without returning to the grammar of black futurity that confronts is in the contemporary moment. How does a black feminist grapple with a future that hasn't yet happened but must, while witnessing the mounting disposability of black lives that don't seem to matter? What constitutes futurity in the shadow of the persistent enactment of premature black death? The line of continuity I trace from to a police station in Hyattsville, Maryland in 1978 to the back of a police van in Baltimore, Maryland in 2015 makes it difficult to theorize black futurity in the face of the bleak facticity of this present and that past. So how do we live the future we want to see now when confronted with the statistical probability of premature black (particularly male) mortality? How do we create an alternative future by living both the future we want to see, while inhabiting its potential foreclosure at the same time?

* * *

It was a collection of photographs I couldn't touch, and I'll admit, I'm not really comfortable with that. I prefer to handle and touch photos as much (or little) as an archive or their owner will allow. It gives me a feel for the image, and the contact intensifies the impact and impression they leave on me. In this case, rather than gentle handling, I scrolled,

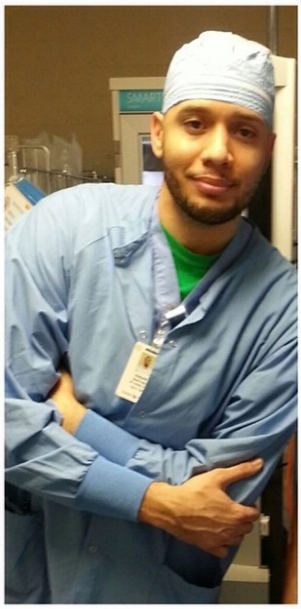
tapped, and clicked in and out, and up and down on my trackpad. This collection of images was a *Tumblr* – one of the self-made, collaborative, digital archives that have become ubiquitous and addictive thanks to the technologies of the Internet and social media. With the Breakwater albums and the Freedom Rider mug shots so present in my mind – archives created to identify criminals and criminal behavior – I couldn't help but compare them to this very different archive of twinned images of the same individual posed side-by-side in two paired images.

But the *Tumblr* photos shared none of the institutional formality of the rigidly shot, compelled portraits with which I originally compared them. They were not pairings of faces full frontal and in profile. They were not jailed or incarcerated men forced to pose for the camera. They were young black men and women reveling in and lamenting the act of photographic capture as a momento mori. The difference enacted in the transition between each photo was a contrast created by an intentional juxtaposition; a juxtaposition that taunts its viewers to 'see' a difference and in doing so, engage the consequences of imposing or resisting the implied narrative that would justify a distinction between them.

#If The Gunned Me Down, Which Picture Would They Use? began as a *Twitter* feed created in response to the proliferation of negative photographic representations of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, and retrospectively, of Trayvon Martin in Sanford, Florida.

> "They wouldn't show the smiling girl who graduated abroad at one of the best schools in the country. The media would portray me as a hard and mean-looking girl who was asking for it."
>
> "Would they mention my troubled past or that I occasionally smoked weed… or would they mention that I was a responsible university student interested in creating a society in which young people aren't getting gunned down due to our fears, judgment, and lack of understanding."

"They'd make sure my pictures of my achievements not only in academics but in life would never see the light of day."



Young women and men in graduation caps and gowns, military uniforms, medical scrubs, prom dresses or coats and ties, mirror photos of those same individuals performing menacing stereotypes of black urban life. Refusing to wait passively for a future posited as highly likely or inevitable for black urban youth, the photos actively anticipate their sitters'

own premature deaths. In doing so, they enact anterior practices of fugitivity through their refusal to be silenced by the probability of a future violent death they confront on a daily basis in the present. Through these images they fashion a futurity they project beyond their own demise. Rather than fleeing or submitting to a future imposed upon them, they face down the image that would negate the complicated truth of the lives they have lived, and interrupt the unescapable narrative of their own demise that extinguishes their capacity to claim a life lived in dignity and complexity. Rather than accept the narrative of black urban depravity ascribed to them, their photographic juxtapositions disrupt and disorder the terms of life imposed upon them even in death. This collection of twinned photos simultaneously reclaim respectability and swagger; filiality and disobedience; dignity and rebellion; mourning, loss, melancholy, and lament. They reassemble a photographic archive of dispossession that enacts a future they anticipate will be robbed from them – a future they must image and re-author in the present in the face of impending death. Their practice of refusal consists of transforming mundane acts of image-making into quotidian practices of fugitivity.

I have argued throughout this volume that practicing refusal means embracing a state of black fugitivity, albeit not as a 'fugitive' on the run or seeking escape. It is not a simple act of opposition or resistance. It is neither a relinquishing of possibility nor a capitulation to negation. It is a fundamental renunciation of the terms imposed upon black subjects that reduce black life to always already suspect by refusing to accept or deny these terms as their truth. It is a quotidian practice of refusing the terms of impossibility that define the black subject in the twenty-first century logic of racial subordination.

Refusing the impossibility of black futurity in the contemporary moment demands extremely creative forms of fugitivity. Performing the imperiled state of one's own future

through photographs that simultaneous image both who you are and how your life will be effaced in death is at once a refusal and an affirmation of one's capacity to inhabit a future against all odds. It is as brave an act as looking into the eyes of police officers surrounding you, seeing the certainty of a lifetime of incarceration, and deciding to create an alternate future ('line of flight') than the one they had in store; for example, deciding not by surrendering as orded or attempting to flee, but putting a gun to your head and pulling the trigger instead.

The frequency of the *Tumblr* photos may be different from the images explored in the preceding chapters, yet their sitters also faced the probability of premature death in their own contexts. The difference between them is that the *Tumblr* sitters deploy the anterior enactment of death as a fugitive practice of refusal. They are photographic enactments that force us to reflect on the historical continuities between black folks' past, present, and future use of photography to embrace the future they want to see – *now*. Like Michelle Koerner and Alexander Weheliye, I too trace this notion of an anterior fugitivity back to the 'lines of flight' invoked be George Jackson in his revolutionary classic, *Soledad Brother*. As Koerner writes, "Jackson's line 'I may run…' announces that fugitivity, rather than simply being a renunciation of action, already carries with it an active construction: a line of flight composes itself as a search for a weapon. Disrupting the opposition of "flight or fight" that has often troubled the political understanding of fugitivity, Jackson's line affirms a politics where escape is always already a counterattack."[1]

[1] Koerner, 161.

My return to the photo of Terrence Johnson I misremembered as a mug shot reanimated an undeniable link between 1978 and 2015, yet is also connected me to the equally visceral affects of a third date: 1995. It was in 1995 that Johnson was paroled after serving nearly seventeen years in prison. During his nearly two decades in incarceration, he earned a GED and an Associate's and Bachelor's degree in business, and was accepted to Howard University law school. Two years after his release, following his divorce, facing eviction, and having had to withdraw from law school due to financial difficulties, Johnson and his brother were surrounded by police after robbing a bank in Aberdeen, Maryland. When told to surrender and lie on the ground, his brother obeyed. Johnson responded by taking a step toward the officers and shooting himself in the head. He died on his thirty-fourth birthday.

This book began with a black feminist mapping of the grammar of black futurity — a grammar of anteriority I defined in the tense of the future real conditional or *that which will have had to happen*. I began by describing my accountability to the forms of black feminist capture described by Hortense Spillers as an 'American Grammar Book' that continues to structure the lives of black folks in the contemporary moment. As surprising as it may seem at this juncture, I am still committed to the grammar of the future real conditional, in particular, an accountability to the *had to* it entails and the necessity of its (grammatically implied) 'must'? I am committed to the political necessity of *what will have had to happen,* because it is tethered to a different kind of 'must'. It is not a 'must' of historical certainty or Marxist teleology. It is a responsibility to create one's own future as a practice of survival. The future real conditional is an essential component of the black radical imagination as an existential grammatical practice of grappling with premature death, while maintaining an

active commitment to the every practice of creating another future. And it is this grammatical practice that constitutes my definition of *freedom*.

What is the frequency of these images? There are some photos are not quiet at all. Some reverberate loudly through the complex multi-modal frequencies of black fugitivity and black futurity.