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## The Death of Michael Brown and the Search for Justice in Black America

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*Aaron Coleman, left, joins other protesters marching in Ferguson, Missouri, August 11, 2014.*

Last Thursday, Theodore Wafer was found guilty of second-degree murder for shooting and killing Renisha McBride, the 19-year-old woman who arrived on Wafer's porch after a car accident the night of November 2, 2013. The verdict came as a surprise. Having witnessed a jury acquit George Zimmerman for the killing of Trayvon Martin, and another jury do the same for

Michael Dunn in the killing of Jordan Davis (though Dunn was convicted on other charges that will lead to prison time), the idea that anyone would be held responsible for killing a young black person seemed like a fairy tale. It was a concept that only existed in the far reaches of the imagination.

Wafer will be sentenced on August 20 and could spend the rest of his life in prison. It's what counts for justice in our current system. But that Wafer will likely die behind bars offers little solace, knowing that this fact will not prevent future Renisha McBrides from suffering fates similar to hers. For a moment, though, his guilty verdict offered a bit of relief.

That relief was short-lived. On Saturday, August 9, 18-year-old Michael Brown was shot and killed in the streets of Ferguson, Missouri, by a local police officer whose identity has not been released. Brown was walking with a friend, 22-year-old Dorian Johnson, on his way to his grandmother's residence in a nearby apartment complex. In an interview with MSNBC, Johnson says the two were walking in the street when a police car approached and the as-yet-unidentified officer instructed them to "get the fuck onto the sidewalk." They told the officer they were almost at their destination and would be out of the street in a minute. Johnson says at that point the officer slammed his brake, backed up and asked, "What'd you say?" while opening his car door and attempting to get out. The door hit Brown and then closed. Johnson says the officer then grabbed Brown by the neck.

He continues: "They're not wrestling so much as [the officer's] arm went from [Brown's] throat to now clenched on his shirt. It's like tug of war. He's trying to pull him in. He's pulling away, that's when I heard, 'I'm gonna shoot you.'"

According to Johnson, the first shot followed not too long after. He and Brown both started running, Johnson ducking behind a nearby parked car and Brown continued past him. The officer fired a second shot, this one hitting Brown in the back. Johnson says Brown then turned around with his hands in the air and said "I don't have a gun, stop shooting!" The officer ignored Brown's words and fired several more shots.

Parts of Johnson's version of the story are backed up by another eyewitness, Piaget Crenshaw, who has said "They shot him, and he fell. He put his arms up to let them know he was compliant, and that he was unarmed. And they shot him twice more, and he fell to the ground and died."

Johnson's account of the shooting, as told to MSNBC reporter Trymaine Lee, differs from what St. Louis County Police Chief Jon Belmar has told the press. "The genesis of this was a physical confrontation," he told CNN. He did not say what led to this confrontation, but asserted that Brown had physically assaulted the officer and a struggle over the weapon ensued. Brown was unarmed and the only casings recovered from the scene came from the officer's gun.

The details are always in dispute, but the result is always the same: a young black person is dead. More parents are in mourning. Another community is enraged.

The *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* editorial board wrote, "Michael Brown didn't get due process." It's worse than that. Michael Brown was robbed of his humanity. His future was stolen. His parent's pride was crushed. His friends' hearts were broken. His nation's contempt for black youth has been exposed. A whole generation of young black people are once again confronted with the

reality that they are not safe. Black America is left searching for that ever-elusive sense of justice. But what is justice?

Justice for Renisha would have looked like Michael Brown being able to attend college. Justice for Trayvon would have looked like Renisha McBride getting the help she needed the night of her accident. Justice for Oscar Grant would have looked like Trayvon Martin making it home to finish watching the NBA All-Star game, Skittles and iced tea in tow. And so on, and so on. Justice should be the affirmation of our existence.

In the absence of such justice, we take to the streets. We protest, we hold vigils and, yes, we riot. What options are left? Rioting/looting (what some would call rebellion) may not provide answers or justice. But what to do with the anger in the meantime? We are told to stay calm, but calm has not delivered justice either. Do we wait for the FBI to investigate? I guess, but what to do in the meantime, as the images coming from Ferguson echo Watts in 1965? We're told not to tear up our own communities, when time and time again we're reminded that they don't belong to us. Deaths like Michael Brown's tell us we don't belong here. What, then?

Counting the bodies is draining. With every black life we lose, we end up saying the same things. We plead for our humanity to be recognized. We pray for the lives of our young people. We remind everyone of our history. And then another black person dies.

Theodore Wafer's guilty verdict allowed us to breathe easy for a second, but the killing of Michael Brown sucked all the oxygen right back out of the room (or whatever was left after learning about Eric Garner. And John Crawford. And...). It's apparently a feature of what it means to be black in America: running from tragedy to tragedy, never having a moment to stop and catch your breath.