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The Black Bottom Line: Reflections on Ferguson, Black Lives Matter, and White Male Violence in America

*Houston A. Baker, Jr.**

During recent decades and especially in recent weeks and days, all walks of life seem to read out in violent terms. Politics, gender, sexuality, entertainment, race, religion, and academics have morphed into venues of violence and cultural mayhem. Journalism still salutes the canard “If it bleeds, it leads!” In present-day reportage, there scarcely seems any other lead. This forum addresses the bound-to-violence conjunctures of everyday life in the US and their entailments in and for the academy. Framing the issue in the context of the police shooting of Michael Brown seems prescient after Orlando and the murders of Alton Sterling and Philando Castile. The violence of these scenes allies and signifies along an indisputably violent trajectory of our nation’s founding and its specific gravity of white male privilege and accord. I will return to this point later.

Michael Brown was 18 years old and a recent high school graduate. On 9 August 2014, he and a companion entered a convenience store in their hometown of Ferguson. Brown stole two packages of cigarillos, and they shoved the storeowner away from the door, fleeing into the street. A police dispatcher reported the theft. White police officer Darren Wilson, on patrol in his squad car, spotted Brown walking down the street with his friend. He attempted to detain them for questioning. A scuffle ensued: Wilson’s gun fired; Brown and his companion ran; Wilson gave chase, stopped and

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exited his squad car, and commenced firing his semiautomatic pistol at the fleeing boys; Brown turned to face Wilson. In an instant a bullet crashed through the young man's skull. Deadly force was the Ferguson police response to two stolen packages of cigarillos.

Michael Brown's uncovered body remained in the sweltering summer street for hours. Ferguson, a predominantly black suburb of St. Louis, erupted at sundown. On subsequent evenings, militarized police with armored vehicles and chanting, violent protesters faced off in a reprise of long hot summers of the 1960s and 1970s. When two years before, a black teenager, Trayvon Martin, had been murdered by a community watch volunteer, George Zimmerman, whose rogue bravado and predatory stalking set off a firestorm of protest, the confederation known as Black Lives Matter was born. Now, in Ferguson, it suddenly had a new focus.

Legal proceedings surrounding the deaths of Brown and Martin resulted in the respective acquittals of Wilson and Zimmerman, just as the death of Freddie Gray has likewise led to legal exoneration for the several Baltimore police officers involved in his death. Grand juries and prosecutors exonerated these perpetrators of black teenage death. Incredulity and outrage filled streets at home and abroad as phalanxes of black, white, Asian American, Puerto Rican, and East Indian young activists of multiple economic registers and academic levels disrupted the status quo everywhere. Millennials shut down urban traffic flow, conducted die-ins and "blackouts," demanded, and were granted, meetings and conversations with major leaders of vaunted political and academic institutions. New scripts of accountability were drafted and instituted. Covert operations—such as the "disappearing" of evidence by police and politicians—were exposed. Many thousand voices and thousands of newly registered members thunderously enhanced the work of Black Lives Matter. The confederation became indisputably a major activist driving force of the nation. Black Lives Matter was voted first runner-up in *Time* magazine's "Person of the Year" selection for 2015.

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After Orlando, Baton Rouge, and St. Anthony, Minnesota, it is essential to remember that Black Lives Matter (BLM) was, in fact, born at the intersection of race and LGBT activist concerns. According to the BLM website: "Black Lives Matter affirms the lives of Black queer and trans folks, disabled folks, black-undocumented folks, folks with records, women and all Black lives along the gender spectrum." The intersectional orientation and reach of BLM remove it entirely from any narrow signification and/or

charge of nationalist or provincial racism. The very cast of its demographics demonstrated in the multicultural, multiple gender and sexuality, cross-class-and-age demographics of its participants is a bold refutation that BLM excludes, well, *anyone*. The aims and endeavors of the movement are set principally by young, energetic activists born between 1983 and 2001, often referred to as “Generation Y.” Their coalescence is marked by unstinting opposition to precisely the violent death and exclusion protocols of US history. Out of Ferguson and Sanford, and elsewhere, lightning bolts of organized, fearless, and committed activism rocked society. *Bringing the noise* against normalized tactics of US exclusion and violence is foundational to the work of BLM.

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Less than two miles from where I am writing today, there is an establishment named City Tavern, in other times known as the Merchants’ Coffee House. The restored and tourist-friendly present building stands at 138 South 2nd Street in the Old City section of Philadelphia. Around the corner on Chestnut Street sits Independence Hall, where the US Constitution was signed in 1787. Fifty-five delegates to the Constitutional Convention were party to the signing. All white men of more than sufficient means and lives of privilege, they drafted and signed a consensual political accord that guaranteed their exclusive power. Their accord also guaranteed the enslavement, disfranchisement, and exclusion of Native Americans, blacks, women, and non-freeholder males. By City Tavern accord, all certainly were *not* entitled to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Some were not even 100% human; they were three-fifths entities of labor. Only those just like the 55 present counted as “the people.” “Others” were explicitly consigned or bound by law to the violence and exclusion of a halfway freedom. One might say extant violence against black and enslaved millions was signed into general and *founding* accord at City Tavern in 1787. Present-day simulacra of that 1787 gathering are sometimes glimpsed in exclusive enclaves on college and university campuses. A tally of consumption on the night before the signing lends some credibility to the comparison. The itemized listing of consumption, taken from preserved records, includes 54 bottles of Madeira, 60 bottles of claret, eight bottles of whiskey, 22 bottles of porter, eight bottles of hard cider, 12 bottles of beer, and seven bowls of alcoholic punch.

On this summer afternoon in Philadelphia, 229 years later, the nation looks a mess. Presidential electoral campaigns have been a combination of violence, farce, and clumsy evasions. Finance for



Fig. 1 Jacob Lawrence, *The Migration Series*, Panel no. 15: *There were lynchings, between 1940 and 1941*. Casein tempera on hardboard 12 x 18 in. The Phillips Collection, Washington, DC, Acquired 1942. © 2016 The Jacob and Gwendolyn Knight Lawrence Foundation, Seattle / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

private and public education has been dramatically slashed; diminishing opportunity for quality learning at any level between prekindergarten and college graduation is a national reality. The black body is ever-increasingly subjected to violence. The black body racked by violence is the *chief* signifier of national abjection that can serve as a metonym for the nation's history. It is the body that recently has served Black Lives Matter uncannily as both a trope of exclusion and a scene of instruction for organized resistance. Consider this famous image from the oeuvre of the African American artist Jacob Lawrence. In her fine monograph "*Who set you flowin?": The African American Migration Narrative*," Farah Griffin presents a captivating analysis of "Panel 15" from Lawrence's *The Migration Series* (Figure 1). My interpretation of Lawrence's panel differs from Professor Griffin's, but her incisive work first brought the panel to my attention.

Here, a needle-sharp, gray-green branch extends from right to left. An empty hangman's noose dangles from its pointed end. The background sky is vacant. On a brownish shore in the foreground sits the orange, figural heap of a woman in mourning. The panel's caption reads: "Another cause [of black migration] was lynching. It was found that where there had been a lynching, the people who were reluctant to leave at first left immediately after this."

In one interpretation, Lawrence's suspended noose and the negative space surrounding it suggest unlimited folds of "invisible"

bodies yet to come. The distraught mourner summons a dark *Stabat Mater Dolorosa*: “We are the Sun/We are the dead stars/We are the black sky.” The panel is a brilliant representation of US historical violence against the black body. Its minimalist iconography transcends the local, transforming the negative space of the frame into a suggestive, uncanny metonym of the national brutality and death that is American history. For Michael Harper, the totality of this history is “the sound of a rifle cocking.” More discursively, one might suggest that the principal engine of this bloody record is enduring white male violence—endless braided dark loops of massacre, war, capital punishment, and lynching enacted to enhance white male privilege and wealth. Lawrence’s empty noose is finally not deferral, but simply the historical documenting of imminent, guaranteed death, violence, and injustice. The noose seems to me a fiercely imaginative emblem of economic protocols of American life that I call *the black bottom line*.

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Mass incarceration, wage slavery, state-sanctioned police violence against human lives, educational disparity, homophobia, and the criminal decimation by drones are our reigning state policy and praxis. And these present excesses of inhumanity are but manifestations of the historical workings of the *black bottom line*. In economic terms, *bottom line* refers to net earnings, net income, or earnings per share. *Bottom line* references any actions that increase or decrease net earnings, or, a company’s overall profit. Moreover, if a company’s net earnings exceed its liability or indebtedness, then its bottom line is said to be *in the black*. We may call to mind by way of illustration a graphic historical instance of *black bottom line* commerce.

On 22 May 1829, Reverend Robert Walsh, a clergyman of the Church of Ireland who had just spent 200 days in Brazil investigating the conditions of slaves, was on a British ship returning to England. The ship’s captain spotted a slaving vessel and pursued it for 30 hours, finally firing across the vessel’s bow and forcing it to heave to. The intercepted vessel was the *Feloz*, a Portuguese slave transport, and when Walsh and others boarded it, the vessel was discovered to contain 562 African captives—336 males and 226 women. Just 17 days to its destination on the coast of Brazil, the *Feloz* had already cast 55 black corpses overboard. As Reverend Walsh describes the scene he and his shipmates encountered when they boarded the *Feloz*:

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... the slaves were all inclosed [*sic*] under grated hatchways between decks. The space was so low that they sat between each other's legs and [were] stowed so close together there was no possibility of lying down or at all changing their position. . . . they were all branded like sheep with the owner's marks of different forms. . . . the circumstance which struck us most forcibly was how it was possible for such a number of human beings to exist, packed up and wedged together as tight as they could cram. . . . ("Aboard a Slave Ship, 1829," *EyeWitness to History*, 2000. Web.)

If the *Feloz* had not been intercepted, it may well have reached Bahia, where its ill-fated captives would have been sold for the equivalent of millions of current US dollars. The reward for the *Feloz*'s merchants and traders would indubitably have landed them in the black. They would have boasted a handsome black bottom line.

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Driven by ever-expanding demands for slave labor, the holds of slave ships were packed ever tighter. Practices of the trade grew ever more brutal. A generally agreed accounting suggests that as many as 12 million Africans were torn from their homelands and viciously incarcerated by the trade. One might say, then, that the transatlantic slave trade effected an inverse of Friedrich Nietzsche's "transvaluation of all values." The vaunted Christianity of merchants, slave traders, and plantation owners assuredly did not elevate the interests of the weak over those of the strong. A rapacious transatlantic religion plundered every accessible vulnerability or weakness of African security and self-possession. The trade acted in religion's name only, not in the true religious offices of compassion for the sanctity and well-being of the black body. We hear the ship captain in Robert Hayden's brilliant poem "Middle Passage" implore the heavens as follows: "We pray that Thou wilt grant, O Lord, / safe passage to our vessels bringing / heathen souls unto Thy chastening." The captain's invocation is mercantile hypocrisy writ large, barely masking the transatlantic slave trade's avaricious lust for robust black bottom lines across nations.

The signal motive of the West's centuries-long commerce with Africa has univocally been a refulgent black bottom line. All valuations, philosophies, and offices of religious life as well as civil society have eternally combined in a single drive: the transformation of black bodies into white gain and the establishment and maintenance of the material superiority and axiological supremacy of white place and station. The most valued and socially validated conversion of African

bodies by the West was unequivocally *not* a religious one. Rather, it was the transmutation of free black bodies into mercantile commodities for abject labor in Western settler-colonial domains of white supremacy. The so-called New World was ordained and moved exclusively by white wealth and dominance extracted from the black bottom line.

The energies of all colonial agencies were dedicated to creating and preserving black slave-derived wealth. The inscribed laws of such colonial provinces make their prescribed ends of wealth and white dominance clear. Slavery in the colony of Virginia serves as a prime example. What was described in 1619 as “twenty negres” arrived by ship at Jamestown and were sold. The inaugural status of these black bodies is not fully known. What we do know is they were not immediately decreed slaves, or indentured in perpetuity. It seems they moved much in the manner of white indentured servants until Virginia white colonists’ anxieties over wealth and stature (and most decidedly *the black bottom line*) troubled the general colonial welfare. How could white colonists expect to sustain both their profits and status if “blackness” was not regulated? Keepers of Virginia set to work at the laws. The resultant mandates were termed *slave laws*. A representative sampling of such legislation follows.

Virginia, 1639: “Act XI. All persons except the African slaves are provided with arms and ammunitions or be fined at the pleasure of the governor of the council.”

Virginia, 1662, Act XII: “Whereas some doubts have arisen whether children got by any Englishman upon a Negro shall be a slave or Free, Be it therefore enacted and declared by this present Grand assembly, that all children born in this country shall be held bond or free according to the condition of the mother.”

Virginia, 1667: “Act 111. Whereas some doubts have arisen whether children are slaves by birth . . . should by virtue of their baptism be made free, it is enacted that baptism does not alter the condition to the person as to his bondage or freedom, masters freed from this doubt may more carefully propagate Christianity by permitting slaves to be admitted to the sacrament.”

It scarcely requires noting that any and all humans of “Negro,” “Mulatto,” or “Indian” designation—once trepanned and sold into slavery—were legally condemned by the laws of the Virginia colony to slavery in perpetuity. The same status and fate branded their offspring. There is no ambiguity here. The designs and ends of slaveholding power and privilege in the Americas were designed for white

benefit by way of the *black bottom line*. Whatever needed to be mandated and enforced to achieve handsome profit was, and has been legally, enacted in colonies of the European Atlantic and through the history of the US. From its founding, slavery was always destined to become the law and custom of the country. Erasure of the humanity of the black body was the first order of American law and order.

The Constitution dissected the black body into a three-quarter-human grotesque of subjugation. The Civil War left putatively freed black bodies naked before the forces of white supremacy. Treasonous warmongers of the Confederacy were restored to power. Two postwar constitutional amendments provided counters to black bondage and abjection, and then instituted everlasting black servitude in the coded justice of the Thirteenth Amendment: “Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction.” The vistas of *black bottom line* “justice” (which is but legal pillage under the eminent domain of white supremacy) are vast. Such legality strips decency and coherence from the life and being of the black majority. The translation of such unrestrained adjudications in the name of “law and order” have translated in our own era, for example, as Hillary Clinton’s demarcation of young black men and women as “superpredators.” The connections, the absolute historical through-line of continuity between the transatlantic trade, Virginia colonial mandates, and the unpunished recent murders of so many black men and women still seem unclear to some. Such lack of clarity, I think, can only result from official distortion and willful ignorance of facts. Then, of course, there is always at issue and at fault the ineluctable greed and complicity of a media transfixed entirely by the fortunes of its own *black bottom line*.

6. Epilogue

Is it a stretch to invoke the *black bottom line* as a frame for analyzing US history? Present-day numbers starkly capture the bottom line actuality of historical, legal, and academic occupancy and hierarchies in the US. For example, 80% of full-time faculty in degree-granting US colleges and universities are white, and the vast majority of those employees are male. This may appear to be a historically acceptable norm, but it represents a truly outsized occupancy alongside the few percentages for black faculty. Those numbers range between 2% and 5% full-time black faculty.

If we turn an eye on the US judiciary, we encounter a recent study titled “The Gavel Gap: Who Sits in Judgment on State Courts?” The study was conducted and reported by Professors Tracy

George (Vanderbilt University) and Albert H. Yoon (University of Toronto). Speaking of its findings, George writes:

A state court judge has tremendous power and discretion in resolving cases and there is limited oversight of the work they do. A state court judge is not only the most significant person resolving thousands of legal disputes that directly impact every day Americans, they are often the *only* person. They are the last word in most cases.

George and Yoon report that more than half of state trial judges and state appellate judges are white men. They go on to state that white men are the most *overrepresented* group, at nearly double their relative numbers compared to the US population.

Academics and the law are, of course, correlated in their demographics by bottom lines starkly disproportional to the median income and wealth of most of the US population. And this disproportion pales in comparison with corporate, financial, and technological sectors. The gulf between the 1% and the low-rise 99% is not a mystery. It is a clear structural outcome of white male violence and supremacy from early days of settler colonialism to the assaultive rallies and racism of the 2016 presidential election season.

It is tempting for a humanities scholar who has survived unending “culture wars” to conclude with a somber critique of white exclusion and violence in the world of the academy. Perhaps the best course is to suggest what I think are enlightening readings for US literary–historical analysis that may help us through these bleak times, when the black bottom line is constantly being measured by the corpses of black men. The readings span creativity and scholarship in law, literature, history, criminal justice, economics, politics, and mental illness. Some of these texts are familiar to you; others not: Ta-Nehisi Coates’s *Between the World and Me* (2015); Tiana Clark’s poetry in whatever form is accessible to the reader; Isabel Wilkerson’s *The Warmth of Other Suns* (2010); Michelle Alexander’s *The New Jim Crow* (2010); Charlotte Pierce-Baker’s *This Fragile Life* (2012); Eddie Glaude, Jr.’s, *Democracy in Black* (2016); Edward Baptist’s *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism* (2014); and Elizabeth Hinton’s *From the War on Poverty to the War on Crime: The Making of Mass Incarceration in America* (2016). The foregoing recommendations are only suggestive. They are rich in testimony and wisdom about why black lives matter. They are eloquent in their analyses and eloquent in their decoding of the black bottom line. They guide us toward a more profoundly equitable and caring American future.