

Marc Lamont Hill,

Nobody: Casualties of

America's War on the

Vulnerable, From Ferguson to

Flint and Beyond

(Simon & Schuster, 2016)

Preface

This is a book about what it means to be Nobody in twenty-first-century America.

To be Nobody is to be vulnerable. In the most basic sense, all of us are vulnerable; to be human is to be susceptible to misfortune, violence, illness, and death. The role of government, however, is to offer forms of protection that enhance our lives and shield our bodies from foreseeable and preventable dangers. Unfortunately, for many citizens—particularly those marked as poor, Black, Brown, immigrant, queer, or trans—State power has only increased their vulnerability, making their lives more rather than less unsafe.

To be Nobody is to be subject to State violence. In recent years, thousands of Americans have died at the hands of law enforcement, a reality made even more shameful when we consider how many of these victims were young, poor, mentally ill, Black, or unarmed. The cases of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri; Eric Garner in New York City; Kathryn Johnston in Atlanta; Trayvon Martin in Sanford, Florida; Freddie Gray in Baltimore; and Sandra Bland in Hempstead, Texas, have forced a stubborn nation to come to terms with the realities of police corruption, brutality, and deeply

entrenched racism. While media coverage and global activism have turned these individuals into household names, they are not, sadly, exceptional. Instead, they represent the countless Americans who die daily, and unnecessarily, at the hands of those who are paid to protect and serve them.

To be Nobody is to also confront systemic forms of State violence. Long before he was standing in front of the barrel of Darren Wilson's gun, Michael Brown was the victim of broken schools and evaporated labor markets. Prior to being choked to death by Daniel Pantaleo, Eric Garner lived in a community terrorized by policing practices that transform neighborhoods into occupied territories and citizens into enemy combatants. Sandra Bland's tragic death sequence did not begin with a negligent jailer or an unreasonable cop but with a criminal justice system that has consistently neglected the emotional, physical, and psychological well-being of Black women and girls. For the vulnerable, it is the violence of the ordinary, the terrorism of the quotidian, the injustice of the everyday, that produces the most profound and intractable social misery.

To be Nobody is to be abandoned by the State. For decades now we have witnessed a radical transformation in the role and function of government in America. An obsession with free-market logic and culture has led the political class to craft policies that promote private interests over the public good. As a result, our schools, our criminal justice system, our military, our police departments, our public policy, and virtually every other entity engineered to protect life and enhance prosperity have been at least partially relocated to the private sector. At the same time, the private sector has kept its natural commitment to maximizing profits rather than investing in people. This arrangement has left the nation's vulnerable wedged between the Scylla of negligent government and the

Charybdis of corporate greed, trapped in a historically unprecedented state of precarity.

To be Nobody is to be considered disposable. In New Orleans, we saw the natural disaster of Hurricane Katrina followed by a grossly unnatural government response, one that killed thousands of vulnerable citizens and consigned many more to refugee status. In Flint, Michigan, we are witnessing this young century's most profound illustration of civic evil, an entire city collectively punished with lead-poisoned water for the crime of being poor, Black, and politically disempowered. Every day, the nation's homeless, mentally ill, drug addicted, and poor are pushed out of institutions of support and relocated to jails and prisons. These conditions reflect a prevailing belief that the vulnerable are unworthy of investment, protection, or even the most fundamental provisions of the social contract. As a result, they can be erased, abandoned, and even left to die.

Without question, Nobodyness is largely indebted to race, as White supremacy is foundational to the American democratic experiment. The belief that White lives are worth more than others—what Princeton University scholar Eddie Glaude calls the “value gap”—continues to color every aspect of our public and private lives.¹ This belief likewise compromises the lives of vulnerable White citizens, many of whom support political movements and policies that close ranks around Whiteness rather than ones that enhance their own social and economic interests.

While Nobodyness is strongly tethered to race, it cannot be divorced from other forms of social injustice. Instead, it must be understood through the lens of “intersectionality,” the ways that multiple forms of oppression operate simultaneously against the vulnerable.² It would be impossible to examine the 2015 killing of Mya Hall by National Security Agency police without understanding

how sexism and transphobia conspire with structural racism to endanger Black trans bodies. We cannot make sense of Sandra Bland's tragic death without recognizing the impact of gender and poverty in shaping the current carceral state. To understand the complexity of oppression, we must avoid simple solutions and singular answers.

Despite the centrality of race within American life, Nobodiness cannot be understood without an equally thorough analysis of class. Unlike other forms of difference, class creates the material conditions and relations through which racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression are produced, sustained, and lived. This does not mean that all forms of injustice are due to class antagonism, nor does it mean that all forms of domination can be automatically fixed through universal class struggle. Rather, it means that we cannot begin to address the various forms of oppression experienced by America's vulnerable without radically changing a system that defends class at all costs.

This book is my attempt to tell the stories of those marked as Nobody. Based on extensive research, as well as my time on the ground—in Ferguson, Baltimore, New York City, Atlanta, Hempstead, Flint, and Sanford—I want to show how the high-profile and controversial cases of State violence that we've witnessed over the past few years are but a symptom of a deeper American problem. Underneath each case is a more fundamental set of economic conditions, political arrangements, and power relations that transforms everyday citizens into casualties of an increasingly intense war on the vulnerable. It is my hope that this book offers an analysis that spotlights the humanity of these "Nobodies" and inspires principled action.

I.

Nobody

Forty years from now, we will still be talking about what happened in Ferguson. It will be mentioned in high school history textbooks. Hollywood studios will make movies about it, as they now make movies about Selma. Politicians will talk about "how far we have come since Ferguson" in the same way they talk today about how far we have come since Little Rock, Greensboro, or Birmingham.

Ferguson is that important.

But why?

After all, to some, Ferguson isn't as worthy as other markers on the historical timeline of social-justice struggle. And Ferguson's native son Michael Brown, whose tragic death in 2014 put the small Missouri town on the map, was certainly no traditional hero. He did not lead a march or give a stirring speech. He did not challenge racial apartheid by refusing to sit in the back of a bus, attempting to eat at a "Whites only" lunch counter, or breaking the color barrier in a major professional sport. He wrote no books, starred in no movies, occupied no endowed chair at a major university, and held no political office. He was no Jackie Robinson, no Rosa Parks, no