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After the unarmed teenager Michael Brown was shot dead by Police Officer Darren Wilson on August 14, 2014, in Ferguson, Missouri, his body lay for more than four hours in the street where he fell. The sun was at its highest. Relatives and neighbors report how they saw him lying in a pool of blood while the police secured the area with yellow tape. He was covered up only after a large number of people had gathered around the crime scene, some filming the body with their cell phones. One neighbor describes how the trail of blood in front of the body was "beet red" when she got to the scene and hours later, when Brown was taken to the morgue, "it was black."

There are three images of Michael Brown in our collective memory. There is the photograph of his dead body lying uncovered in the street in Ferguson. He lies face down on the asphalt, his arms beside him. A thick trail of blood runs from his head, and seems to be an extension of his body. A yellow tape – "Police Line - Do Not Cross" – frames the crime scene. And then there are two images of Brown taken before he died that have been circulating in different media and on personal blogs. One is his graduation picture from high school. He is wearing a traditional green cap and gown with a red ribbon around his neck. The other is a photograph of Michael Brown giving the middle finger to his webcam.

These two photographs of Brown when he was alive are being used to, purportedly, reveal his true character. Either he was a thug, as the webcam photo seems to suggest, a thug whom Police Officer Darren Wilson was justified in killing. Such, we can say, was the conclusion made in the legal aftermath to the killing. The grand jury decided not to indict Officer Wilson and the justice department’s report on the incident concluded that Wilson's fear of Brown was "not unreasonable." Or – going with the other image – Michael Brown was a young man on his way to attending college, a teenager whose future was cruelly taken away from him. We can say that there is the image of the tragedy – the teenager’s corpse left in the street – and the
I frame Michael Brown as a tragic teenager and include literary tragedy in the interpretation of his downfall in order to eschew such determinations of his character as either a thug or a student with a bright future. More specifically I enlist Sophocles’s *Antigone* (441 BC) in an anachronistic analysis of Brown’s tragedy. The injustice in Brown’s and other unarmed teenagers’ deaths is clear. But what makes them tragic? When the black body is cast as a threat to law and order, it might be impossible to appeal to standard notions of innocence, right to protection, and fair trial. Police brutality against black people is increasingly being documented as digital images and videos become widely circulated. But, the fact that we now have immediate, visual access to these incidents does not necessarily mean that the truth about them is any less a matter of dispute. In 1991, Los Angeles Police Department police officers brutally beat Rodney King, a black man. A bystander videotaped the entire beating. In her essay on the King beating, Judith Butler argues that there is “no simple recourse to the visible, to visual evidence, […] it still and always calls to be read.”

When the visual is “schematized by racism,” visual evidence such as the video of the Rodney King beating or of 12-year-old Tamir Rice playing with a pellet gun in a Cleveland, Ohio, park before the police drove up and immediately shot him, comes to prove not the brutality of racially biased law enforcement, but the threat that the black body poses – even when being beaten, and even when being the body of a child. The task, according to Butler, is not just to contest these official readings of the visual evidence with readings that might seem more evident: that is, that neither the man being beaten nor the child playing constituted a reasonable danger to armed police officers. The point is that in a visual field structured by racist paranoia “no black person can seek recourse to the visible as the sure ground of evidence.” The black person is constituted through the white person’s fear, and police violence against the black person becomes an exchange for the violence that he, because he is black, is always about to exercise.

Literary tragedy stages bodies that act and speak ambiguously, that is, humans who are both guilty and innocent and who both act and are acted upon. In my view, tragedy is not an authentic source of a universal condition of suffering or a way to ratify human suffering; instead, it puts forth the possibility of a different imaginary. As a world of ambiguity, partial agency, limited autonomy, affect and conflict,
literary tragedy invites a consideration of a teenage subject whose way of life can be described in similar terms.

Just as it is not uncommon for a teenager to graduate from high school, it is not uncommon for them to publicize a fuck-you gesture on social media. What we can infer from the above image is simply that Brown behaved like a teenager. As I will show, however, teenage behavior – and its imagery – does not for the tragic teenagers count as markers of innocence, potentiality, and harmless play. On the contrary, the black adolescent’s appearance and behavior have served and continue to serve to justify their imprisonment, and their tragic defiance has been cast as a threat to normal order. Brown’s middle finger gesture can be considered both a childish gesture – a banal “playing it cool” – and a more political signal, an angry response to a society that wants him to grow up, get his act together, and be a responsible adult citizen. But it is a society – with its economic structures, history of racism and system of mass incarceration – that does not necessarily make that growing-up possible for him and other black adolescents. His gesture can also be considered an image of something in between innocence and a threat. It is a gesture that represents a specific zone worth investigating – that of the tragic teenager who disrupts normal conversation, is overtly emotional, and who renders unstable the judgments made upon them.

Sophocles’s Antigone presents the problem of not coming of age: Antigone is unmarried and relentless and she dies before she reaches mature adulthood. She is an adolescent who does not confirm a developmental narrative of the subject. Furthermore, she dies struggling with a representative of the law, and the world of the tragic drama presents itself as a legal spectacle wherein problems of guilt and innocence are not easily settled. Sophocles’s drama questions the public nature of a dead body and stages a young woman’s fight against a sovereign’s ruling. It poses a set of questions about the relationship between law and affect in a democratic culture through and with which we can think about the contemporary tragedies of the black adolescent. There is a conspicuous Sophoclean ring to this young man’s death: Brown’s dead body was left to rot in the sun like Polyneices, the enemy of Creon’s state. While Polyneices came to the city of Thebes with an Argive army, Brown was unarmed, a petty criminal perhaps, but unarmed. His death
ignited smoldering tensions in the community, and protests erupted nationwide over racial bias in policing and over general discrimination and disadvantaging of African American citizens. During the immediate protests in the city of Ferguson, military forces were brought in to support police officers in their effort to control the protesters, who were referred to as "enemy forces."

The dead corpses of Polyneices and Brown immediately pose questions about who counts as a human. Who deserves a proper burial, that is, to have his or her body treated with respect when they are no longer living: this is a human rights issue, and the visual dimension of its problematic is horridly explicit: In *Antigone*, not only shall Polyneices not have the burial rituals performed for him, he "shall be left, unmourned, for the carrion birds to defile and feast on." While the police argued that Michael Brown was not taken to the morgue sooner because of the disorder that immediately rose in the community, this prolonged public display of his dead body was in any case a visual reminder of how the human right to a decent burial did not immediately apply to him.

That the police would leave an enemy body unburied reads as a show of power. Burial and public grief are, and have always been, issues of political symbolism. But it quickly becomes something more than that, as we see in *Antigone*, where Creon is challenged by young Antigone's dissent and escalates his show of power such that even his own son and the blind, but all-seeing prophet Tiresias, come to question the reasonableness of his decisions. Creon loses control of the spectacle of Polyneices's body that he has left to rot outside the polis. At the same moment, he assigns Antigone to a spectacular death process in which she shall perform this signifying work.

We can associate Brown not only with the corpse of Polyneices but also with his defiant sister Antigone, a body sentenced to a living death. The play is not just about the symbolic image of vulnerability, lamentation, and the dead body, it also deals with how the dead body – or the body sentenced to a process of death – can thwart the interpellation it is given by the state.

**Tragic teenagers**

[M]others and fathers raise their kids right and have "the talk" about how to respond if stopped by a police officer – "yes, sir," "no, sir" – but still fear that
something terrible may happen when their child walks out the door, still fear that kids being stupid and not quite doing things right might end in tragedy.

US President Barack Obama, Remarks by the President at Memorial Service for Fallen Dallas Police Officers, July 12, 2016

Boys will be boys being boys feeling their capacity heaving butting heads righting their wrongs in the violence of aggravated adolescence charging forward in their way experiencing the position of positioning which is a position for only one kind of boy face it know it for the other boy for the other boys the fists the feet criminalized already are weapons already exploding the landscape and the litigious hitting back is life imprisoned.

Claudia Rankine, Citizen – An American Lyric

I read the black adolescent in contemporary US society as a tragic teenager. By referring to this diverse group of individuals as a single entity, I do not intend to make generalizing claims about their individual psychologies or different ways of life, but to evoke a range of statistical facts that show that black youth have been disproportionately interpellated by mechanisms of criminal justice. Black adolescents are stopped-and-searched, arrested, and killed by the police on a scale that demonstrates considerable racial bias in the justice system. According to demographic data from 2010, African Americans represent 26 percent of juvenile arrests, 44 percent of the youth who are detained, 46 percent of the youth who are judicially waived to criminal court, and 58 percent of the youth admitted to state prisons. The black adolescent's citizenship is framed by racism on both micro- and macro-levels, that is, they are subject to individual discrimination and stereotyping, and they grow up in a society where relations of domination and control are structured along the lines of biological difference.

While structural racism is not limited to the period or experience of adolescence, the ways that youth is framed and experienced amplify the injustices that people of color are faced with in contemporary US society. The difficulties that the black adolescent encounters with occupying the "domain of the human" or with making him- or herself recognizable within the human/citizen relations that structure our social distribution of rights and responsibility occur in and through the workings of criminal justice, age, gender, and sexuality. A young person's citizenship is not yet settled into recognizable forms of jobs and marriage, and while their bodies,
speech, and actions are central modalities in both sentimental nostalgia and national tales of futurity, the liminality that black youth occupy undoes fixed relations of representation and accountability and occasions ambiguous speech and affective perplexity that can be considered tragic modalities.

As the above quotations from former President Barack Obama and poet Claudia Rankine suggest, "normal speech" also becomes disturbed by the liminality of the black adolescent. Parents' anxious efforts to discipline their children's behavior do not guarantee their safety when confronted by police; their pedagogic "talk" – even when successful – might prove futile against "tragedy," a term that even the politician employs to describe the current state of affairs. And, as Rankine's poem demonstrates with its punctuation-less sentences, in a confrontation with the police, the idiom "boys will be boys" no longer designates a certain innocent unruliness in the case of black kid, since his "fists" and "feet" are considered "weapons," since his body is already criminalized. Rankine shows, by way of her poetic rendering, how the liminality of the black teenager shatters any stable relations between words and meaning, body and action, and law and justice.

In *Between the World and Me* (2015), Ta-Nehisi Coates addresses his 15-year-old son, who on the night it was announced that Officer Darren Wilson would not be indicted for his shooting of Michael Brown went to his room and cried. Coates writes: "The men who had left his body in the street would never be punished. It was not my expectation that anyone would ever be punished. But you were young and still believed." Coates's book is a letter to his son, an African American adolescent, as were Trayvon Martin (1995–2012), Tamir Rice (2002–2014), Jordan Davies (1995–2012), Keith McLeod (1996–2015), Laquan McDonald (1997–2014), Michael Brown (1996–2014), David Joseph (1999–2016), and many other teenagers who have been fatally shot by either police officers or vigilantes. The father of this boy thinks it dishonest or futile to comfort his son: "I heard you crying. I came in five minutes after, and I didn't hug you, and I didn't comfort you, because I thought it would be wrong to comfort you." His letter is not a hopeful one, but rather seems to be about preparing his son for a life of injustice.

These injustices are tied to a history of colonization, slavery, and segregation. For the black adolescent, "[t]he past is a life sentence, a blunt instrument aimed at tomorrow," Rankine writes. The African-American adolescent in contemporary America is, as Coates expresses it, "cast into a race in which the wind is always at
his or her life is framed by tragedy. Since the US was built on slavery, claiming justice from it or opposing state entities for the African American citizen is a complex matter. It is no less a complex matter for a black adolescent on the verge of obtaining the full rights and responsibilities of American citizenship. As in literary tragedy, the past keeps repeating itself in the contemporary tragedies of the black adolescent. This repetition of the history of racial injustice is aesthetic in the sense that it produces sensibilities that sustain its legitimacy.

The Hoodie

A social organization in which the black adolescent is disproportionately criminalized requires cultural renditions of physical and psychic space for its categorizations, divisions, and aesthetics to seem self-evident. What I identify as the tragic frames of the black adolescent’s citizenship is a modality of the sensible (meaning what is apprehended by the senses) formed by processes of categorizing, separation, and aestheticizing. First, this “distribution of the sensible,” which, in Jacques Rancière’s conceptualization sets the divisions between what is visible and invisible, audible and inaudible, sayable and unsayable, works through processes of classifying and naming. For example, definitions of the human and the less than human serve the history – and authorization – of slavery. Second, the way society and politics are organized separates and divides groups in accordance with these categorizations such that they prevent, for example, poor black and white communities from coming together in a common political struggle for social justice. Third, as Nicholas Mirzoeff argues, political power functioning as a distribution of the sensible “makes this separated classification seem right and hence aesthetic.” The social order functions by establishing possible modes of perception and by determining what feels right, pleasing, and beautiful.

In 2012, 17-year-old Trayvon Martin was fatally shot by neighborhood watch member George Zimmerman in Sanford, Florida. On the evening of February 26, Martin, who was visiting his father’s fiancé in the gated community of Retreat at Twin Lakes, went to a convenience store and purchased candy and a can of iced tea. As he was returning from the store, Zimmerman, who was voluntarily patrolling the residential area as part of a neighborhood watch program, spotted Martin and made a “non-emergency call” to the police to report a “suspicious guy.” He described Martin as a black person in his late teens wearing a gray hoodie, walking
suspiciously around. The dispatcher told him an officer was on the way, whereupon Zimmerman stated: "Okay. These assholes, they always get away..." He repeated this biased frustration by referring to what he conceived as a general pattern when asked by the police dispatcher where Martin was heading: "The back entrance.... Fucking punks." When Zimmerman confirmed that he was pursuing Martin, the dispatcher said: "Alright, we don’t need you to do that." Within eight minutes of Zimmerman’s call to the police, Martin was shot in the chest. The watch volunteer argued that he was acting in self-defense and was not charged with the shooting initially. This was due, Florida police argued, to the state’s "Stand Your Ground" law, which prohibits the prosecution of a person who uses deadly force if he or she reasonably believes they are under threat of serious injury.

Within a few weeks, the story became nationally known and rallies calling for Zimmerman’s arrest took place across the country. The "Million Hoodies March," thus dubbed because Martin was wearing a hooded sweatshirt on the night of his death, gathered supporters in New York City on March 22 where his parents demanded that Zimmerman be prosecuted: "Trayvon Martin is you. Trayvon Martin did matter. And I just want New York to know that we’re not going to stop until we get justice for Trayvon." The following day, former President Barack Obama commented on the case and told reporters, "if I had a son, he’d look like Trayvon", and called for a full investigation of the case. Forty-six days after the killing, on April 11, 2012, the state of Florida charged Zimmerman with second-degree murder. The state attorney argued that Zimmerman racially profiled an innocent teenager. Against this, the defense argued that he acted out of self-defense. An all-female jury consisting of five white jurors and one considered non-white acquitted Zimmerman of second-degree murder and manslaughter on July 13, 2013.

Borrowing Mirzoeff’s term, we can say that "visualization" as a production of a visuality that serves as sensible evidence for the legitimacy of power relations is central to how black adolescents are being framed today. Mirzoeff’s point is that history is an imaginary practice that employs visuality to suture authority to power. The visuality of the hoodie relates to the visualization of slavery, because it is a visual framing of the African American adolescent that marks him as a rightful target of violent policing, regardless of circumstance. For example, it was raining on the evening that Martin was wearing his hooded sweatshirt, and a hooded sweatshirt in other contexts is considered a standard piece of sportswear. However,
despite the fact of his freedom as an American citizen, Martin, because he was a black adolescent, was seen as a threat to order. The history of slavery and segregation is part of the contemporary rendition of the psychic and physical space of the black adolescent, the space in which tragedies such as the death of an unarmed teenager occur. "Slavery is both literal and metaphorical: it is the very real trauma of chattel slavery and an expression of a technically 'free' social relation that is felt to be metaphorically equivalent to slavery."  

The hoodie that Martin was wearing became a symbol for racial justice protests and movements, which insisted that Zimmerman's racial profiling of Martin was an expression of a general pattern of human rights abuses in the US. While not entirely contrasting such a reading of Martin's death as caused by his appearance, other commentators blamed Martin himself for bringing about the conflict because he wore the hooded sweatshirt in a residential area. Fox News television network host Geraldo Rivera stated that he thought Martin's clothing was as much responsible for his death as George Zimmerman was, and that minority youth's "thug wear" rouses fear and violence: "You have to recognize that this whole stylizing yourself as a gangster – you're going to be a gangster want-to-be. Well, people are going to perceive you as a menace, that's what happens." One juror, who was interviewed shortly after the trial, reported that she did not think that skin color was a factor in the case, but that enough evidence had been brought forth to show that Martin's actions could reasonably be read as instigating fear: "Anybody would think anybody walking down the road, stopping and turning and looking – if that's exactly what happened – is suspicious." As the juror did indeed call the event a tragedy, she insisted that that action was the problem and the outcome of the sequence of events was thus inevitable: "It's a tragedy this happened. But it happened. [...] And I think both were responsible for the situation they had gotten themselves into. I think both of them could have walked away. It just didn't happen." By refusing to tie the tragic action to the problem of racialization, the juror exhibited blindness to the policing of the visual, which is obviously involved in this event. By using the term "tragedy," the juror at the same time shut down any reflection on tragic experience by immediately defining tragedy as a no-fault accident: "it just didn't happen" (my emphasis). The term 'tragedy' can function both to conceal and to reveal injustices and relations between affect and judgment. It can be evoked to put a stop to further reflection or attention to underlying structural patterns of, and responsibilities for, contemporary injustices. In other words, saying that something is
tragic can mean that something is sad and regrettable, but ultimately inevitable. This seems to be the juror’s understanding. But ‘tragedy’ can also be evoked to consider these relations in a critical light, and to ask about our social divisions and their affective grounds.

The adolescent is not yet a legally competent subject; he or she is neither child nor adult, neither innocent nor fully responsible. As minors they are considered unable to manage their own affairs, but still they can be prosecuted for their actions. As such their self-representation is framed by a system of justice that considers them both incapable and responsible at the same time. But, as Antigone demonstrates, that does not preclude them from harboring a sense of justice and from contesting the legal framings of their speech and actions. Before I attend to how Antigone and Brown speak from their liminal positions, I shall argue that they are subject to processes of delegitimization that cast them as bodies out of control and as not quite human and thereby make their fatality appear as a necessity.

**Tragic Flaw / Legacies**

The deaths of Antigone and Brown are tragic events that are both part of a more general system of punishment as well as legal spectacles that involve a young person who disturbs the order of the city. Antigone disturbs the distribution of grief and reverence in the immediate aftermath of civil war; Brown was walking in the middle of the street wearing socks with marijuana leaves on them and refusing to obey the orders of a police officer.

It can be argued that both Antigone and contemporary black adolescents bring about their own deaths, which is what constitutes their tragedies, in accordance with Aristotle’s argument that tragedy is the representation of a universal action, where what ought to happen, happens. Aristotle claimed “Universal means the kinds of things which it suits a certain kind of person to say or do, in terms of probability or necessity; poetry aims for this, even though attaching names to the agents.” (1451b5)

While Antigone, Trayvon Martin, and Michael Brown share the fact that their actions led to their deaths, Aristotle also stated that such falling into misfortune is caused by *hamartia* (1453a16), by an error in the character of the tragic hero. In what sense...
do Antigone and black adolescents share a tragic flaw that makes their deaths seem inevitable or necessary?

The misfortune that befalls the tragic heroes is not something out of their control; it is not simply the fact that the dark forces of fate, of the gods, or of the contemporary political system bring the disaster upon them. Rather, evoking Schelling's thoughts on the tragic entanglements of freedom and necessity, we can say that there would not be any tragedy without freedom and some degree of complicity on our part in the misfortune that destroys us. But the question remains whether the fact that these tragic teenagers bring about their deaths by their own actions makes their deaths a necessity. And if not, as Judith Butler asks, "under what non-necessary conditions does [their] fatality come to appear as necessity?" In other words, what legacies are being acted through and upon? In my analysis, Antigone's and Brown's tragic erring is tied to the (legal) framing of their downfall. They are framed as tragically flawed in relation to a past that they come to embody. Antigone – on her way to her death – becomes a figure of her father's incestuous debt; whereas Brown – first as socially dead, then as corpse – becomes the colonial image of the slave body that must be controlled.

Officer Darren Wilson's testimony to the grand jury, which made the decision on November 24, 2014, not to indict him, is replete with imagery that depicts Brown in the well-known trope of the dangerous black man. Wilson repeatedly stressed the size of Michael Brown's body, that he, Wilson, "felt like a 5-year-old holding onto Hulk Hogan" and that Brown had an "aggressive, intense face." When Wilson arrived at the point in his narrative that recounted his shooting Brown in the head, we understand – through this imagery – that Brown's death is a consequence of his "looking like a demon."

And then when it [the bullet] went into him, the demeanor on his face went blank, the aggression was gone, it was gone, I mean, I knew he stopped, the threat was stopped. When he fell, he fell on his face. (State of Missouri v. Darren Wilson, Officer Wilson's testimony)

As was clear in Trayvon Martin's case, the visual modalities in which the tragic teenagers' deaths are expressed and experienced are part of the justification of them. Because Antigone stages bodily presences that haunt the ordering of the polis, the play provides a vocabulary or structure for understanding the processes
of dehumanization as well as the articulation of suffering that are at stake in such spectacles.

Death worlds

At the end of scene III in *Antigone*, Creon has become strangely convinced that Antigone, rather than being stoned to death, which was the punishment he at first intended, will be sent to a cave with a few scraps of food to die slowly. Even before he comes to realize he is wrong, Creon’s sovereign rule proves to be not exclusively sovereign in the traditional sense of holding the power of life and death, to ‘make die and let live.’ He sentences Antigone to a living death and thus, in a more modern show of power, he is handling her juridico-political status as a citizen and subjecting her to dehumanizing conditions of survival.

As such, Creon consigns Antigone to the same fate as the one he decided for Polyneices, a process of death removed from the polis: "It has nothing to do with us. / Above ground we are rid of her. And guiltless." So, while he avoids making himself guilty of direct murder, which in his terms would be a legal execution, his new sentence subjects Antigone to prolonged cruelty. Since he has become uncertain – not as to whether the killings he orders are lawful, but whether they have the right political effect – he switches from the death sentence to the more managerial project of "doing deaths", not for Antigone’s sake, but – in line with his political rationale – "to keep the city free / of a murder’s pollution." To stress his political and fatherly authority he makes a show of Antigone’s death.

For Creon, then, killing the criminal is not enough, although that is what he says when Antigone, on her way to the cave, asks him what more he wants “than to take me and kill me?” He says to Antigone: "When I have that I have everything." Rather, he is exercising a "necropolitical" form of sovereignty, that is, he is controlling and distributing deaths and the meanings of processes of death and punishment, as well as the value that the corpses come to have. He even threatens his disobedient son, saying that he will take revenge via the spectacle of his fiancée’s death: “Bring out the girl. / Let him watch the despicable creature die / before her darling bridegroom’s horrified eyes!” In this logic, Creon will stage Antigone’s dying and thereby regain authority. But this spectacular control of death is what is finally impossible, and Creon will see the horrid corpses of both his son and wife before he comes to realize how he has erred: “I don’t know which way to
look, at him or at her. / Everything I have touched has turned out badly. / And my fate breaks on my head and pounds me down."

Creon loses control of the spectacle of Polyneices’s body that he has left to rot outside the polis. At the same moment, he assigns Antigone to a spectacular death process in which she shall perform this signifying work. The tragedy of Antigone can thus be likened to the question of slavery, as Alexander Weheliye frames it, that is, as a question not exactly of the passiveness of bare life and death, but of doing the work of death.

In his book *Habeas Viscus*, Weheliye re-frames the notion of bare life in the context of colonialism and contemporary forms of structural racism. He argues that the highly influential discourse of bare life and biopolitics stemming from the work of Agamben and Foucault undervalues the history of colonialism and slavery and ignores the role that race plays in the conceptualization of bare life. Weheliye, who works in the tradition of feminist black theory, provides a critical correction of the biopolitical discourse of "bare life" and argues that the US system of mass incarceration is not a state of exception, but creates subjects that suffer from political death within the mundane sphere of the law.

Weheliye’s modality of analysis, then, is not biopolitics, but race as "a set of sociopolitical processes which are projected onto the putatively biological human body," processes that represent "among other things, the visual modalities in which dehumanization is practiced and lived." Rather than seeing bare life as an apathetic state outside politics, Weheliye is interested in what happens in that space of bare life, where actual living beings exist. We can read in this line of thought the unburied corpse not only as serving the state’s distributions of civic worth and affect, and not only as a sign of the state’s power to decide upon life and death, but also as something that marks the dependence of that power on its sensible distributions, on its images of life and death.

In March 2015 the U.S. Department of Justice issued two official reports on Ferguson. One is an analysis of the shooting of Brown, in which eyewitness statements, forensic evidence and evidence from the crime-scene are assessed and evaluated. This report concludes that Darren Wilson acted out of reasonable fear when he shot Brown six times. Hence, by way of this evaluation of emotion, the law concludes that Michael Brown was partly to blame for his own death. If Brown
turned around and, as the report states, “charged” at the policeman and thus brought about his own death, then we can associate him not only with the corpse of Polyneices but also with Antigone.

We might argue that Brown, like Antigone, already inhabited a "death-world" in which his actions were already the labor of bare life. He was a black teenager living in a poor neighborhood, and thus in danger of people perceiving him as dangerous. Creon finally did not kill Antigone, but condemned her to a living death. And Wilson finally, according to the law, did not kill Brown cold-bloodedly, but acted in "reasonable fear" for his own life. But, if the fact that these tragic teenagers bring about their deaths by way of their own actions, if this makes a necessity of their deaths, it is this appearance of necessity that should be investigated. How do their deaths, in for example the judgment of Wilson’s fear, become framed as necessities? Both Antigone and Brown become bodies made to represent their political categorizations. Thereby they carry legacies that make them unrecognizable as fully within the domain of the human.

Sophocles’s play clearly positions Antigone as a young girl, who acts out of turn and who speaks up when no one has asked for her opinion. Her social precariousness – she is of the royal family, but just a girl – is linked to another socially marginalized status, that of a slave. Creon is able to question her status as a free citizen by repeatedly likening her to those other bodies in the city, which are not in control of themselves: He states as follows: “A slave should not be proud before a master. / The girl knows she’s insolent. She transgresses / established laws, and then, compounding the crime, / laughs and gloats at the thought of what she’s done. / Which one of us here is the man, she or I?”

Now, Antigone is not a slave, since she is very much a high-born in the city of Thebes, but by way of delegitimizing her citizenship both in words and deeds, Creon attempts to rid her of her status within the city. In addition to deciding on life and death, Creon is handling a process of juridico-political delegitimization. And in this process the imagery of the slave functions to frame her body as one which is under his control.

Tina Chanter calls attention to the paradox of how the rise of Athenian democracy was dependent on its economic basis as a "slave society." She argues that citizenship in ancient Athens was importantly linked with not being a slave, with not
being managed by other citizens, but also with being in control of one’s own body both politically and in terms of desire and appetite. Chanter cites the politician Demosthenes (386–322 BC):

If you (the jury) wished to look into what makes the difference between a slave and a free man, you would find that the greatest distinction was that in the case of slaves it is the body which takes responsibility for all their offences, whereas it is possible for free men, however great their misfortunes, to protect their bodies.48

The slave body was a body out of control and a slave was one who was not in self-possession.

New World slavery and colonial politics positioned black subjects as nonhuman, and the wounded flesh of the slave was a materialization of such politics. Whereas the legally competent body is connected with notions of ownership, the slave body is the body made to represent its political categorizations, a body, which in Hortense Spiller’s formulation is violently rendered flesh:

I would make a distinction in this case between “body” and “flesh” and impose that distinction as the central one between captive and liberated subject-positions. In that sense, before the “body” there is “flesh,” that zero degree of social conceptualization that does not escape concealment under the brush of discourse, or the reflexes of iconography.49

This flesh is created not only at the moment of slavery, but is transmitted through the generations since the categorization, through slavery, of black people as black is sustained throughout history. While black people have obtained full citizenship and been ‘granted’ legal self-ownership, black bodies cannot escape “cultural seeing by skin color.”50 So, the black person, although ‘liberated,’ carries a visual legacy that makes him or her unrecognizable as fully within the domain of being human. This visual legacy is what leads to their ‘necessary’ death.

Weheliye sets the concept of the "flesh" against the legal concept of ‘habeas corpus,’ which is Latin for ‘you shall have the body,’ and is the common law procedure used to review the legality of a detention or the juridical proceedings that resulted in it.51 Whereas the 'corpus' is conceptualized in terms of ownership and self-possession and thereby represents legal personhood, "the flesh designates
those dimensions of human life cleaved by the working together of depravation and deprivation.” The right to a ‘corpus’ applies to free individuals, and while African Americans can, of course, file and win habeas corpus suits, Weheliye’s point in distinguishing between corpus and flesh is that the black body does not control its own imagery in contemporary US society. The black body is a body made to do the work of figuration that secures authority to current power relations.

The bodies of Brown, Martin and Rice become framed as bodies out of control, as aggressive teens at first sight. And this framing allows for the taking of their lives by police officers as grand juries accept their fearful perception to be reasonable.

### Working the interval

If Antigone and Brown already inhabit death-worlds, then how does the dead body speak? How does Antigone speak politically? We should attend not just to the cry of suffering that the tragic character emits – that could confirm the image of the dead body and ratify the racializing schemes of visibility – but instead to the dissenting speech of the tragic teenager.

As both Judith Butler and Bonnie Honig point out in their readings of Sophocles’s play, it is not just Antigone’s lamentation and bodily anger, but also her style and her distinct way of expressing this anger that is an important part of what she brings to the stage. Because of her mad insistence on publicly mourning her brother’s death, Antigone comes to represent a challenge to the distribution of grievances that is produced by the sovereign law.

When Creon interrogates Antigone about the burial of Polyneices she does not simply confess her deed. She provocatively assumes her defiance. She speaks authoritatively, and she waters down Creon’s deathly decree: “That I would die, I knew—even before / your proclamation. Every one of us dies.” And she tosses Creon’s descriptive power back at him: “You think I’m a fool? / I’m content to be called a fool by a greater fool.” Thus, she neither asserts herself as the pre-political ‘human’ (that is, woman or child), who is the subject of unwritten, universal rights, nor is she the full citizen (that is, man or adult), who’s endowed with enforceable citizenship rights. By way of her parodying Creon’s sovereign speech and asserting her God-given right to bury her brother, she is, in Honig’s formulation, “working the interval” between human and citizen and thus rendering unstable the...
relation between these identities. She is performing her unruly dissent with a voice that reverberates between a cry of suffering and a political speech and thus unsettles the boundaries for what is sayable, hearable and visible as competent speech in the public realm. Antigone attempts to frame the meaning of her own death. She insists on making sense as a tragic teenager, as one who speaks excessively and acts towards no definite future. We can understand Antigone's dissent as destabilizing Creon’s death-dealing and connect her politics to Fred Moten and Stefano Harney’s imagination of a “jurisgenerative black life” coming from a reinterpretation of the dead body of Michael Brown as a refusing body.

Antigone defies Creon in his own language while at the same time saying that she does not believe in his authority to set the law or decide upon any fixed relation between law and fact, or word and appearance.

At the Grand Jury proceedings following the killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Officer Wilson testified that Brown shouted, “Fuck what you have to say” in response to the policeman’s request that Brown and his friend use the sidewalk. This, of course, supports the overall image of Brown as an aggressive teen who displayed only contempt for law enforcement. But, by adding the second DOJ report to this image, we might also say that Brown's contemptuous speech is dangerously parodying how law speaks in Ferguson. While the death of Michael Brown in the first DOJ-report is considered a "reasonable" misfortune, their second report links the same death to pervasive injustices in the Ferguson police and court system. It shows evident racial bias and discrimination in Ferguson law enforcement practices. Both police officers and the municipal court treat citizens as a source of revenue for the City budget rather than constituents to be protected. So whereas the first report ratifies Wilson’s fear as legitimate public affect, the second report criticizes the larger pattern of racist thinking that structures this single confrontation.

Now, Brown can no longer speak, but the impossible dissent to the sovereign's speech that his attitude bears witness to is restaged by the subsequent protests that instigated the Black Lives Matter movement. Their protests take place in the public space that black people cannot inhabit without risking being figured as a threat to white life. The “Hands Up, Don’t Shoot” gesture that quickly spread to...
protests across the country repeated what was believed to have happened when Brown was killed. The “Hands Up, Don’t Shoot” gesture also, as Nicholas Mirzoeff writes, re-enacted what subsequently happened when the police called in police dogs to threaten bystanders who, media coverage shows, were more shocked than agitated. Mirzoeff argues that the movement – through this bodily performance – mobilizes vulnerable bodies making them political bodies. It is not a gesture of surrender but a claim to appearance in the public space by those who have the most to fear from its visual distributions. While we can say, with Mirzoeff, that this gesture “pauses the action at the crucial moment, when any “reasonable person” (to use the legal phrase) would have ceased firing at a wounded, surrendering child,” it is also important to note that just as the black teenager cannot seek recourse to visual evidence he cannot find legal vindication through the concepts of reason and sovereignty of the self. The protesters’ taking to the streets might rather function as an imagination that challenges the official hallucinations about black life.

In their text on the Michael Brown tragedy, Fred Moten and Stefano Harney imagine a scene different from the image of the unburied body in the Ferguson street. “If we refuse to show the image of a lonely body, of the outline of the space that body simultaneously took and left, we do so in order to imagine jurisgenerative black social life walking down the middle of the street – for a minute, but only a minute, unpoliced, another city gathers, dancing.” Rather than thinking about black life as life condemned to death, Moten and Harney refuse the teleology of necropolitics. This is not to deny what happened on August 9, 2014, but to hear and see in that scene – the scene of Brown’s walking in the middle of a street with a friend – a resistant body that insists on making its own laws and meanings.

On August 9, like every day, like any other day, black life, in its irreducible sociality, having consented not to be single, got caught walking – with jurisgenerative fecundity – down the middle of the street. Michael Brown and his boys: black life breaking and making law, against and underneath the state, surrounding it. They had foregone the melancholic appeal, to which we now reduce them, for citizenship, and subjectivity, and humanness. That they had done so is the source of Darren Wilson’s genocidal instrumentalization in the state’s defense. They were in a state
of war and they knew it. Moreover, they were warriors in insurgent, if imperfect, beauty.  
Here, Brown is figured not as a pure victim, but as a "warrior" walking with "jurisgenerative fecundity," that is, living on his own terms and claiming the right to make sense of the death-dealing that he was subjected to. Moten and Harney continue the description of the scene and the aftermath of Brown's life when they imagine a 'taking to the streets' that not only demands justice from a state authority that for the black subject repeatedly deals in death:

What's left for us to consider is the difference between the way of Michael Brown's dance, his fall and rise – the way they refuse to take place when he takes to the streets, the way Ferguson takes to the streets – and to the way we seek to take but don't seem to take to the streets: in protest, as mere petitioners fruitlessly seeking energy in the pitiful, minimal, temporary shutdown of this or that freeway.... What would it be and what would it mean for us jurisgeneratively to take to the streets, to live in the streets, to gather together another city right here, right now?  

To "jurisgeneratively" take to the streets is to refuse the projections of death that black people are already subjected to. When Brown (supposedly) answered Wilson, "Fuck what you have to say," he, like Antigone, assumed his tragic defiance – his teenage behavior that led to his death because he is black – but at the same time engaged in a concerted action of refusing the interpellation of the police, a concerted action that everyone must become able to hear.

Footnotes


2  Ibid.


7 Prior to the confrontation with Officer Wilson, Brown is alleged to have stolen some packages of cigarillos in a nearby convenience store. Wilson stated that he suspected that Brown was the perpetrator of this crime, of which he had been informed via police radio, See: DOJ Report on the Shooting of Michael Brown, accessed October 30, 2017.


9 Antigone was staged in Ferguson in 2016 and again in Brooklyn in 2017. The director, Bryan Doerries, said that bringing the ancient play to speak to this modern tragedy was a also a mission to have the experience of these people reframe the universal themes of the ancient play. "'Whose stories are these? Who has a proprietary right to be talking about them?' The fundamental value of our work is that audiences who have lived the extremities described in these plays have more to teach us than we have to teach them." See David Freedlander, "'Antigone in Ferguson': A Modern Tragedy is now a Greek Tragedy", Daily Beast July 13, 2017: https://www.thedailybeast.com/antigone-in-ferguson-a-modern-tragedy-is-now-a-greek-tragedy and "Missouri Theater Embraces Ferguson Echoes In 'Antigone' Production", NPR, September 17, 2016:

10 Remarks by the President at Memorial Service for Fallen Dallas Police Officers,* White House, Office of the Press Secretary, July 12, 2016: https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2016/07/12/remarks-president-memorial-service-fallen-dallas-police-officers, accessed October 30, 2017. The President's remarks continue: "...when all this takes place more than 50 years after the passage of the Civil Rights Act, we cannot simply turn away and dismiss those in peaceful protest as troublemakers or paranoid. [...] To have your experience denied like that, dismissed by those in authority, dismissed perhaps even by your white friends and coworkers and fellow church members again and again and again -- it hurts. Surely we can see that, all of us."

11 Claudia Rankine, *Citizen – An American Lyric* (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2014)

12 See NAACP, Criminal Justice Fact Sheet: http://www.naacp.org/pages/criminal-justice-fact-sheet, accessed October 30, 2017. Further statistics: In the US, 3.2 percent of the population is under some form of correctional control (including people in jail and prison and people on probation and parole). The prison population has risen from less than 350,000 to more than 2 million in 40 years. The US now has the highest incarceration rate in the world: 750 per 100,000. See: Michelle Alexander: *The New Jim Crow. Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press, 2010), 6-8. There are clear racial disparities running through this contemporary fact of "mass incarceration." Three percent of all US black males are in prison," which is 6.3 times the White rate. See: Alfred Blumstein, *Racial Disproportionality in Prison*, in: *Race and Social Problems. Restructuring Inequality*, ed. Ralph Bangs and Larry E. Davis (New York: Springer, 2014), 187-193. The Bureau of Justice Statistics has estimated that "32% of black males born in 2001 can expect to find themselves in prison sometime in their lives if the 2001 incarceration rates were to continue."


14 Ibid.
15  Ibid., 107.


17  In her book The New Jim Crow, legal scholar Michelle Alexander argues that white elites foil multiracial coalitions by exploiting the vulnerabilities and resentments of poor whites to validate the rebirth of a caste-like system in the United States. While it is no longer permissible to use race as a justification for discrimination and social exclusion, Alexander argues that the US criminal justice system functions as a system of racialized control and that racial caste is redesigned under the discourse of "law and order. See: Alexander, The New Jim Crow.

18  Nicholas Mirzoeff, The Right to Look (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 3. In this summary of the operations of the tragic modality, I borrow from Mirzoeff’s conceptualization of visualization as central to the self-legitimization of power relations. Techniques of classification, separation, and aestheticization are operative in "complexes of visibility" such as plantation slavery, imperialism, and the contemporary military-industrial complex, and work to cast Western hegemony as natural and legitimate.


21  Ibid. Explicit language omitted in the transcript.

22  Ibid.

23  In 2005, the Florida Legislature enacted what is popularly known as the "Stand Your Ground" law. See State of Florida statute: "776.012 USE OF FORCE IN DEFENSE OF PERSON": http://www.leg.state.fl.us/statutes/index.cfm?mode=View


26 Mirzoeff, The Right to Look, 11


29 Ibid.

30 Friedrich von Schelling noted in 1795 how tragedy shows freedom and necessity to be inexorably entangled, as the protagonist fights against their destined criminality and willingly endures punishment for his unavoidable crime: "It was by allowing its hero to fight against the superior power of fate that Greek tragedy honored human freedom." Cited in Peter Szondi, An Essay of the Tragic, trans. by Paul Fleming (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), 7. Rita Felski calls this blurring of the boundaries of agency and necessity a condition of "uncertain causality," and stresses how tragedy’s notion of ambiguous
accountability is also relevant to present day discussions about agency, responsibility, and autonomy: To what extent can individuals "be held accountable for actions that wreak catastrophes on themselves and the world"? *Rethinking Tragedy*, ed. Rita Felski, (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), 11. These discussions proceed from the difficulty of clearly distinguishing social forces and individual responsibility. This difficulty is not limited to exceptional situations; rather, it runs through everyday experiences and is, for example, inescapably tied to the ordinary condition of the adolescent, whose liminality occasions a blurring of the boundaries between the social and the individual. We can say that the black adolescent's tragedy is one of ambiguous accountability. This black kid's everyday movements are indeed subject to unpredictable framing. He and other black bodies are held accountable for actions that they do not control or set in motion, since the black body does not have an individual life that is easily detached from the social forces of racism and violence.


33 Ibid.

34 Ibid.

35 Sophocles, 40.

36 This is Anne Carson's formulation in her poetic translation *Antigonick* (New York: Bloodaxe Books, 2012)

37 Sophocles, 36.

38 Ibid., 47.

39 Necropolitics is Achille Mbembe's concept, which along with the term "necropower", rather than the Foucauldian "biopower", for him most suitably describes contemporary forms of subjugation such as the Israeli occupation of Palestine. In the necropolitical era, weapons are deployed "in the interest of
maximum destruction of persons and the creating of death-worlds, new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of living dead." Achille Mbembe, "Necropolitics", Public Culture 15 (1), 2003, 1–40. I use the term here to point to how Creon exercises his sovereign right to kill, allow to live, and expose to death under conditions that are questioned and negotiated throughout the play. Antigone from the beginning confronts death, and this "living death" is inscribed in Creon’s exercise of power and becomes a site for political contestation. I suggest that we can read – before the fact – Antigone as a play about how "the lines between resistance and suicide, sacrifice and redemption, martyrdom and freedom" become blurred in the context of necropolitics.

40 Sophocles, 36.

41 Ibid., 58.

42 Weheliye, 5.

43 Ibid., 6.


45 There are numerous accounts of black youth who have had groundless encounters with law enforcement. Gary Fields, an African-American reporter, remembers how he was once suspected of a crime and pointed at with a police gun and writes about how "the margin of error" for black teenagers is "nonexistent" compared with that of white teenagers. Gary Fields, "What It Felt Like to Be a ‘Suspicious’ Black Teenager," The Wall Street Journal, November 25, 2014: http://www.wsj.com/articles/what-it-felt-like-to-be-a-suspicious-black-teenager-1416956319, accessed October 30, 2017.

46 Sophocles, 21.

48 Ibid., 7.


50 Ibid., 207


52 Weheliye, 39.

53 Sophocles, 21.

54 Ibid.


57 Ibid., 103.


59 Moten and Harney, "Michael Brown", 81.

60 Ibid., 85.

61 Ibid.