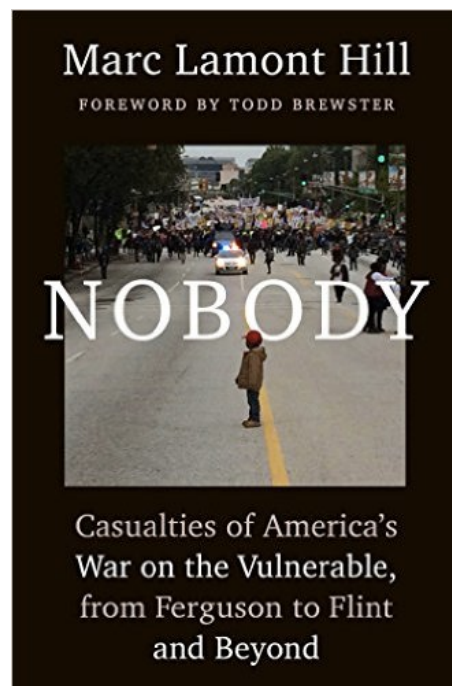


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Review of Nobody: Casualties of America's War on the Vulnerable, from Ferguson to Flint and Beyond

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Disposable. Hidden. It. Invisible. Nobody.

These are the terms used to describe America's forgotten. Those whose income does not allow them to live in the best neighborhoods, whose historical background makes it difficult to attain the "American Dream," whose mere existence on this planet angers the nation so much that it holds a silent war against them daily. These are the people Marc Lamont Hill wants to identify in his book, *Nobody: Casualties of America's War on the Vulnerable from Ferguson to Flint*. Looking at the cover of the book, the world Hill wishes to show is clear. A black picture frame with white and red words symbolize the color divide and the bloodshed of the vulnerable. In the picture, a young, lonely Black boy stands in the middle of a road amidst protests while police cars divide the protestors with police lights illuminating the sky. This lonely boy stands in front of the word, "nobody," as if to show the world that he is here; he is present; he is somebody. This book aims to delve deeper than the superficial discussion of inequality in America, for it is not a discussion Hill is after, but an understanding of how history, society, and pride have created a class of people considered less than citizens.

Hill's chapters are focused on various systems within the United States that oppress the vulnerable, and he interweaves stories of Black lives that have been affected by these social and political institutions. He studies the story of Michael Brown and how his death was more than an instance of police brutality; it was a story of how the institution of public housing caused the degradation of an entire city. He examines the case of Eric Garner and how his death by police chokehold should be a reminder of the way jail and police officials have changed from protector to enemy with the enactment of stop-and-frisk laws that target racial minorities. He scrutinizes the story of Freddie Gray and how his death resulted in no convictions, showing that the judicial system is not one that tries to endorse justice, but one that penalizes the ignorant and bargains with the lives of those less fortunate. He inspects the killings of Jordan Davis and Trayvon Martin and works to identify how gun rights activists and stand your ground laws have done more harm than good by

resulting in the unnecessary killing of young Black men. He reviews the state prison system and looks at how it disproportionately houses Black men since the enforcement of crime bills, the initiation of a war on drugs, and the beginning of mandatory minimum sentencing laws. He discusses Flint, Michigan and how the water system was more than a monetary issue; it was an issue of government pride and a disinterest in the poor. The names of these Black people are used because they allow the reader to personalize the history. We know these names because they are the ones that are used in hashtags and protests throughout the world, but we may not know the history that lead to their names being plastered in the media. Hill works to correct this to ensure that no person can simplify the argument and state that any of these tragedies are predicated on race alone.

What makes Hill's text stand out amongst the other history-focused non-fiction texts is his combination of rhetorical techniques and conversational tone to draw the reader out of academic prose and into a conversation. In an anecdote about the trial of Trayvon Martin, Hill makes the connection between the prolific author of literary nonsense, Lewis Carroll, and George Zimmerman's defense attorney, Mark O'Mara, when he states that in a conference after Zimmerman's acquittal, O'Mara displayed logic that modeled the storyline of *Alice in Wonderland*; it just didn't make logical sense (Hill, 2016). He later states that the over-incarceration of Black and Brown people is "the establishment of an irreversible system worthy of the imagination of Sweeney Todd," (Hill, 2016, p. 126) a character whose apathy for the lives of others allowed him to kill his customers and use the dead bodies of his victims for personal gain. Both allusions carry his details from reality to the imaginary realm in an attempt to show how the ill-treatment of the vulnerable is villainous absurdity.

In addition to his use of allusion, Hill also employs ethos, pathos, and logos to guarantee that all angles of persuasion are addressed fluently. He appeals to the ethics of the nation by imploring readers to meet the oppression of people with resistance; he appeals to the emotions of the reader in the detailed descriptions of the death and degradation of the

vulnerable by the institutions designed to protect them; he appeals to logic by utilizing facts and numeric values from national data systems. In fact, he includes fifty-one pages of footnotes with 562 entries included at the end of the book to make sure that all of his facts have been referenced, so there can never be any question about the validity of his data. What makes his argument sound, though, is not in the rhetoric he uses to personalize the stories, it is in the way he uses the process of argumentation. When he makes his points about injustices to the vulnerable, he provides evidence retrieved from a multitude of sources, acknowledges counterclaims to his arguments, and refutes objections with prowess.

For example, Hill begins a discussion on the initiation of “Broken Windows,” an article written by a political scientist and a criminologist in 1982 for the *Atlantic*. The purpose of the article was to state that if police could stop people from participating in nuisance crimes - like loitering, littering, and jumping turnstiles - crime would decrease dramatically because those criminals would not be able to escalate their misconduct. With this theory brought forth, police precincts began to consider it more law than suggestion, providing summonses for numerous people, no matter how small the crime. In fact, the *New York Daily News* found that, “from 2001 to 2013, 7.3 million citations were issued for everything from public urination and littering to possession of small amounts of marijuana and consuming alcohol on the streets” (Hill, 2016, p. 55). Of the 7.3 million citations, about 81 percent were given to Black or Latinx people. Hill (2016) points out that there was some truth to the overall premise of the article, but “there is no evidence that disorder directly promotes crime,” and “crime would be more effectively redressed by investing economically in neighborhoods rather than targeting them for heightened arrests” (p. 44). To elaborate further, he states that “while there is a correlation between disorder (social and physical) and crime, research shows that this relationship is not causal. Simply put, there is no evidence that disorder directly promotes crime.” (p. 44). These points are proven by the gathering and synthesizing of data from five

sources, most of which he retrieved from peer reviewed journals in criminology, law, and crime which can be checked in the notes section of the text.

Of course, many people would disagree with his position, arguing that the incarceration of petty criminals assisted in the overall decline in crime. Hill anticipates those who may contest his views and submits a preemptive rebuttal. He says, “while it is indisputable that crime declined in New York during the broken-windows era, crime also went down in other major cities that did not adopt so-called broken windows approaches” (Hill, 2016, p. 45). He also mentions that New York’s own computer analysis tool may have helped in deterring crime because it helped to target resources to areas with a lot of crime, and that there is no way to prove that broken windows policies work other than by conjecture because all analysts can do is “speculate as to what would have happened if the policing of minor offenses had not occurred” (Hill, 2016, p. 46). Here, Hill presents refutations to possible counterclaims which is consistent with the methods of argumentation. Although this is a small example, every point that he makes uses this same method to ensure that all questions are answered and no refutations survive.

In the forward, Todd Brewster, recognized for his studies in constitutional law and editorial positions at *Time* and *Life* magazines, sets the tone for the book by praising Hill’s argument that the state of America is affected by systemic issues that go deeper than race. He also says that to define the problem in such terms is to simplify the reality of what is truly occurring: the elimination of the less desirable. He posits that seeing “these events as nothing more than vestiges of a persistent racial antagonism is to misunderstand them” (Hill, 2016, p. xii). I agree with Brewster that focusing on race does not delve deeply enough into the issue, but pushing race to the background contradicts the premise of the book. Hill does talk about history’s effect on the current situation in the United States, but much of his argument is centered on the fact that Black people are the group most affected by this system. He even makes the statement that he wants to “show how

the high-profile and controversial cases of State violence [those in the Black Lives Matter movement] that we've witnessed over the past few years are but a symptom of a deeper American problem" (Hill, 2016, p. xx). The contradiction is that he foregrounds race in order to situate deeper systemic issues; his arguments shed light on the persistent racial antagonism backed by America's social structures. Thus, although the issues go deeper than race, the elimination of certain undesirables is most definitely motivated by skin color; it is not a symptom, but the sickness.

Further contradiction occurs in his appeal to members of various marginalized groups – immigrant, queer, trans, and poor people. He says that all of these citizens are included in the group of the vulnerable, but he focuses more on Black stories than those of the others. Although the Black Lives Matter movement is important to the progression of society, the book's overall impact is diluted by his pandering to other groups in order to promote readership by a wider audience. He discusses a few token figures to ensure that all of the members noted in his preface are present, but they are not equally developed as major factors in his analysis of society. I understand that in order to create a book that addresses all of the nation's troubles in regards to the vulnerable would be more of an anthology than a short, non-fiction text, but if race is going to undergird the argument, then it should be brought to the forefront. If his goal was to address all of the vulnerable - regardless of race, gender, sexuality, and income - their stories should not be relatively nonexistent in comparison. To superficially mention other vulnerable people and minimize their stories by not giving them as much attention perpetuates the idea of "nobody" within a book that is supposed to make us start recognizing these people and their situations.

The only other issue is in the constant switching of ideas within the chapters. Each section is created to investigate a societal or political institution that has a reputation for marginalizing people, and because each section is wrought with information, it seems as though there are moments where Hill transitions to a related, yet alternate idea without allowing the

reader time to shift with him. Some of these segues seem to be present to allow for the reader to experience catharsis from a solemn piece of information, like when he switches to the optimism associated with the 1950s after World War II right after leaving a story about how Michael Brown's face went blank after being shot in the middle of the street (Hill, 2016). During other progressions, however, Hill shifts to a topic that is related in theme, but does not show the reader how they are related until later in the section. It is not difficult to see how the sections correlate, but the organization of some material could have been shifted to allow for a better flow in reading, and the use of transitions would assist the reader in the movement from one point to the next.

Although this book has some issues in reference to shifts and the lack of equal representation of the vulnerable, Hill does a great job in creating a book that can possibly open the lines of communication between people of all places in the social and political hierarchy. He avoids combatant speech because he understands the need for dialogue in the healing of national wounds. Every person is vulnerable in some way, and it is difficult for those that have higher cultural capital (Edwards, 2002) to understand some of the issues faced by those who do not have similar resources. In an effort to change the lack of understanding, teachers who aim to incorporate social justice pedagogies in their classrooms must help students to become cognizant of how measures of diversity can limit a group's access to various American institutions (Schieble, 2012). There are students in classrooms who are considered to be "nobodies," and it is imperative for teachers of all subjects to understand some of the systemic issues that affect them. If educators use this book as a starting point for change and discussion in the classroom, it can create a safe space for those students who do not feel acknowledged beyond the classroom walls. Beginning to create these spaces for intellectual discourse about what it means to be a "nobody" and how people become categorized as "nobodies" allows for people to be transformed into somebodies.

This book is an essential primer to elicit discussion about the systemic race issues in society that affect a great number of people. Because of this, I would recommend this book to anyone who wants information regarding the social invisibility and denigration of people often overlooked. I would recommend this book to anyone who wishes to take part in the conversation on race that the reading elicits. I would recommend this book to anyone who does not want to be a bystander in social action and justice.

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