



FIRE: THE FIRST-YEAR INNOVATION & RESEARCH EXPERIENCE

VISUALIZING SOCIAL JUSTICE

Who Gets to be a Victim?: The Significance of Johnny Robinson's Murder

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The 16th Street Baptist Church bombing in 1963 received attention on a federal level, and illustrated the brazen lengths of racial violence in Alabama for a broader audience. Lesser known, however, is the racially motivated murder of 16-year-old Johnny Robinson, which happened a few hours after the church bombing, when Birmingham police officer Jack Park fatally shot Robinson in the back as he was fleeing the scene of an altercation. This research project examines why Robinson's death was overlooked and remained underreported by the media in the 1960s. While the church bombing gained extensive media attention and was portrayed as the tragic loss of young, innocent black lives, Robinson's case was framed in newspaper coverage not as a victim of racial violence but as a troublemaker evading police, declaring his death an "accidental" shooting. The difference in media coverage and public perception between these two significant events juxtaposes the rhetorical frame of "victimhood," a frame recognizable to contemporary audiences, especially following the protests in the summer of 2020 after George Floyd's murder by a white, Minneapolis police officer. Drawing on primary documents, conclusions made from a requested FOIA report, and parallels to the 2020 protests for George Floyd, this research seeks to shed light on the factors that contributed to Robinson's case being overlooked and denied the justice it deserves.

Case Summary

On September 15th, 1963, just hours after the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church, 16-year old Robinson and his friends were taunted and harassed by a group of white youths. In response, they threw stones at the white youths, but allegedly hit the wrong car.

Police soon arrived at the scene and Robinson's group began to flee.

BPD Officer Jack Parker shot Johnny Robinson in the back and he died en route to the hospital. Eyewitness accounts vary about how shots were fired. Regardless, the shot that Parker fired in Robinson's direction was the cause of his death.

There was minimal investigation into Robinson's death and no initial indictments. Birmingham Commissioner of Public Safety Theophilus Eugene "Bull" Connor and FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover can be linked to how cases like Robinson's were handled.

His case was reopened in 2009 as a part of the Emmett Till Unsolved Civil Rights Crime Act, but no indictments could be brought since Officer Parker died in 1977.

Why was Johnnie Robinson's death overlooked by popular media and uninvestigated in the 1960s?



(The Burlington Free Press, 1963)



Birmingham Blast Injures 23 Negroes; 2 Others Shot Dead
Front page newspaper headline that heralds the loss of the four girls, but only refers to Robinson and Ware, another victim of the same day, as "2 others shot dead" (Los Angeles Times, 1963).



The innocence and tragedy of the church bombing victims is the cornerstone of this newspaper cover, while Robinson is not mentioned in any capacity (The Journal News, 1963).

Rhetorical Construction of "Victim"

Included above are representative clippings from newspapers that exemplify the stark juxtaposition of the description of the two tragic events. The four small girls who were killed in the church bombing were painted as innocent children – victims whose lives were ended too soon. Mention of Robinson was brief, while the bombing was front page news. Even though Robinson was also a child, newspaper coverage often framed his death as justifiable. There is no mention of the white youth that provoked Robinson by yelling slurs, and this lack of context paints Robinson as a juvenile delinquent fleeing from the scene. Even though it is clear that Robinson died from the shot fired by the BPD officer, the newspaper still included details like: the officer "fired over his head." This framing portrays Robinson's death as an accident, where the only person to blame is Robinson himself.

In public memory of the Civil Rights Era, Robinson's case remains overlooked. As Walklate argues, victimhood is a subtle status, granted and enforced by societal power structures.⁽¹⁾ Age, gender, and race are identities that can signal or deny "innocence," seen here by the media's image of a sixteen-year-old black boy, who cannot be a "victim." Robinson's case illustrates how Christie's interrogation of the "ideal victim" relies on empathy, identification, and the construction of the "ideal enemy."⁽²⁾ Furthermore, there was little structural support for accusing a police officer of brutality in the 1960s, a situation we still see in news coverage today. Robinson's murderer had the police department and FBI backing him, while Robinson and his family were left alone and silenced.

Results of FOIA

Requested: 10-24-23
Received: 1-23-24

Next of Kin Letter

- Redacted recipient and relationship

Newspaper clippings

- From Birmingham Public Library
- Low quality; damaged

Notice to Close File Memorandum

- Local and federal investigation information
- Redacted names of police office

Excerpt from DOJ: Notice to Close Filing

"On September 15, 1963, Johnnie Robinson, the 16-year old, African-American victim, was fatally shot in the back by Birmingham Police Department (BPD) Officer Jack Parker, the subject. Earlier that day, the 16th Street Baptist Church was bombed, resulting in the death of four African-American girls. The bombing sparked racial rioting and unrest throughout the city. Police officers claimed that the victim was among a group of African-American youths who were throwing stones at a car containing several white youths who were flying Confederate flags. When officers arrived at the scene; the African-American youths began to flee."

Case Synopsis of Robinson's murder given in the Notice to Close File from Attorney Shelly Ward (Dept. of Justice, Civil Rights Division, 2010).

Footnotes

(1) Walklate, Sandra. *Imagining the Victim of Crime*. Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2007, 130.
(2) Christie, Nils, "The Ideal Victim," *From Crime Policy to Victim Policy: Reorienting the Justice System*, ed. Fattah, E.A., 1986, 17-18; Duggan, Marian, ed. *Revisiting the 'Ideal Victim': Developments in Critical Victimology*. Bristol: Policy Press, 2018, xiv-xv.

"4 CHILDREN DIE: Birmingham Blast Injures 23 Negroes; 2 Others Shot Dead CHURCH BOMBING," *Los Angeles Times*, September 16, 1963, 1.
"Shootings Follow Church Bombings in Birmingham," *Burlington Free Press*, September 16, 1963, 1.
"National Student Association," *The Wolverine Observer*, November 1963, 3.
"Hate-Triggered Church Blast Kills 4 Little Girls," *The Journal News*, September 16, 1963, 1.
Civil Rights Division, "Johnnie Robinson - Notice to Close File," *Department of Justice*, <https://www.justice.gov/crt/case-document/officer-jack-parker-deceased-birmingham-police-dept-birmingham-alabama-subject>

Additional Acknowledgements:
Megan Heptner, Ashlee Leighty, Adrienne Burns