

## The Sound of Silence: The Critique of Police Violence Against Black Americans in Jason Mott's *Hell of a Book* (2021)

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### Abstract

*This article examines the portrayal of police violence against Black individuals in Hell of a Book (2021) by Jason Mott, by using the framework of African American aesthetics. It explores how the novel highlights systemic racism, criminalization, and dehumanization through the characters and narrative techniques. The article discusses the historical and institutional roots of police brutality, connecting it to slavery, segregation, and racial profiling. It also explores the psychological impact of police violence, particularly the fear and trauma experienced by Black individuals and communities over generations. It examines how characters like Soot and the unnamed author of a novel cope with racial trauma, illustrating how Black people survive the constant threat of violence. Additionally, the study highlights the normalization of Black deaths, the failure of the justice system to hold police accountable, dehumanization and Criminalization of Blacks and the emotional breakdown of Black families in America. Through a thematic analysis, this paper argues that Hell of a Book critiques systemic injustice and exposes the fears that shape Black experiences in America.*

**Keywords:** police violence, racial violence, african american aesthetics, dehumanization, criminalization, coping mechanisms.

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## Introduction

The issue of police violence against Black individuals in the USA is deeply connected to the history of slavery and racism. “The historical and ongoing subjugation of Black life is maintained through structures of policing, surveillance, and violence” (Sexton 47). This means that during slavery, Black individuals were treated as property and subjected to violence, and this continues through the criminalization, dehumanization, and police violence in the present world. Kamala Harris, who is a senate from California, during a senate judiciary committee hearing said that “When we say that America has a history of systemic racism, we mean that from slavery, Jim Crow laws, lynchings, and policing, our institutions have done violence to black Americans” (New York Post). What she says is that Black individuals experience fear for their safety due to racial profiling, extreme use of police force, and unjust killings by law enforcement. This violence not only causes physical harm but also leads to severe mental health challenges, such as anxiety, depression, and trauma. Studies have shown that Black individuals worry more about police brutality than Whites do, leading to chronic stress and anxiety. Recently, a nationwide survey revealed that 32.4% of Black respondents worry a lot about experiencing police violence, a rate significantly higher than their white counterparts (Haner & Sloan 1077-1104).

In recent years, there are several real-life victims of police violence, for example, Tanisha Anderson, Eric Garner, Rekia Boyd, Yvette Smith, Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Miriam Carey, Jonathan Ferrell, and Tamir Rice. These are just a few examples of Black people who have lost their lives because of police violence in the United States (Mapping Police Violence). These events have brought more attention to the ongoing problem of police brutality and racism that Black communities have faced for many years.

In 2020, the death of George Floyd in Minneapolis, where a police officer kneeled on his neck for more than nine minutes, caused protests around the world and became a decisive moment in the fight for racial justice (Hill et al). In the same year, Breonna Taylor, a 26-year-old medical worker, was shot and killed by police during a mistaken raid on her apartment in Louisville, Kentucky (Oppel & Taylor). Her death also became an example of the urgent need for police reform and accountability. Similarly, Other victims like Philando Castile, who was an officer shot during a traffic stop while his girlfriend and her daughter were in the car (Bosman & Smith). Walter Scott, who was shot in the back while running away, shows a pattern of police misusing force against Black people (Sack & Blinder). These incidents raise concerns about racial profiling, racially biased aggressive policing, and how police officers have rarely been punished for their actions against Black people in the USA.

The “Black Lives Matter” movement was started to bring more attention to these kinds of injustices. It focuses on fighting racism and the unfair treatment of Black people by police. The movement also calls for justice, changes to the way police departments work, and better ways to protect Black communities. Activists,

researchers, and community members continue to speak out and demand changes such as better training, using body cameras, moving some police funding to community services, and creating safety programs run by residents (Clayton). All these real-life stories show that police violence against Black people is not just a group of random events, but a serious and ongoing issue that is connected to deeper problems of racism in America.

In this contemporary background, Jason Mott's *Hell of a Book* (2021) explores the profound and painful issue of police violence against Black Americans. The novel combines real events with imagination to help readers understand the deep fear, trauma, and emotional struggles that many Black individuals face in a society affected by systemic racism. The story follows an unnamed author on a book tour while dealing with his issues. Along the way, he meets The Kid, a mysterious and symbolic character who represents young Black children whom the police have killed. Their conversations are powerful and emotional, showing how police violence affects the way Black people see themselves and their place in the world. Through these two characters, the novel discusses how Black individuals are often seen as threats, even when they are innocent, and how this leads to unfair treatment, fear, and even death. The story also shows the mental and emotional impact of police violence in America, and the coping mechanisms Black people adopt to live in a society that does not protect Black lives equally.

This study examines how *Hell of a Book* (2021) by Jason Mott portrays the dehumanization of Black people through police violence and systemic racism. The novel illustrates how Black individuals are treated as suspects rather than as human beings and how their identities are reduced to stereotypes shaped by racial bias. The study also explores how the text criticizes the criminalization of Black individuals by showing how innocence is often ignored and how Black bodies are perceived as threats within a racially biased system. In addition, the research analyzes the emotional and communal impacts of police violence, including fear, trauma, grief, anger, and the erosion of trust within Black communities. By focusing on these themes, the study highlights how the narrative gives voice to Black experiences and perspectives. The theoretical framework of this research is grounded in African American literary aesthetics, particularly the ideas presented in *Within the Circle: An Anthology of African American Literary Criticism from the Harlem Renaissance to the Present* (1994), edited by Angelyn Mitchell, which emphasizes the significance of Black voice, cultural memory, resistance, and community in interpreting African American literature.

### **Review of Literature**

The article "Old Issues in the New Century: Invisibility, Double Consciousness, and Fear in Jason Mott's *Hell of a Book*" (2024) by Olena Boylu. In this article, *Hell of a Book* (2021) by Jason Mott is examined in light of the historical and social backdrops of African Americans' battles with racism, identity, and invisibility. To place Mott's story within the African American literary history framework, the article

finds significant events such as Reconstruction, the Great Migration, the Harlem Renaissance, and the Civil Rights Movement. Based on ideas such as Ralph Ellison's concept of invisibility and W.E.B. Du Bois's double consciousness, the essay also explores how these concepts have changed in the twenty-first century. The article reconsiders the persistent color line that Du Bois described through Mott's creative storytelling, examining its expressions in modern America and its effects on African American representation, identity, and security.

The next article reviewed is "There are Better Ways and Places to Spend Your Time": historical stillness, quantum narration, and Black spacetime(s) in Jason Mott's *Hell of a Book* " (2024) by Marco Petrelli. It is about the narrative of Jason Mott's *Hell of a Book* is one in which the past, present, and future are interconnected through the progressive overlap of two initially distinct stories. The history of slavery and the racial boundaries that Black Americans faced are reflected in this complex timeline. But by redefining Blackness in a multidimensional framework that goes beyond these limitations, the book also presents a more positive viewpoint. The book rejects Afro- pessimistic notions that narrative is inherently anti-Black by ignoring linear chronology and utilizing quantum physics concepts like superposition and the Many-Worlds hypothesis. Instead, it creates fresh paths for Black stories beyond institutional racism.

The article "The excessive use of force against blacks in the United States of America" (2018) by Stefan K. Newton examines the disproportionate use of police force against Black individuals in America. It says that legal standards governing police use of force are biased and fail to follow international law. The author also says that the grand jury process and prosecutors involved in cases of police killing of Blacks are influenced by bias, which leads to these kinds of brutalities. The study says that excessive force used against Black Americans is more frequent than against other racial groups. The article raises the need for reform in the legal and judicial systems to address racial discrimination in policing and to increase accountability for the use of force against Black Americans.

Another article, "Race and Consequences: An Examination of Police Abuse in America" (2019) by Nicole L. Martin and A. Kposowa, uses the Racial Threat Hypothesis. This study examines shootings in America, focusing on the factors contributing to these incidents and the lack of accountability for officers involved. There are two primary themes discussed in this article: the dehumanization of victims by local officials and police departments, and victim blaming through exaggeration of the victim's potential threat to police officers. The authors say that addressing police violence requires comprehensive reform that considers issues of justice, racism, and racial stereotypes. This article talks about the systematic nature of police violence against African Americans and the need for better law enforcement practices.

The article "Police Violence Against Blacks" (2022) by Cassandra D. Chaney deals with the significant issue of police violence against Black people. Blacks are 2.5

times more likely to die from police encounters than whites in America. This leads to concerns about police violence among Black communities and also creates a negative perspective on law enforcement and police brutality. The author depicts a conflict theory, Racial Formation Theory, and Systematic Racism Theory, which talk about how police violence has harmful effects on the health and well-being of Black individuals and the community. Also, it creates a sense of insecurity and disturbs social life.

There are only a few scholarly articles on *Hell of a Book*. The articles reviewed on *Hell of a Book* mainly focus on the Afterlife of slavery, Afro-pessimism, quantum narration, invisibility, double consciousness, and fear. However, as the selected novel has been published recently, I found a few articles related to the novel. Moreover, the researcher has not found any articles exploring the themes of police violence against Blacks. There is a need to research this theme in the novel *Hell of a Book* to explore how the novel employs the complexities of the African American experience of racism and its historical and contemporary relevance.

## **Analysis and Discussion**

### **The Systemic Dehumanization of Black Individuals**

“Dehumanization refers to the psychological and social process through which individuals or groups are perceived and treated as less than human, often through the denial of empathy, dignity, and moral consideration” (Haslam 257). Dehumanization is powerfully illustrated in Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, where he writes, “Black men are recognized as the human factor placed outside the democratic master plan, a human ‘natural’ resource who, so that white men could become more human, was elected to undergo a process of institutionalized dehumanization” (Ellison 137–138). In this quote, Ellison shows that Black people were left out of the rights and freedoms promised by democracy and were treated more like objects meant to help as a labour for white people succeed, showing that this unfair treatment is built into the systems and rules of American society. This repeating institutional discrimination and injustice demonstrate the dehumanization of Black people in the USA.

Similarly, in *Hell of a Book*, William, who was tragically shot and killed by police, represents many Black individuals who lose their lives to police violence. During his funeral ceremony, as the crowd gathers to mourn him, Uncle Paul, a wise character who is a relative and mentor to the protagonist, says, “The laws were never made for Black folks.” His words deeply affect the mourners, who then share their own stories of being denied justice due to racial discrimination and violence, a cycle that has continued for generations (Mott 185). This moment shows the emotional impact of the dehumanization of Black people in America. The stories shared by the mourners reveal a painful reality that Black lives are often not valued the same way as white lives. This is seen in the statistics on police violence. According to *Mapping Police Violence*, in 2017, of 1,147 deaths caused by police, only 13 officers were charged with a crime, or just 1% (Mapping Police Violence, 2017). This shows how the

justice system protects police rather than holding them accountable, allowing an exemption from punishment to continue. This pattern reveals how government and institutions, including the law, dehumanize Black people by taking no account of their lives and continuing a cycle of violence and inequality. In *Hell of a Book*, it becomes clear that the law does not treat Black people equally. Police officers who kill innocent Black people are rarely held responsible, which shows how the legal system and society treat Black people differently. This systemic inequality, demonstrated throughout the novel, reveals how the law and institutions are set up to maintain racial hierarchies by denying the same protections given to white people.

Similarly, Black people are often seen as threats and are ignored or erased by the institutions around them. This is especially seen in the character of The Kid, who represents all the Black children killed by police but is never given a real name. This lack of identity may suggest that mainstream American society erases the personal identities of Black victims, making it easier to overlook their lives and deaths. The failure to value Black lives leads to further dehumanization and may allow society to forget or ignore their deaths without holding anyone accountable. This idea is supported by Christina Sharpe, who states, “The archives of Black Death are vast, but they fail to recognize the full humanity of those who have been lost” (Sharpe 17). This shows that although there are many records and reports about the deaths of Black people, these records often do not show who these individuals truly were as human beings. Instead of honoring their lives, the focus is mostly on their deaths, which makes it easier for people to ignore their humanity and continue the cycle of racial violence.

The novel also shows how institutional injustice contributes to this dehumanization. For example, the government fails to deliver justice in the case of William, an innocent Black man who was killed by police. No officers are punished, and the system shows no concern for his death. Uncle Paul, speaking to Soot, expresses this harsh reality: “Ain’t nothing going to happen to the man that killed your daddy because that’s how the world works for people like us” (Mott 167). Through these characters and events, the novel shows how Black lives are devalued and dehumanized within a racist system that protects those in power.

### **The Racialized Criminalization of Black Individuals in America**

Criminalization is “the process by which behaviors, actions, or entire groups of people are labeled as criminal through laws, policies, or social attitudes, even when those actions may not be harmful or were previously considered acceptable. In many cases, criminalization is shaped by power, race, and inequality, especially when it targets marginalized communities” (Alexander 59). For example, scholars have argued that “Black individuals in America have historically been criminalized through biased policing and legal systems that treat them as dangerous or guilty based on race rather than behavior” (Davis 28). This quotation means that, throughout American history, Black people have often been unfairly treated as

criminals by the police and legal system. Instead of judging them based on their actual actions, authorities have seen them as dangerous or guilty just because of their race. This shows how racism has shaped the way Black individuals are treated in law enforcement and the justice system. And also, “The criminalization of Blackness has been a consistent theme in American history, used as justification for slavery, segregation, and mass incarceration” (Davis 29). The criminalization of Black individuals has been used as a tool to justify racial discrimination and the killing of Black people, both historically at the time of slavery and in contemporary police violence. By associating race and criminality, it devalues Black lives.

Throughout the novel, it criticizes the racial profiling and criminalization of Black individuals. Soot’s father, William, was shot by police in front of his house and family. Police shot him without even saying the reason, and without waiting for any words from him, they criminalized him with racial bias. In this incident, William just went out of his home for jogging, and out of nowhere, a police vehicle appeared and asked him to hold on right there, and he lifted his hand. He was not even informed about the reason, and was shot and killed by police just in front of his house (Mott 112). This moment in the novel reflects the larger reality that Black people are often denied the fundamental right to be seen as innocent or human in front of the law. Because Police officers were prejudiced and racially profiled William only because he was Black. As a fundamental right, William was unaware of why he was suspected.

Similarly, once, Soot’s teacher told him that “one in every three Black men would end up in prison” (Mott 148). This shows a public notion and prejudice about Blacks that white people and the judicial officials had in their minds. Another incident from the novel is during the school time of the protagonist, an unnamed author; a white boy pours motor oil on him, and when the teacher catches the children involved, all the children blame the protagonist, a Black boy. Also, that teacher was prejudiced against Black people. This is the same that happens when police criminalize Black people for crimes that they do not commit. Black people are always suspected in any situation of crime in the USA. “The mere presence of a Black man, for instance, can trigger thoughts that he is violent and criminal. Simply thinking about a Black person renders these concepts more accessible and can lead people to misremember the Black person as the one holding the razor” (Eberhardt et al. 1). This means that because of criminalization, people often wrongly assume that Black men are dangerous or violent, and sometimes even wrongly assume that they are the ones who did something harmful.

In the same way, Police are more likely to shoot Black civilians than White civilians given the same levels of criminal activity, even when the civilian is in addition to a disproportionate burden of unarmed (GBD Police Violence US Subnational Collaborators). Likewise, Uncle Paul took Soot to the forest after his father’s death. He taught him how to shoot for safety, and Uncle Paul told him to study how to use a gun for self-defence. After some time, a police vehicle reached there, and one of the cops asked Paul for the license and registration. After that,

officers threatened Paul with their guns and said that if you were to get arrested, you would not stand there shouting about rights and law (Mott 231-239). In this incident, Criminalization of the innocent is evident as the police assume guilt based on race rather than behavior, treating Black individuals, especially children, as threats. This incident from the novel connects to real-life cases where Black youth are unfairly targeted. The story also criticizes gun rights and race, as Black individuals with guns or even suspected of having them face immediate violence from the police. At the same time, white gun owners are treated differently. This shows how Black people are treated and race-profiled by their race, not by deeds.

### **The Psychological Impact of Police Violence on Black Individuals: Fear and Anxiety as Consequences**

The fear and anxiety about police violence are another part of the Black experience in America. The character Soot, a young Black boy, constantly feels afraid because of the police violence happening around him. For example, William, the father of Soot, once noticed that his son was crying after returning from school. He also understood the reason that each day, there is a news report about someone who looks like him being shot and killed. Each day, his son saw someone arrested and locked in prison. These incidents threatened him, making him unhappy and scared (Mott 83). This incident reveals the harsh reality of Black lives. Fear not only affects the direct victims, but it also spreads throughout the Black community, forming their fears and perceptions of safety from a young age. In this incident, it is evident that Soot's fear and unhappiness reflect his growing awareness that his identity as a Black boy puts him in danger. William, as a Black father, understands this reality, and he feels a sense of powerlessness, knowing that he cannot fully protect his son from the world's injustices. This incident also highlights the deep fear of Blacks, knowing that any encounter with the police could turn deadly, even if they are innocent.

The novel also shows how this fear is passed down through generations. Multiple times, Uncle Paul warns Soot about the dangers of being Black in a society that criminalizes Black people. This reflects the real-life conversations of Black parents with their children about how to act around police to stay safe. The unnamed author of a novel and Black Kid are conversing after the author returns to his hometown after the book tour. The author says, "It's hard to stand there and yell to your children that they're always going to be afraid of the police" (185). He also says, "If a policeman stops you, do not move and talk to them; follow whatever they say because there is no guarantee that you will come out of it alive" (Mott 185). In these words, it is visible that there is a psychological weakness and fear of police violence. This is how parents raise their children out of this fear. Studies have shown that Black individuals disproportionately worry about police brutality, leading to chronic stress and anxiety. A nationwide survey revealed that 32.4% of Black respondents worry a lot about experiencing police violence, a rate significantly higher than their white counterparts (Haner & Sloan 1077-1104). This fear and

anxiety affect the daily life and well-being of Black people, showing how the legacy of police violence continues to impact Black communities across generations in the USA.

Current comprehensive data on police violence across the United States suggest that Black Americans are more likely to be stopped, searched, arrested, and charged with more serious crimes. Police also kill members of this demographic at three times the rate of their White counterparts, primarily impacting community perceptions of police among people of color (Campaign Zero). The unnamed author says, "It's not just about the ones who get shot. It's about all of us watching, knowing it could be us next" (Mott 83). This statement highlights how police violence affects him and his community; this is also a collective fear that influences the daily life of most Black Americans. Similarly, Uncle Paul tries to prepare Soot for the realities of being Black in America, warning him about the dangers he will undoubtedly face. He reflects on this inherited fear by saying, "You learn early what it means to be a danger just by existing" (Mott 145). This shows how Black children, even at a young age, know that their very presence can be considered a threat, shaping their behavior and worldview.

### **Coping Mechanisms and Survival Strategies of Blacks**

There are various coping mechanisms and survival strategies that Black characters adopt to get away from generational trauma, police violence, and institutional discrimination. "The attack on Black lives is not new to the United States. Black folks have experienced centuries of trauma; developing strategies of resistance and resilience to not only survive, but to also thrive" (Black Mental Health Matters: 6 Strategies for Coping with Racial Trauma). It says that the history of violence and discrimination against Black people in the United States is long-standing. Despite this, Black individuals have developed ways to resist and cope with this trauma, not just to survive, but also to find ways to live their lives. Similarly, the protagonist, who is an unnamed author of a novel, and the mysterious child, Soot, have different approaches to coping with racial violence and the constant threat of harm. One of the most important coping mechanisms in the novel is dissociation. The Author frequently experiences reality in a disconnected and unreal manner, reflecting his struggle to process painful memories and trauma. This detachment from reality allows him to escape from the harshness of his experiences, but it also shows the psychological cost of living under racial oppression. The use of an unreliable narrator further highlights how trauma affects memory and perception through memory loss and escapism from the realities of Black life, showing that the idea of survival often requires a disconnection from painful realities.

The unnamed Black writer hates reality because people are getting trafficked, murdered, and molested. He is depressed and used to thinking, "Because where I am now is a pretty surreal place, and my therapist said that one of the best things I can do to help me deal with my depression is to keep my feet firmly planted in reality by writing things from the past" (Mott 46). This shows how the unnamed Black

writer struggles with reality because of the violence and injustice happening in the world, including human trafficking, murder, and molestation. His depression is connected to the harsh realities of being Black in a society where police violence and racial discrimination are common. Even though he is a Black author, he is not writing anything about being Black in America because he is escaping from his Black identity as part of a coping mechanism. The passage shows how he copes with this trauma and how Black individuals use different survival strategies to deal with the emotional impact of racism and violence.

In *Hell of a Book* by Jason Mott, Soot's coping mechanism of becoming invisible reflects his attempt to escape the pain and trauma he faces as a young Black boy living in a world infected by racial discrimination and violence. Soot's experience with bullying begins early in the novel, as classmates target him because of his dark skin. In one incident, Soot goes through constant teasing from fellow students who call him cruel names and make him feel isolated, which leads him to believe that fading into the background is his only means of protection (Mott 25). This constant mistreatment pushes Soot to develop the idea that becoming invisible can shield him from both emotional and physical harm. His sense of invisibility intensifies after the tragic incident involving his family. Following the violent death of his father, who is killed in an act of racially motivated violence, Soot becomes even more withdrawn, using invisibility as a way to avoid the pain and fear that follow this traumatic event (Mott 117). By mentally detaching from his surroundings, Soot attempts to create a safe space where he feels less vulnerable to the world's dangers. However, while this coping strategy offers him temporary comfort, it also reflects the tragic reality that emotional detachment and avoidance can prevent proper healing. Through Soot's story, Mott portrays how young Black individuals may adopt invisibility as a means of survival in a society where racial violence and discrimination make them feel unsafe and powerless. Soot's journey ultimately highlights the emotional trauma of racism and the complex ways in which Black people cope with trauma.

### **Conclusion**

In *Hell of a Book* by Jason Mott, the portrayal of police violence against Black individuals reveals the lasting impact of systematic racism, dehumanization, and criminalization. By examining the experiences of characters such as Soot, William, Uncle Paul, and the unnamed author, Mott illustrates how institutional violence not only causes physical harm but also profoundly affects the mental and emotional well-being of Black individuals and their communities. The novel critiques the racialized criminalization of Black people, showing how they are unfairly targeted, presumed guilty, and subjected to violence without justification. Through the tragic deaths of characters like William and the unjustified targeting of Uncle Paul during a shooting lesson, Mott highlights the ongoing pattern of racial profiling and police violence in America. Moreover, the novel explores the psychological trauma this violence inflicts, as seen in the characters' overwhelming fear, anxiety, and trauma. Soot's

decision to become invisible after witnessing his father's death and the unnamed author's struggle with reality reflect the complex coping mechanisms Black individuals adopt to survive racial trauma. These strategies, while protective, often come with an emotional detachment and psychological strain. Altogether, in these narratives, Mott critiques systematic injustice and the emotional burden that Black families carry as they go through the constant threat of violence. *Hell of a Book* brings out the urgent need for social change, justice, and reimagining systems that preserve racial violence and inequality. Through powerful storytelling, Mott not only exposes the destructive impact of police violence but also raises the issues of resilience and survival strategies that Black individuals adopt to live in a world shaped by systemic racism.

However, this study also has some limitations that need to be considered. First, the research focuses on a single novel, *Hell of a Book* by Jason Mott, so the findings may not fully represent all African American literary works that address police violence. Second, the study primarily uses thematic analysis grounded in African American aesthetics and does not incorporate other theories, such as critical race theory or trauma theory, which could have provided a broader understanding of the topic. Also, this research is based on textual analysis and does not include real-life data, which limits its connection to practical situations. Therefore, future studies can improve this research by comparing multiple African American novels, using different theoretical approaches. Future research can also focus on how readers respond to such texts to better understand their social impact.

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