

## Black Lives Have Never Mattered

In The United States of America and Never Will:

A "Modern"-Day Slaves Perspective

By

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"One of the most tragic beliefs widely shared by Blacks throughout the world is that white people need or want us or will treat us equally and share societal resources with us. Faith continues to prevail in spite of overwhelming evidence which disputes this belief. Blacks continue to ignore the irrefutable truth that, in a racist social system, all institutions will reflect, protect, and sustain values that are consistent with racism/white supremacy. This should not be considered surprising or profound since all institutions serve to perpetuate the social theory of the group which created them."

-Dr. Bobby E. Wright  
African-Centered Psychologist

Sometimes, different people can independently arrive at the same conclusion. I didn't start and haven't been affiliated with the Black Lives Matter Movement, but I respect their analysis of the problem and their desire to end it. Around the same time as #BLM was starting, I, like many other people, was thinking along the same lines about what the fundamental problem was behind seemingly rampant police murders of Black people. And for once, I didn't feel alone in centering the problem of what Black life means. If Black life doesn't mean anything, the USA would be a genocidal slave state in which the killing and punishment of Black people is meted out and widely considered acceptable, regardless of guilt or innocence, gender, socioeconomic status, or other factors. And that's exactly what it is.

#BLM (Black Lives Matter) is a grassroots coalition-based social movement started in the United States by Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi in the wake of several unpunished (or lightly punished) incidents of police killing unarmed Black people, including the killing of Oscar Grant and Kenneth Harding in Oakland, as well as Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner, Renisha McBride, and Michael Brown. While it consists of people with diverse viewpoints and tactics, the movement's central aim is to oppose the systematic normalization of Black people's deaths, which makes violence against Black people more likely and more acceptable. #BLM began as a social media movement, but has quickly become an on-the-ground social movement with many different actors and organizations that aren't necessarily connected as one organization but have the same general aims.

Actions and policies of the state result in the disproportionate killing, injuring, and incarceration of Black people, but the struggle for Black life to matter is not just about opposing policing practices against Black men, boys & girls. It is also about how domestic abuse victim Marissa Alexander was not allowed to defend herself against her abusive husband under the same "stand your ground" defense in Florida law that George Zimmerman used to get exonerated in the killing of Trayvon Martin. It is also about how Black transwoman Cece McDonald was prosecuted and convicted for defending herself against a hostile and racist group of white youths in Minneapolis. It is also about how broader political practices, like the mass disenfranchisement of Florida and Ohio Black voters, the shutting down of water services to Detroit residents, and the anemic federal response to Hurricane Katrina in 2005, show a remarkable disregard for Black lives.

Because the nature of racism is not just prejudice but also the power to enforce prejudice, these problems cannot be addressed individually, by punishing or educating those who commit violence against Black people without justification. It's too big a problem. The conservative Wall Street Journal reported that in 2011 NYPD had more stops of young Black men in Manhattan than there are young Black men in Manhattan. And at least one former NYPD police officer has stepped forward to say that he was specifically ordered to stop young Black males at every opportunity. **But he is just one officer, and NYPD just one department.** Police officers everywhere have broad latitude to stop anyone they suspect may be involved in a crime and use that latitude to systematically target Black and Latino men and boys. The problem is deeper than any one department and it's "stop-and-frisk" policies.

For one thing, it's everywhere, not just New York. One report described anti-black racism as "baked into" police practices. "The root of the problem", says #BLM co-founder Alicia Garza, "is **anti-black racism**". In other words, there is a unique, deeply ingrained, and pervasive kind of racism that American society at large feels toward Black people that goes a long way toward explaining these disparities as well as many others.

What does blackness mean to America? There are not-so-subtle hints everywhere.

- \* Black people make up approximately 12 percent of the US population, but constitute more than 40 percent of the prison population.
- \* White Americans use illegal drugs at rates that are comparable to, or well in excess of, the rates at which Black Americans use illegal drugs, but Black Americans are incarcerated for drug offenses 10 times more.
- \* In 2012, a Black American was killed by police and security forces at least once every 28 hours. According to another report, "black teens were 21 times more likely to be shot dead [by police] than their white counterparts".

The problem is not just that a de facto police state is ready to descend on Black people at any time, but also, more broadly, that the entire population of African Americans is perceived by the broader society (1) as a potential threat and (2) as unworthy of being listened to when we protest through legal, institutional, or other means. This problem must be viewed as a systemic one, not just an individual or institutional one, and it must be addressed on multiple levels, including not only institutionally or interpersonally but especially in our unconscious thought, the deeply ingrained thought processes that are reflected by our actions before we even have the opportunity to think. Before we can change our thinking to make Black lives matter, we must truly understand that the problem of Black lives not mattering is a problem of meaning that isn't just individual or institutional but structural. It is rooted in what America is.

America needs Black lives to not matter. Due to centuries of negative images and stereotypes about Africans and racial blackness, in the collective psyches of the United States, throughout the Americas, and across the world blackness means, as the late psychiatrist Dr. Frantz Fanon said, "the lower emotions, the baser inclinations, the dark side of the soul". A field of study within cognitive psychology known as implicit cognition (or implicit bias) finds quantifiable evidence of what Black people have been knowing for better than 1,000 years (had anyone with power bothered to listen): that **deeply rooted negative attitudes toward people of African descent** are held widely across the American population, even among those who claim to be non racist, even when other possible causes for these attitudes (like socioeconomic class or education level) are taken into consideration—and these attitudes tend to **increase people's willingness to use violence (interpersonal, institutional, or state) and punishment against Black people.**

One recent quantitative study from Stanford, titled "Not Yet Human", shows that **people of African descent are commonly associated with apes** at an unconscious level of mental processing. According to the study: "this Black-ape association alters visual perception and attention, and it increases endorsement of violence against Black suspects. In an archival study of actual criminal cases, the authors show that news articles written about Blacks who are convicted of capital crimes are more likely to contain ape-relevant language than news articles written about white convicts. Moreover, those who are implicitly portrayed as more apelike in these articles are more likely to be executed by the state than those who are not". This finding agrees with the earlier work of Stanford literature professor Sylvia Wynter, who found that police in Los Angeles in the 1980s and early 1990s commonly used the incident code "NHI"—meaning "no humans involved"—for incidents involving African Americans. While many people acknowledge this police code to have been racist, the Stanford quantitative study shows that even people who don't think themselves racist have the same thoughts.

Other studies show that **children of African descent are believed to be older, more mature, and less innocent** than their white counterparts are, something that might explain why teachers suspend African American preschoolers at triple the rate of white preschoolers and why police and prosecutors are more likely to charge African American youths with harsher crimes or in adult court than they are in cases involving non Black youths. It might also explain why 12-year-old youth Tamir Rice

was shot dead by police at a playground in Cleveland, Ohio, while holding a toy gun, whereas white youths are free to regularly play with toy guns in their neighborhoods.

Another set of studies ("shooter bias" studies) shows that Black males holding cell phones are, on quick glance, believed to be holding guns, while white males are believed to be holding cell phones. These studies also found that people would be quicker to shoot and to holster their weapons when faced with a Black male who might be holding a cell phone or a gun, compared with a white male in the same position. These studies might explain why plainclothes police shot unarmed immigrant Amadou Diallo after he reached for his wallet presumably thinking the officers wanted to see his identification or were trying to rob him.

Still other studies have shown that a stereotypically-named hypothetical Black defendant will receive a higher rate of conviction and harsher degree of punishment for the same crime than will a stereotypically-named hypothetical white defendant, even when identical evidence is presented.

A hypothetical job applicant with an African-American-sounding name is less likely to receive further consideration when a hypothetical job applicant with a white-sounding name is granted further consideration, even when both have the exact same resume except for the name at the top. An applicant for housing or mortgage will be similarly screened based on assumptions about whether they are Black or not, thereby shaping geographic segregation patterns.

**African-American employees are more likely to be evaluated poorly by employers than are white employees.**

**Black NFL players are required to return from injury sooner than their white counterparts with the same injury.** Other studies show that the medical profession is slower to give aggressive treatment to African Americans and less sensitive to the pain of African American patients.

Regardless of whether one stands on the side of addressing the problem, like the founders of #BLM, describing the problem, like researchers at Stanford, or even denying the problem or defending police murders of Black people, the central problem is not a swirling morass of practices to be altered. It is a structure. These problems of anti-black racism are not simply problems of individual or institutional practice or prejudice because they are repeated across widely disparate individuals and institutions with the same independent results. The psyche of anti-black racism is not individual or institutional. Both the psyche and the institution are networked together as part of one dynamic, fluid, and massive structure. The psyche, like the institution, is a structure. The problems of Black life mattering are hence fundamentally problems of structural power. In other words, structural racism encompasses the entire system of white supremacy, diffused and infused in all aspects of society, including our history, culture, politics, economics and our entire social fabric. Structural racism is the most profound and pervasive form of racism—all other forms of racism (e.g. institutional, interpersonal, internalized, etc.) emerge from structural racism.

The key indicators of structural racism are inequalities in power, access, opportunities, treatment, and policy impacts and outcomes, whether

they are intentional or not. Structural racism is more difficult to locate in a particular institution because it involves the reinforcing effects of multiple institutions and cultural norms, past and present, continually producing new, and re-producing old forms of racism.

The problem of Black life mattering extends to unconscious levels of thinking and is not only deeply rooted, but also widely diffused and reinforced through multiple networks of power. It is therefore quite challenging to uproot without a massive change in the social structure that abolishes the ways that both personal and institutional practice, as well as individual and social frames of meaning, are tethered to the genocidal slave empire of the "modern" world, the United States. If we only think about the practice of prejudice without centering the ways that all racism derives from structural racism-what I call anti-blackness-we will be at pains to explain why there is so deep a reserve of animosity that can result in normalized violence toward Black people (and people of color in general) and why the mass loss of Black life does not constitute a national emergency or a cause for widespread grief. True dedication to the principle that Black lives matter will require a revolution using all means necessary to end the structure of anti-blackness.

Racism/white supremacy in America is deeply rooted in a global system of settler-colonial capitalism, land theft, mass murder (or if you prefer the sanitized euphemism of the term "genocide") racial chattel slavery and its consequences. White privilege is the manifestation, consequence, and flip-side of Black oppression and exploitation, violence of indigenous sovereignty, and the Eurocentric imposition of private property relations on both land and people to extract profit through domination. This is a global Empire, and it is an empire here within the US itself as well. White supremacy, white privilege and racism can only be uprooted by overturning that system of settler colonialism and imperialism, here in the US and throughout the world. Nothing short of decolonization, self-determination of oppressed and colonized people and revolutionary social, political, economic and ecological transformation of the entire society will do.

"Powerful people never educate the victims of their power in how to take their power away from them... the ideology of our "former" slave masters cannot save us. We will not be truly liberated until we are the main instruments of our liberation".

-Dr. John Henrick Clarke

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