

# United States: Death in Black and White

Sunday 31 July 2016, by [DYSON Michael Eric](#) (Date first published: 7 July 2016).

We, black America, are a nation of nearly 40 million souls inside a nation of more than 320 million people. And I fear now that it is clearer than ever that you, white America, will always struggle to understand us.

Like you, we don't all think the same, feel the same, love, learn, live or even die the same.

But there's one thing most of us agree on: We don't want cops to be executed at a peaceful protest. We also don't want cops to kill us without fear that they will ever face a jury, much less go to jail, even as the world watches our death on a homemade video recording. This is a difficult point to make as a racial crisis flares around us.

We close a week of violence that witnessed the tragic deaths of two black men — Alton B. Sterling and Philando Castile — at the hands of the police with a terrible attack in Dallas against police officers, whose names we're just beginning to learn. It feels as though it has been death leading to more death, nothing anyone would ever hope for.

A nonviolent protest was hijacked by violence and so, too, was the debate about the legitimate grievances that black Americans face. The acts of the gunman in Dallas must be condemned. However, he has nothing to do with the difficult truths we must address if we are to make real racial progress, and the reckoning includes being honest about how black grievance has been ignored, dismissed or discounted.

In the wake of these deaths and the protests surrounding them, you, white America, say that black folks kill each other every day without a mumbling word while we thunderously protest a few cops, usually but not always white, who shoot to death black people who you deem to be mostly "thugs."

That such an accusation is nonsense is nearly beside the point. Black people protest, to one another, to a world that largely refuses to listen, that what goes on in black communities across this nation is horrid, as it would be in any neighborhood depleted of dollars and hope — emptied of good schools, and deprived of social and economic buffers against brutality. People usually murder where they nest; they aim their rage at easy targets.

It is not best understood as black-on-black crime; rather, it is neighbor-to-neighbor carnage. If their neighbors were white, they'd get no exemption from the crime that plagues human beings who happen to be black. If you want interracial killing, you have to have interracial communities.

We all can see the same videos. But you insist that the camera doesn't tell the whole story. Of course you're right, but you don't really want to see or hear that story.

At birth, you are given a pair of binoculars that see black life from a distance, never with the texture of intimacy. Those binoculars are privilege; they are status, regardless of your class. In fact the greatest privilege that exists is for white folk to get stopped by a cop and not end up dead when the encounter is over.

Those binoculars are also stories, bad stories, biased stories, harmful stories, about how black

people are lazy, or dumb, or slick, or immoral, people who can't be helped by the best schools or even God himself. These beliefs don't make it into contemporary books, or into most classrooms. But they are passed down, informally, from one white mind to the next.

The problem is you do not want to know anything different from what you think you know. Your knowledge of black life, of the hardships we face, yes, those we sometimes create, those we most often endure, don't concern you much. You think we have been handed everything because we have fought your selfish insistence that the world, all of it — all its resources, all its riches, all its bounty, all its grace — should be yours first, and foremost, and if there's anything left, why then we can have some, but only if we ask politely and behave gratefully.

So you demand the Supreme Court give you back what was taken from you: more space in college classrooms that you dominate; better access to jobs in fire departments and police forces that you control. All the while your resentment builds, and your slow hate gathers steam. Your whiteness has become a burden too heavy for you to carry, so you outsource it to a vile political figure who amplifies your most detestable private thoughts.

Whiteness is blindness. It is the wish not to see what it will not know.

If you do not know us, you also refuse to hear us because you do not believe what we say. You have decided that enough is enough. If the cops must kill us for no good reason, then so be it because most of us are guilty anyway. If the black person that they kill turns out to be innocent, it is an acceptable death, a sacrificial one.

Terror was visited on Dallas Thursday night. Unspeakable terror. We are not strangers to terror. You make us afraid to walk the streets, for at any moment, a blue-clad officer with a gun could swoop down on us to snatch our lives from us and say that it was because we were selling cigarettes, or compact discs, or breathing too much for your comfort, or speaking too abrasively for your taste. Or running, or standing still, or talking back, or being silent, or doing as you say, or not doing as you say fast enough.

You hold an entire population of Muslims accountable for the evil acts of a few. Yet you rarely muster the courage to put down your binoculars, and with them, your corrosive self-pity, and see what we see. You say religions and cultures breed violence stoked by the complicity of silence because peoples will not denounce the villains who act in their names.

Yet you do the same. In the aftermath of these deaths, you do not all condemn these cops; to do so, you would have to condemn the culture that produced them — the same culture that produced you. Condemning a culture is not inciting hate. That is very important. Yet black people will continue to die at the hands of cops as long as we deny that whiteness can be more important in explaining those cops' behavior than anything else.

You cannot know how we secretly curse the cowardice of whites who know what I write is true, but dare not say it. Neither will your smug insistence that you are different — not like that ocean of unenlightened whites — satisfy us any longer. It makes the killings worse to know that your disapproval of them has spared your reputations and not our lives.

You do not know that after we get angry with you, we get even angrier with ourselves, because we don't know how to make you stop, or how to make you care enough to stop those who pull the triggers. We do not know what to do now that sadness is compounded by more sadness.

The nation as a whole feels powerless now. A peaceful protest turned into the scene of a sniper attack. Day in and day out, we feel powerless to make our black lives matter. We feel powerless to

make you believe that our black lives should matter. We feel powerless to keep you from killing black people in front of their loved ones. We feel powerless to keep you from shooting hate inside our muscles with well-choreographed white rage.

But we have rage, too. Most of us keep our rage inside. We are afraid that when the tears begin to flow we cannot stop them. Instead we damage our bodies with high blood pressure, sicken our souls with depression.

We cannot hate you, not really, not most of us; that is our gift to you. We cannot halt you; that is our curse.

**Michael Eric Dyson**

---

---

**P.S.**

\* SundayReview. NYT. JULY 7, 2016:

[http://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/10/opinion/sunday/what-white-america-fails-to-see.html?\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/10/opinion/sunday/what-white-america-fails-to-see.html?_r=1)

A version of this op-ed appears in print on July 10, 2016, on page SR2 of the New York edition with the headline: *Death in Black and White*.

\* Michael Eric Dyson, a professor of sociology at Georgetown, is the author of "The Black Presidency: Barack Obama and the Politics of Race in America" and a contributing opinion writer.