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Black Lives: Between Grief and Action

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The Stone is a forum for contemporary philosophers and other thinkers on issues both timely and timeless.

This is the fourth in a series of interviews with philosophers on race that I am conducting for The Stone. This week's conversation is with Joy James, a political philosopher who is a professor of the humanities and political science at Williams College. She is the author of "Seeking the Beloved Community: A Feminist Race Reader." — George Yancy

George Yancy: There are times when I've asked myself if philosophy can console in times of pain and suffering. Among my friends and colleagues of all races, the killings of Michael Brown, Akai Gurley, Tamir Rice and Eric Garner and so many others like them have caused emotional pain —feelings of being sick and hurt, feelings of depression, angst, hopelessness. It's crazy.

Joy James: That's grief. And yes, it is crazy. Welcome to black life under white supremacy.

Grief as a painful historical trajectory is one thing; to grieve intensely in the misery of the present moment is another. Ferguson, Staten Island, Brooklyn and Cleveland (we can add Detroit for 7-year-old Aiyana Stanley-Jones, and Bastrop, Texas for Yvette Smith) — these disparate sites have forced diverse people around the country and internationally to huddle closer together as we scrutinize laws and policies that reward police violence with immunity.

Being denigrated and victimized by your designated protectors is shocking to the core, because their job is to protect and serve. We're stunned because our trust in law is violated; police departments tolerate hyper-aggressive officers by underreporting and underdisciplining them. These officers are not "going rogue" in wealthy, white communities because those communities have the economic and political resources to discipline them.

Police are our employees whom we have to obey ostensibly for our own safety and that of the general good; but also because they will hurt us often, with impunity, if we don't — and sometimes even when we do — obey.

Of course, police crime and the duplicity of law are not new to America. During the convict prison lease system and Jim Crow, a black person could easily be arrested for not stepping off the sidewalk to let a white person pass. In Ferguson, it appears that not stepping on the sidewalk to let a white person pass — one whose salary was paid in part by blacks — sparked the encounter that ended Michael Brown's life.

Nonetheless, despite how disturbing these structural and episodic assaults are, they also work as catalysts for substantive change. Police incompetence, malfeasance and murder inspire outrage.

G.Y.: What are your thoughts on the killings of the New York City police officers Wenjian Liu and Raphael Ramos? Does it complicate these issues?

J.J.: The murders of these officers highlight the dangers that both police and public face. When Ismaaiyl Brinsley first shot his former female partner in a domestic violence dispute in Baltimore then traveled to Brooklyn to randomly kill police officers, he invoked the killings of Michael Brown and Eric Garner as motivation. This invocation has been denounced by the Brown and Garner families, civil rights activists, the president and attorney general, and city leaders. What any mentally ill or criminal person does is not representative of a movement for human rights.

G.Y.: What are the implications of this sort of suffering amid police violence?

J.J.: In a democracy, the implications for an ill-informed citizenry are grim. The recent tragedies remind us that this violence is sadly familiar to those who have a complex memory. We've grappled with racial animus and hatred from overseers, Klansmen and -women, police, segregationists, integrationists and various sectors of society from academia to athletics.

The implications of public servants and deputized vigilantes violating black life with impunity are profound, especially for young black people. We need to publicly debate whether it is just, moral, and appropriate, or even safe and sane, to believe in modern policing, given the fallibility, corruption and danger present in the institution. Police agencies have a history of racial bias and violence that has been investigated and condemned by governments as well as civil and human rights organizations. Citizens are supposed to flee or fight criminals, not the police. But reality teaches you that in black life you need to be ever vigilant for both.

G.Y.: What do we do with despair at the moment regarding these killings? What do we do to avoid feelings of implosion?

J.J.: We mix sorrow with something else. We've historically done that as a people. Ida B. Wells as an anti-lynching activist, who was marginalized by respectable blacks, always said she would sell her life "dearly" to a lyncher. She didn't have to (apparently she died from exhaustion and lack of support for her radical opposition to racism). Ida B. Wells loved, deeply and immensely; traumatized and transformed by the Memphis lynching of Thomas Moss, the father of her goddaughter, she became an activist. Moss was "targeted" for economic competition with whites; and lynched in 1892 with other black men following the exchange of gunfire with white, unidentified policemen who approached the black grocer's store at night, through a dark alley, with their guns drawn. Realizing the men injured were police, Moss and his associates went to the police to explain the mistake. Their murders sparked an anti-lynching movement.

Decades later, Mamie Till defied law and held an open casket for her mutilated 14-year-old son, Emmett, who broke "law" and custom by allegedly whistling at a white woman. He was subsequently tortured and murdered; his white killers

acquitted. These women activists loved life, family and community, and inspired the courageous reinvention of America through social and political movements.

People sometimes miss that outrage and resistance are guided by love, and the desire to bring honor to life brutally taken. We continue to remember atrocities through demonstrations and protests in humor, sports, black women who though traumatized by domestic violence still organize forums against gun violence.

G.Y.: Why has racism persisted so long within the North American context?

J.J.: As the late great civil rights leader, historian Vincent Harding noted, this crisis is structural and endemic. There is anti-black prejudicial bias not only in policing but also in education, employment, health and housing. “The law” has been an impediment to black lives’ mattering since the “three-fifths clause” to the U.S. Constitution legalized bodily theft to build a democracy favoring white property holders. The 13th Amendment legalized slavery to prisons, establishing the foundation for the convict prison lease system, where blacks died faster in freedom than they had on plantations because they were worked to death to benefit capital and state economies. Jim Crow, foster care disproportionality, racially fashioned policing and incarceration and — as Marvin Gaye notes in “Inner City Blues (Make Me Wanna Holler)” — “trigger-happy policing” are all part of the fabric of American life.

Racism is also economically and existentially profitable. Proximity to “whiteness” helps, as studies have shown, in obtaining jobs, housing, promotions; just as gender and sexism lead to differential pay for women, race and racism create differentials in the acquisition of resources.

Racism is also sexualized. It is so embedded with (sexual) slander, and micro and macro aggressions against blacks (males and females), that it is normative as entertainment. This is part of the American “libidinal” economy; for some, black suffering is enjoyable as spectacle.

G.Y.: How does your understanding of that persistence relate to the current situation?

J.J.: If Michael Brown had survived his police encounter, he might have had to endure a Rodney King-type beating, physical and emotional trauma; trial; incarceration; disenfranchisement through being a felon.

Here is the “crazy” of our social order. Former Chicago Police Commissioner Jon Burge was released in October after running a torture ring that imprisoned over 100 black men. For over 20 years, Burge, who is white, led an anti-black torture ring to obtain false confessions. Torture included cattle prods to their genitals, and near suffocation through plastic bags over their heads (some of the tactics evoke the report on the C.I.A.’s interrogation techniques). Due to the statute of limitations, Burge was convicted of perjury in 2010 and sentenced to four and a half years in prison. The officer-torturers now reportedly collect millions in pensions; and Chicago has settled more in compensation to their victims. The nation compensates racial predators; without accountability, restorative justice remains elusive.

Restorative justice is complex. It is also unnecessarily complicated by police structures that present and posture as omnipotent. In the absence of a clear line between criminal and police behavior, fear is the enforcer. Ironically, black Americans are regularly taxed to pay salaries, pensions, and benefits to police forces that disproportionately target black life through penalties and fines, brutality and disrespect. The Senate Intelligence Committee’s report on C.I.A. interrogation documents that the C.I.A. lied about its use of torture to the public and government, and that its actions did not make the United States safer, only more barbaric. Why would the local police force expect a different outcome as it treats black communities as “enemies” and deploys excessive force without accountability?

G.Y.: So, where do we go from here?

J.J.: Congressman John Lewis, a former S.N.C.C. activist, has said that Ferguson may have sparked another civil rights movement. During the civil rights rebellion, Ella Baker emphasized that the movement was about “more than a hamburger” — more than the right to consumer society. Today, as all lives experience so much violence and sorrow, we can see how certain historical leadership, that of Ella Baker, Fannie Lou Hamer, Rosa Parks, Audre Lorde, prepared us for the present moment. If the current tragedies have sparked

movement, then it is not only about the martyrs, it is about the mothers and families and communities that organize in the face of all forms of illegitimate violence, including that by police who are rarely brought to justice.

We've seen "Fergusons" and police violence before. We'll see them again until there is substantive change. Activists are challenging the dynamics of violence and intimidation: racial-denigration and contempt; rape and domestic violence; schools as dropout factories or pipelines to prison; banning of speech for the (politically) imprisoned; incompetent medical care on both sides of razor wire.

The good news is that the young are resilient. Student activists educate about "The Black Women's Blueprint," and black women's leadership in Ferguson addressing racism, sexism and homophobia in order to forge dynamic, political responses to violence. They have also pointed out how the underreporting of activist black female leadership, and the scant attention to police sexual and physical assaults against black women and girls, limits our view of political agency and women's contributions towards healing, accountability, and building protected communities.

Movements also appear on a Harlem4Kids listserv, where mothers cite Canadian politicians who call for "zero death" in the wake of police shootings of unarmed people. We can raise the bar and demand "zero trauma" — that is, peaceful, not terrorized, communities as the bedrock for a functional society, and the public standard for police set by their ability to diminish rather than create trauma.

Black lives matter. My students who have visited Ferguson tell me that this statement of fact was introduced into our shared language by women who understand the lives of their communities as crossing gender boundaries and traditional roles of political leadership. Black lives matter because we make them matter.

This interview was conducted by email and edited. Previous interviews in this series can be found here.

George Yancy is a professor of philosophy at Duquesne University. He has written, edited and co-edited numerous books, including "Black Bodies, White

Gazes,” “Look, a White!” and “Pursuing Trayvon Martin,” co-edited with Janine Jones.

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