**[Repetitive Motion Disorder: Black Reality and White Denial in America](http://www.timwise.org/2014/11/repetitive-motion-disorder-black-reality-and-white-denial-in-america/" \o "Repetitive Motion Disorder: Black Reality and White Denial in America)**

Tim Wise - Posted on November 24, 2014

<http://www.timwise.org/2014/11/repetitive-motion-disorder-black-reality-and-white-denial-in-america/>

see also http://www.timwise.org/2014/11/i-was-no-angel-either-crime-deviance-and-white-privilege-in-america/

I suppose there is no longer much point in debating the facts surrounding the shooting of Michael Brown. First, because Officer Darren Wilson has been cleared by a grand jury, and even the collective brilliance of a thousand bloggers pointing out the glaring inconsistencies in his version of events that August day won’t result in a different outcome. And second, because Wilson’s guilt or innocence was always somewhat secondary to the larger issue: namely, the issue of this gigantic national inkblot staring us in the face, and what we see when we look at it—and more to the point, why?

Because it is a kind of racial Rorschach (is it not?) into which each of these cases—not just Brown but all the others, from Trayvon Martin to Sean Bell to Patrick Dorismond to Aswan Watson and beyond—inevitably and without fail morph. That we see such different things when we look upon them must mean something. That so much of white America cannot see the shapes made out so clearly by most of black America cannot be a mere coincidence, nor is it likely an inherent defect in our vision. Rather, it is a socially-constructed astigmatism that blinds so many to the way in which black folks often experience law enforcement.

Not to overdo the medical metaphors, but as with those other cases noted above, so too in this one did a disturbing number of whites manifest something of a repetitive motion disorder—a reflex nearly as automatic as the one that leads so many police (or wanna-be police) to fire their weapons at black men in the first place. It is a reflex to rationalize the event, defend the shooter, trash the dead with blatantly racist rhetoric and imagery, [and then deny](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/08/18/ferguson-shooting-poll_n_5688762.html?utm_hp_ref=black-voices) that the incident or one’s own response to it had [anything to do with race](http://www.people-press.org/2014/08/18/stark-racial-divisions-in-reactions-to-ferguson-police-shooting/).

Reflex: To deny that there was anything racial about sending around those phony pictures [claimed to be of Mike Brown](http://www.kctv5.com/story/26310700/kansas-city-officer-faces-review-for-michael-brown-facebook-posts) posing with a gun, or the one [passed off as Darren Wilson](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/09/04/darren-wilson-injury-photo-ferguson_n_5768510.html?utm_hp_ref=crime&ir=Crime) in a hospital bed with his orbital socket blown out.

Reflex: To deny that there was anything racial about how quickly [those pictures were believed to be genuine](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/ian-reifowitz/zombie-lies-about-ferguso_b_6029750.html) by so many who distributed them on social media, even when they weren’t, and how difficult it is for some to discern the difference between one black man and another.

Reflex: To deny that there was anything racial about how rapidly many bought the story that Wilson had been attacked and bloodied, even as video showed him calmly standing at the scene of the shooting without injury, and even as the [preliminary report on the incident](http://www.stltoday.com/online/pdf-autopsy-report-for-michael-brown/pdf_ce018d0c-5998-11e4-b700-001a4bcf6878.html) made no mention of any injuries to Officer Wilson, and even as Wilson apparently [has a history](http://thefreethoughtproject.com/shock-video-darren-wilson-violates-1st-amendment-ill-lock-ass-up-arrests-man-filming/#oTKjLGHHgpgbyGcX.99) of power-tripping belligerence towards those with whom he interacts, and a propensity to distort the details of those encounters as well.

Reflex: To deny that there was anything racial about Cardinals fans [taunting peaceful protesters](http://crooksandliars.com/2014/10/watch-how-racist-st-louis-cardinals-fans) who gathered outside a playoff game to raise the issue of Brown’s death, by calling them crackheads or telling them that it was only because of whites that blacks have any freedoms at all, or that they should “get jobs” or “pull up their pants,” or go back to Africa.

Reflex: To deny that there was anything racial about sending money to Darren Wilson’s defense fund and then [explaining one’s donation](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/aug/22/gofundme-defends-ferguson-officer-fundraising-page-racist-postings) by saying [what a service the officer had performed](http://www.salon.com/2014/08/22/darren_wilson_gofundme_campaign_has_become_hub_of_racism_and_hate/) by removing a “savage” like Brown from the community, or by referring to Wilson’s actions as “animal control.”

Reflex: To deny that there was anything racial about reaction to evidence of weed in Brown’s lifeless body, as with Trayvon’s before him, even though whites [use drugs at the same rate as blacks](https://www.aclu.org/criminal-law-reform/war-marijuana-black-and-white-report), but rarely have that fact offered up as a reason for why we might deserve to be shot by police.

Reflex: To deny that there was anything racial behind the belief that the head of the Missouri Highway Patrol, brought in to calm tensions in Ferguson, was [throwing up gang signs](http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2014/08/20/missouri-highway-patrol-capt-ron-johnson-is-not-a-gang-member-hes-just-a-kappa/) on camera, when actually, it was a hand sign for the black fraternity of which that officer is a member; and to deny that there is anything racial about one’s stunning ignorance as to the difference between those two things.

Reflex: To deny that there’s anything at all racial about the way that even black *victims* of violence—like Brown, like Trayvon Martin, and dozens of others—are [often spoken of more judgmentally](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/08/14/media-black-victims_n_5673291.html?utm_hp_ref=tw) than even the most horrific of white *perpetrators*, the latter of whom are regularly referred to as having been nice, and quiet, and smart, and hardly the type to kill a dozen people, or cut them into little pieces, or eat their flesh after storing it in the freezer for several weeks.

And most of all, the reflex to deny that there is anything racial about the lens through which we typically view law enforcement; to deny that being white has shaped our understanding of policing and their actions in places like Ferguson, even as being white has had *everything* to do with those matters. Racial identity shapes the way we are treated by cops, and as such, shapes the way we are likely to view them. As a general rule, nothing we do will get us shot by law enforcement: not [walking around in a big box store](http://www.valuewalk.com/2014/07/target-tells-customers-guns-please/) with semi-automatic weapons (though standing in one with an air rifle [gets you killed](http://www.buzzfeed.com/mikehayes/the-life-and-death-of-john-crawford#1dxf09l) if you’re black); not [assaulting two officers](http://www.kmov.com/news/crime/Police-Suspect-hides-in-womans-basement-assaults-officers-271009211.html), even in the St. Louis area, a mere five days after Mike Brown was killed; not [pointing a loaded weapon at three officers](http://www.nola.com/opinions/index.ssf/2014/04/who_points_a_gun_at_nopd_and_l.html) and demanding that they—the police—”drop their fucking guns;” not committing [mass murder in a movie theatre](http://www.cnn.com/2012/07/20/us/colorado-theater-shooting/) before finally being taken alive; not proceeding in the wake of that event to [walk around the same town](http://www.rawstory.com/rs/2014/08/teen-totes-shotgun-through-town-still-shaken-by-mass-murder-because-2nd-amendment/) in which it happened carrying a shotgun; and not killing a cop so as to spark a “revolution,” and then leading others on a two month chase through the woods before [being arrested with only a few scratches](http://talkingpointsmemo.com/news/eric-frein-suspect-wanted-revolution).

To white America, in the main, police are the folks who help get our cats out of the tree, or who take us on ride-arounds to show us how gosh-darned exciting it is to be a cop. We experience police most often as helpful, as protectors of our lives and property. But that is not the black experience by and large; and black people know this, however much we don’t. The history of law enforcement in America, with regard to black folks, has been one of unremitting oppression. That is neither hyperbole nor opinion, but incontrovertible fact. From slave patrols to overseers to the Black Codes to lynching, it is a fact. From dozens of white-on-black riots that marked the first half of the twentieth century (in which cops participated actively) to Watts to Rodney King to Abner Louima to Amadou Diallo to the railroading of the Central Park 5, it is a fact. From the New Orleans Police Department’s killings of Adolph Archie to Henry Glover to the Danziger Bridge shootings there in the wake of Katrina to stop-and-frisk in places like New York, it’s a fact. And the fact that white people don’t know this history, have never been required to learn it, and can be considered even remotely informed citizens *without* knowing it, explains a lot about what’s wrong with America. Black people have to learn everything about white people just to stay alive. They especially and quite obviously have to know what scares us, what triggers the reptilian part of our brains and convinces us that they intend to do us harm. Meanwhile, we need know nothing whatsoever about them. We don’t have to know their history, their experiences, their hopes and dreams, or *their* fears. And we can go right on being oblivious to all that without consequence. It won’t be on the test, so to speak.

We can remain ignorant to the ubiquity of police misconduct, thinking it the paranoid fever dream of irrational “race-card” playing peoples of color, just like we did after the O.J. Simpson verdict. When most of black America responded to that verdict with cathartic relief—not because they necessarily thought Simpson innocent but because they felt there were enough questions raised about police in the case to sow reasonable doubt—most white folks concluded that black America had lost its collective mind. How could they *possibly* believe that the LAPD would plant evidence in an attempt to frame or sweeten the case against a criminal defendant? A few years later, had we been paying attention (but of course, we were not), we would have had our answer. It was then that the scandal in the city’s Ramparts division broke, implicating dozens of police in over a hundred cases of misconduct, including, in one incident, shooting a gang member at point blank range and then planting a weapon on him to make the incident appear as self-defense. So putting aside the guilt or innocence of O.J,, clearly it was not irrational for black Angelenos (and Americans) to give one the likes of Mark Fuhrman side-eye after his own racism was revealed in that case.

I think this, more than anything, is the source of our trouble when it comes to racial division in this country. The inability of white people to hear black reality—*to not even know that there is one* and that it differs from our own—makes it nearly impossible to move forward. But how can we expect black folks to trust law enforcement or to view it in the same heroic and selfless terms that so many of us apparently do? The law has been a weapon used *against* black bodies, not a shield intended to defend them, and for a very long time.

In his contribution to Jill Nelson’s 2000 anthology on police brutality, scholar Robin D.G Kelley reminds us of the bill of particulars.\* As Kelley notes, in colonial Virginia, slave owners were allowed to beat, burn, and even mutilate slaves without fear of punishment; and throughout the colonial period, police not only looked the other way at the commission of brutality against black folks, but were actively engaged in the forcible suppression of slave uprisings and insurrections. Later, after abolition, law enforcement regularly and repeatedly released black prisoners into the hands of lynch mobs and stood by as their bodies were hanged from trees, burned with blowtorches, body parts amputated and given out as souvenirs. In city after city, north and south, police either stood by or actively participated in pogroms against African American communities: in Wilmington, North Carolina, Atlanta, New Orleans, New York City, Akron and Birmingham, just to name a few. In one particularly egregious anti-black rampage in East St. Louis, Illinois, in 1917, police shot blacks dead in the street as part of an orgy of violence aimed at African Americans who had moved from the Deep South in search of jobs. One hundred and fifty were killed, including thirty-nine children whose skulls were crushed and whose bodies were thrown into bonfires set by white mobs. In the 1920s, it is estimated that half of all black people who were killed by whites, were killed by white police officers.

But Kelley continues: In 1943 white police in Detroit joined with others of their racial compatriots, attacking blacks who had dared to move into previously all-white public housing, killing seventeen. In the 1960s and early ’70s police killed over two dozen members of the Black Panther Party, including those like Mark Clark and Fred Hampton in Chicago, asleep in their beds at the time their apartment was raided. In 1985, Philadelphia law enforcement perpetrated an all-out assault on members of the MOVE organization, bombing their row houses from state police helicopters, killing eleven, including five children, destroying sixty-one homes and leaving hundreds homeless.

These are but a few of the stories one could tell, and which Kelley does in his extraordinary recitation of the history—and for most whites, we are without real knowledge of any of them. But they and others like them are incidents burned into the cell memory of black America. They haven’t the luxury of forgetting, even as we apparently cannot be bothered to remember, or to learn of these things in the first place. Bull Connor, Sheriff Jim Clark, Deputy Cecil Price: these are not far-away characters for most black folks. How could they be? After all, more than a few still carry the scars inflicted by men such as they. And while few of us would think to ridicule Jews for still harboring less than warm feelings for Germans some seventy years later—we would understand the lack of trust, the wariness, even the anger—we apparently find it hard to understand the same historically-embedded logic of black trepidation and contempt for law enforcement in *this* country. And this is so, even as black folks’ negative experiences with police have extended well beyond the time frame of Hitler’s twelve year Reich, and even as those experiences did not stop seventy years ago, or even seventy days ago, or seventy minutes.

Can we perhaps, just this once, admit our collective blind spot? Admit that there are things going on, and that have been going on a very long time, about which we know nothing? Might we suspend our disbelief, just long enough to gain some much needed insights about the society we share? One wonders what it will take for us to not merely listen but actually to *hear* the voices of black parents, fearful that the next time their child walks out the door may be the last, and all because someone—an officer or a self-appointed vigilante—sees them as dangerous, as disrespectful, as reaching for their gun? Might we be able to hear that without deftly pivoting to the much more comfortable (for us) topic of black crime or single-parent homes? Without deflecting the real and understandable fear of police abuse with lectures about the danger of having a victim mentality—especially ironic given that such lectures come from a people who apparently see ourselves as the always imminent victims of big black men?

Can we just put aside all we think we know about black communities (most of which could fit in a thimble, truth be told) and imagine what it must feel like to walk through life as the embodiment of other people’s fear, as a monster that haunts their dreams the way Freddie Kreuger does in the movies? To be the physical representation of what marks a neighborhood as bad, a school as bad, not because of anything *you* have actually done, but simply because of the color of your skin? Surely that is not an inconsequential weight to bear. To go through life, every day, having to think about how to behave so as not to scare white people, or so as not to trigger our contempt—thinking about how to dress, and how to walk and how to talk and how to respond to a cop (not because you’re wanting to be polite, but because you’d like to see your mother again)—is *work;*and it’s harder than any job that any white person has ever had in this country. To be seen as a font of cultural contagion is tantamount to being a modern day leper.

And then perhaps we might spend a few minutes considering what this does to the young black child, and how it differs from the way that white children grow up. Think about how you would respond to the world if that world told you every day and in a million ways before lunch how awful you were, how horrible your community was, and how pathological your family. Because that’s what we’re telling black folks on the daily. Every time police call the people they are sworn to protect animals, as at least one Ferguson officer was willing to do on camera—no doubt speaking for many more in the process—we tell them this. Every time we shrug at the way police routinely stop and frisk young black men, even though in almost all cases they are found to have done nothing wrong, we tell them this. Every time we turn away from the clear disparities in our nation’s schools, which relegate the black and brown to classrooms led by the least experienced teachers, and where they will be treated like inmates more than children hoping to learn, we tell them this. Every time Bill O’Reilly pontificates about “black culture” and every time Barack Obama tells black men—but *only* black men—to be better fathers, we tell them this: that they are uniquely flawed, uniquely pathological, a cancerous mass of moral decrepitude to be feared, scorned, surveilled, incarcerated and discarded. The constant drumbeat of negativity is so normalized by now that it forms the backdrop of every conversation about black people held in white spaces when black folks themselves are not around. It is like the way your knee jumps when the doctor taps it with that little hammer thing during a check-up: a reflex by now instinctual, automatic, unthinking.

And still we pretend that one can think these things—that vast numbers of us can—and yet be capable of treating black folks fairly in the workforce, housing market, schools or in the streets; that we can, on the one hand, view the larger black community as a chaotic maelstrom of iniquity, while still managing, on the other, to treat black loan applicants, job applicants, students or random strangers as mere individuals. That we can somehow thread the needle between our grand aspirations to equanimity as Americans and our deeply internalized biases regarding broad swaths of our nation’s people.

But we can’t; and it is in these moments—moments like those provided by events in Ferguson—that the limits of our commitment to that aspirational America are laid bare. It is in moments like these when the chasm between our respective understandings of the world—itself opened up by the equally cavernous differences in the way we’ve experienced it—seems almost impossible to bridge. But bridge them we must, before the strain of our repetitive motion disorder does permanent and untreatable damage to our collective national body.