Wednesday, Dec 3, 2014 07:00 AM EST

**White America’s scary delusion: Why its sense of black humanity is so skewed**

**Many white folks aren't violent. But here's how ignorance and lack of empathy make life so unsafe for black people**

[Brittney Cooper](http://www.salon.com/writer/brittney_cooper/)

<http://www.salon.com/2014/12/03/white_americas_scary_delusion_why_violence_is_at_the_core_of_whiteness/?utm_source=facebook&utm_medium=socialflow>

[e](http://www.salon.com/topic/race), [darren wilson](http://www.salon.com/topic/darren_wilson), [Racism](http://www.salon.com/topic/racism), [White people](http://www.salon.com/topic/white_people), [African Americans](http://www.salon.com/topic/african_americans), [Trayvon Martin](http://www.salon.com/topic/trayvon_martin), [Politics News](http://www.salon.com/category/politics/)

Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Tamir Rice

The failure of a St. Louis county grand jury to indict Darren Wilson, the former police officer who killed Michael Brown, created a maelstrom of protests last week. In more than 137 cities and on college campuses around the country, including Rutgers University where I teach, protesters walked out of classes, marched with signs, linked hands to stop traffic on interstate highways and train routes, staged a massive “die-in” to shut down the Galleria Mall in St. Louis, and chose to boycott Black Friday and Cyber Monday, the biggest shopping days of the year. On Sunday, five players for the St. Louis Rams entered the field with their hands up, a silent and peaceful protest in solidarity with Michael Brown’s final act as he attempted to save his own life.

These protests have been met at best with a kind of studied indifference and at worst with a kind of unrighteous indignation that truly baffles the mind. For instance, Black Friday sales dropped an estimated 11 percent from last year’s totals. While some decrease in revenue had been predicted, double-digit decreases were not. The New York Times coverage of the decline managed to not even consider the possibility that the massive, social media-driven boycott of Black Friday, through hashtags like #BlackoutBlackFriday and Rahiel Tesfamariam’s #NotOneCent, had contributed at all to the downward shift in sales.

Then on Sunday, after the protest by Rams players, the St. Louis Police Officers Association [sent a letter demanding an apology](http://www.ksdk.com/story/news/local/2014/11/30/stl-police-officers-association-condemns-rams-display/19721979/?hootPostID=56e4d621f410c5ee1ef0c0b0696f34f8) and condemning the players’ peaceful protest as “tasteless, offensive, and inflammatory.”

Unfortunately, key players in this case, buttressed by a particularly clueless segment of white America, actually seemed to believe that a grand jury decision in favor of Darren Wilson would simply be accepted by black America. The outrage from the St. Louis Police Officers hearkens back to an era when black people were expected to willingly endure white people’s routine horrific act and humiliations committed against them. That this decision feels like a travesty worthy of literally stopping traffic in locales all over the country is an affective response that seems to escape white notice, an apparent casualty of the well-documented racial empathy gap, among white Americans. Though many white people do understand the racial magnitude of last week’s devastating decision – the sense it offers that black people, and in particular young black men, are simply sheep for the slaughter — far too many white people do not understand this.

Among those with more insidious and overt racial animus, the belief is that we should simply “lie down and take it.” Among well-meaning, *reasonable* white people, the view is more anodyne. These people implored us to wait for justice to take its course, for the evidence to be evaluated, the witnesses to testify, a decision to be made.

There is a real disconnect between what white people know and what black people know in this country. Philosophers and political theorists understand these as questions of “epistemology,” wherein they consider how social conditions shape our particular standpoint, and ability to apprehend the things that are supposed to be apparent to us. “How do we know what we know?” is one way we might ask the question.

It is deeply apparent to most black people that the legal proceedings in the grand jury deliberations were a farce. Whether we consider the deliberate incorrect instructions given to jurors by the prosecutor, or the refusal to challenge the incendiary and inhumane characterizations of Michael Brown as “it,” “demon” and “hulk,” black people know that a lie has been perpetrated.

Too many white people lie comfortably in bed each night with the illusion that justice was served, that the system worked, that the evidence vindicated the view that they need to believe – that white men do not deliberately murder black boys for sport in this day and time and get away with it. Most well-meaning white people need to believe this. For me as both teacher of different kinds of epistemology and as a black person, I do not have the luxury of believing this. I do not have the luxury of stepping over the bodies of Eric Garner, John Crawford and Tamir Rice, leaving my unasked questions strewn alongside their lifeless bodies.

Part of the challenge of this moment is coming up with new frameworks of racial recognition. I am struck by the fact that it did not even occur to the [New York Times writer](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/01/business/thanksgiving-weekend-sales-at-stores-and-online-slide-11-percent.html?smid=fb-share&_r=1) to consider the potential of a protest that was front and center among most black people over the holiday weekend. I am struck by the ways that media, other than cable news outlets, participated in making black rage *and* black peaceful protest invisible. I am struck by the fact that the boycott of Black Friday and Cyber Monday, which I participated in alongside family, friends and comrades, registered as merely incidental to the narrative, if it registered at all.

The invisibility of black rage, black pain and black humanity are all elements of the same problem. That problem is a framework problem. Because Darren Wilson did not use any racial slur to refer to Michael Brown, our current racial frameworks are inadequate for helping your average all-American white people think through the contours of this encounter. That problem has plagued us since the beginning of this case; it dogged us throughout the Zimmerman trial; and it is helped along by the deep emotional dishonesty that characterizes race relations in the country.

Because of this framework problem, this epistemology problem, white people find black protests to be absolutely, utterly unreasonable, in light of the “evidence.” Many of these folks have never stopped to consider the fact that “reason,” and “evidence,” are not race-neutral concepts. What is a reasonable conclusion to draw for people who have never had the entirety of their lives shaped by a negative perception of skin tone, is an entirely unreasonable set of conclusions to draw for people who have.

For instance, to believe that Michael Brown charged at Darren Wilson in the midst of a hail of gunfire is to believe that black people are monsters, mythical superhuman creatures, who do not understand the physics of bullets, even as they rip through flesh. To white people, who co-sign Wilson’s account of events, this seems like an entirely reasonable assertion, one helped along by a lifetime of media consumption that represents black masculinity as magical, monstrous and mythic.

That is the supreme irony of the police taking offense at the image of five black football players walking out on the field in a poise of surrender-as-protest. As long as those large, strong football players used their brawn to run a ball down the field, to entertain the mostly white spectators at the game, there are no problems. That they might be human beings, with thoughts and feelings, with politics and connections to communities, with sentiments and spirits attuned to injustice, made them seem threatening, disrespectful and unruly. And frankly,  ungrateful. For so many black men, it is sports that saved them from a fate akin to Michael Brown’s. They are supposed to demonstrate their gratitude through silence.

Black bodies have been used in this country for labor, entertainment and sport. The symbolic import of the Rams protest matters as an assertion that those black men in those mythic, hyper-athletic black male bodies refused to accept an injustice done to a young man that many of us see as a little brother, or cousin, or nephew.

Michael Brown was a human being to us, and more than that, a kid. Like Tamir Rice, the 12-year-old shot in Cleveland for playing with a toy gun, black children are frequently perceived as being much older than they are. The police believed Tamir to be 20 and not 12.

That inability to see black people as human, as vulnerable, as children, as people worthy of protecting is an epistemology problem, a framework problem, a problem about how our experiences shape what we are and are not able to know. The limitations of our frameworks are helped along by willful ignorance and withholding of empathy.

So I continue to refuse to debate this issue with white people in my social circles because I recognize that the frameworks from which most of them work are frameworks that inherently foreclose recognition of black humanity and vulnerability. Those frameworks wield race-neutral notions of “reason” and “evidence” as a sword against unreasonable, heinous and racist acts.

Until white people are ready to relieve themselves of an all-consuming belief in a colorblind legal system, ready to recognize the violence at the core of the ideology of whiteness (which is, I hope you hear me saying, different from calling all white people violent), ready to adopt a new framework, we can’t talk. We can’t talk because y’all can’t hear me. To remix the words of Trayvon’s mom, since you can’t hear us, we will make you feel us, through our protests, through our acts of civil disobedience, through our stoic faces that refuse you the comfort of our smiles. And in the words of Notorious B.I.G., “if you don’t know, now you know.”



Brittney Cooper is a contributing writer at Salon, and teaches Women's and Gender Studies and Africana Studies at Rutgers. Follow her on Twitter at [@professorcrunk](https://twitter.com/ProfessorCrunk).