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**Dear White People: Here Are 5 Reasons Why You Can't Really Feel Black Pain**

Claiming solidarity with us is fine, but don't confuse that with "feeling our pain."

<http://www.alternet.org/dear-white-people-here-are-5-reasons-why-you-cant-really-feel-black-pain?akid=12550.17896.qzydem&rd=1&src=newsletter1028244&t=3>

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After a grand jury in Staten Island decided not to indict the NYPD cop who choked Eric Garner to death this week, thousands of people across the nation took to the streets in protest. Many of those angry people were white and I am willing to bet most were genuinely outraged. But when it comes to the issue of "feeling our pain," white people just can't go there with us.

African Americans' frustation and anger over Garner runs much deeper than the decision not to indict the white cop who killed him; it is a reaction to a white supremacist system that oppresses us and excludes us in every area of American life -- economic, educational, social and political. Even the most empathic white person is just not going to know what that's like.

Here a few structural forms of racism that white people never endure but which cause black people pain on a daily basis:

**1. White people control the media.**[According to a recent Pew study](http://contently.net/2014/08/20/stories/journalism-diversity-problem-can-fix/), nearly 90 percent of reporters who work in America's newsrooms are white and mostly male. The issue with news coverage created by middle-aged white men is that much of the news America views is reported through the white gaze.

Whether it is  [depicting](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2009/feb/18/new-york-post-cartoon-race) President Barack Obama as an ape who was shot and killed by cops or  [penning a *New York Times* piece](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/21/arts/television/viola-davis-plays-shonda-rhimess-latest-tough-heroine.html) saying certain black women aren't "classically beautiful," white people have full control of how black people appear to white America. *Variety*, for example, ran the headline "How Elvis Invented Rock 'n' Roll 60 Years Ago." That the genre of rock 'n' roll was invented by black musicians and existed long before Elvis was born meant nothing to the editors. The magazine eventually changed the headline after  [#BlackTwitter eviscerated it](http://www.theroot.com/blogs/the_grapevine/2014/07/_variety_claims_rock_n_roll_was_invented_by_elvis_but_gets_a_lesson_from.html).

Sympathy for black and white journalists isn't equal, either. When a viewer emailed Wisconsin TV anchor Jennifer Livingston, who is white,  [a rude note](http://www.today.com/news/anchor-called-too-fat-tv-now-international-role-model-1C7761679) about how she was a bad example because of her weight, she went on air to blast him. Her station even posted the email on the newsroom's Facebook page. Her story become an international headline and support poured in from around the world.

However, when a Facebook user complained about African-American TV anchor Rhonda Lee's natural hair on the station's page, Lee was fired after she politely defended herself. She got no support from her employer and the only headlines that followed focused on how she lost her job in what many saw as an act of racism. It took nearly two years for Lee to find another job. (I  [interviewed her](http://www.today.com/news/anchor-called-too-fat-tv-now-international-role-model-1C7761679) about the experience when I was at NewsOne.)

Sympathy isn't created equal, white people. The media has a huge role in shaping it.

**2. The criminal justice system works in white people's favor.**The United States has 5 percent of the world's population and  [25 percent](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/08/12/us/justice-dept-seeks-to-curtail-stiff-drug-sentences.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0) of its prisoners.  [The Sentencing Project reports](http://www.sentencingproject.org/template/page.cfm?id=122) that more than 60 percent of those prisoners are an ethnic minority. There is a reason that disparity exists and it starts with the centuries-long institution called slavery.  [The Equal Justice Initiative notes](http://www.eji.org/HighlightOct2014) that 90 percent of African Americans lived in the south after slavery was abolished in 1865. " [Black Codes](http://www.pbs.org/tpt/slavery-by-another-name/themes/black-codes/)," which limited the legal freedoms of newly freed blacks, were passed in most southern states to severely punish black people for minor offenses such as stealing a pig. Such laws, which lasted well into the 20th century, imprisoned African Americans in conditions that were very similar to slavery.

Though we no longer have Black Codes, sentencing practices still continue to favor white people. Nearly 20 percent of white people have used cocaine compared to  [just 10 percent of black people](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/09/17/racial-disparity-drug-use_n_3941346.html). White people also use hallucinogens, marijuana, prescription painkillers and stimulants like methamphetamine at higher rates than African Americans, but black Americans are arrested at three times the rate of whites for drug possession.

That may have to do with the fact that local policing tactics such as New York City's "broken windows" target African Americans at rates disproportionate to whites. According to a [study](http://www.eji.org/node/965) by the Sentencing Project, white people "overestimated the number of burglaries, illegal drug sales, and juvenile crime committed by African Americans by 20 to 30 percent." [A recent study](http://www.eji.org/node/946) conducted by Stanford University researchers revealed that white people were more likely to support harsher prison sentences if they believed prisons were mostly populated by black inmates.

This means white people are presumed innocent until proven guilty. Not us, though. There's no way white people can relate to this.

**3. The employment market is incredibly racist.**The overall unemployment rate is [5.8 percent](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/06/business/economy/november-jobs-unemployment-figures.html?_r=0) but a racial breakdown of that figure reveals extreme racial skewing. For starters, [data released by the U.S. Department of Labor](http://www.bls.gov/news.release/empsit.t02.htm) reveal that the unemployment rate is 4.9 percent for whites, and 11.1 percent for African Americans. During the 42-year period the Labor Department has broken unemployment data down by race, the [rate has always been higher](http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/the-fix/wp/2014/09/06/black-unemployment-is-always-much-worse-than-white-unemployment-but-the-gap-depends-on-where-you-live/) for African Americans than for whites—at least two-thirds higher, in fact.

The writer Ta-Nahesi Coates breaks down the historical economic desparities in his [reparations piece for the Atlantic](http://www.theatlantic.com/features/archive/2014/05/the-case-for-reparations/361631/), but there are a number of studies showing blatant racist hiring practices in practically every sector of the job market. A [University of Chicago study](http://www.chicagobooth.edu/pdf/bertrand.pdf) reveals that resumes with white-sounding names got 50 percent more callbacks than those with African American-sounding names. The [Nextions report](http://www.vox.com/2014/4/21/5637068/reviewers-will-find-more-spelling-errors-in-your-writing-if-they) shows how law firm partners view legal briefs of African Americans more harshly than those written by whites. A study from the National Bureau of Economic Research reveals how U.S. companies pass up black candidates for jobs because they assume blacks use drugs. [A 2003 study](http://www.irp.wisc.edu/publications/focus/pdfs/foc232i.pdf) by Princeton University sociologist Devah Pager found that white men with criminal records were more likely to get callbacks for interviews than black men with the same qualifications and no criminal record.

White people get the benefit of the doubt. And the job. We don't.

**4. Police officers value your lives while they take ours at will.**Even though an NYPD police officer was captured on video placing Eric Garner in a prohibited chokehold and a coroner ruled his death a homicide, a grand jury said that wasn't enough to charge the cop who killed Garner with a crime. Another black life gone and no one is responsible. At least not now.

Police departments across the country have been accused of racism for decades. [A USA Today analysis](http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2014/11/18/ferguson-black-arrest-rates/19043207/) of arrest records of police departments showed they "arrested black people at a rate 10 times higher than people who are not black."

But black people commit more crimes, that's why they get arrested and killed by cops more, right? No, not really. [As Van Jones explains in the Huffington Post](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/van-jones/are-blacks-a-criminal-rac_b_8398.html), black and white kids are equally likely to carry a weapon or a gun, but black kids are arrested at twice the rate of white one on weapons charges. [ProPublica reports](http://www.propublica.org/article/deadly-force-in-black-and-white) that black men are 21 times more likely than whites to be killed by police. A few weeks ago, [I cited research](http://www.alternet.org/civil-liberties/why-did-cops-shoot-12-year-old-black-boy-brandishing-fake-gun) in a report I wrote on police brutality that reveals how white cops are more likely to shoot an unarmed black person than an armed white one.

Part of the reason for that is connected to the fact that, [according to the New York Times,](http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2014/09/03/us/the-race-gap-in-americas-police-departments.html) "the percentage of whites on the force is more than 30 percentage points higher than in the communities they serve."

Yes, white people, the possibility of there being a white Eric Garner is very slim.You are too valuable in America's eyes to be harmed recklessly. #WhiteLivesMatter. To the police, that is.

**5. No matter how much we discuss our pain, white people manage to make it about them.**"Tonight Show” writer Jason Ross created the hashtag #CrimingWhileWhite to highlight how white people can get away with breaking the law. As well-intentioned as the gesture was, it revealed how much privilege white people have when sharing their misgivings. Few black people would feel safe opening up about their criminal pasts without fearing reprisals, professional or otherwise.

As Caitlin Dewy of theWashington Post [wrote yesterday](http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-intersect/wp/2014/12/04/the-glaring-problem-with-crimingwhilewhite/), white people made our pain over Eric Garner all about them:

"But there’s profound privilege built into even #CrimingWhileWhite, which is supposedly such a force against it. Consider how fortunate and secure you must be, to feel entitled to talk about yourself in the face of someone else’s overwhelming pain and grief. To be comfortable flinging around light-hearted anecdotes about the police, because those interactions don’t represent any kind of ongoing threat to you or your family. To type 100 characters and stamp them with a trendy hashtag, unafraid of any blowback — because, as per usual, you rule the narrative; yours is the dominant voice.

"To top it all off, #CrimingWhileWhite has earned fawning, uncritical write-ups on virtually every news site out there, a scale and tone of coverage we rarely see for #BlackLivesMatter or #DyingWhileBlack or any other non-white social media narrative on race."

Again, when it comes to our pain, white people have this amazing knack for making it about them. Despite their best efforts, #CrimingWhileWhite demonstrated white privilege that was paraded as sympathy and solidarity for black pain.

Fail.

Let us not forget how Piers Morgan [expressed his discomfort](http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2829080/PIERS-MORGAN-black-Americans-want-N-word-die-kill-themselves.html) with black people using the word n\*gga. Never mind that white people created the word. While he didn't focus his essay on them, he found it okay to challenge leading black thinkers online over why they should stop using the world for his comfort. [I appeared](https://soundcloud.com/bbc-world-service/piers-morgan-discusses-his-n-word-column) on the BBC to challenge Piers over his essay but he brushed me off.

Don't get me wrong. White people can certainly support us in our efforts to fight racism. In fact, it is their duty. Sure, they can march with us in Chicago, Boston and New York City, but they will likely never be the victims protesters are marching for. That, dear allies, is white privilege.

There is no way you can "feel us" on that front, but we appreciate the sentiment.

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