

CALL IT WHAT IT IS: ANTI-BLACKNESS

by kihana miraya ross

The word “racism” is everywhere. It’s used [to explain](#) all the things that cause African-Americans’ suffering and death: inadequate access to health care, food, housing and jobs, or a police bullet, baton or knee. But “racism” fails to fully capture what black people in this country are facing.

The right term is “anti-blackness.”

To be clear, “racism” isn’t a meaningless term. But it’s a catch-all that can encapsulate anything from black people being denied fair access to mortgage loans, to Asian students being burdened with a “model minority” label. It’s not specific.

Many Americans, awakened by watching footage of Derek Chauvin killing George Floyd by kneeling on his neck, are grappling with why we live in a world in which black death loops in a tragic screenplay, scored with the wails of childless mothers and the entitled indifference of our murderers. And an understanding of anti-blackness is the only place to start.

Anti-blackness is one way some black scholars have articulated what it means to be marked as black in an anti-black world. It’s more than just “racism against black people.” That oversimplifies and defangs it. It’s a theoretical framework that illuminates society’s inability to recognize our humanity — the disdain, disregard and disgust for our existence.

The African-American studies professor Frank B. Wilderson, who coined the term “[Afro-pessimism](#),” argues that anti-blackness indexes the structural reality so that in the larger society, blackness is inextricably tied to “slaveness.” While the system of U.S. chattel slavery technically ended over 150 years ago, it continues to mark the ontological position of black people. Thus, in the minds of many, the relation between humanity and blackness is an antagonism, is irreconcilable.

Anti-blackness describes the inability to recognize black humanity. It captures the reality that the kind of violence that saturates black life is not based on any specific thing a

black person — better described as “a person who has been racialized black” — did. The violence we experience isn’t tied to any particular transgression. It’s gratuitous and unrelenting.

Anti-blackness covers the fact that society’s hatred of blackness, and also its gratuitous violence against black people, is complicated by its need for our existence. For example, for white people — again, better described as those who have been racialized white — the abject inhumanity of the black reinforces their whiteness, their humanness, their power, and their privilege, whether they’re aware of it or not. Black people are at once despised and also a useful counterpoint for others to measure their humanness against. In other words, while one may experience numerous compounding disadvantages, at least they’re not black.

So when we’re trying to understand how a white police officer could calmly and casually channel the weight of his entire body through his knee on a black man’s neck — a man who begged for his life for over eight full minutes until he had no air left with which to plead — we have to understand that there has never been a moment in this country’s history where this kind of treatment has not been the reality for black people.

From whips to guns, [the slave patrols of the 18th century are the ancestors of modern day police departments](#). Mr. Floyd’s killer just happened to make the news, happened to have video footage documenting his desperate screams to his deceased mother for help from the other side. Mr. Floyd’s brutal killing is not an exception, but rather, it is the rule in a nation that literally made black people into things.

Black people were rendered as property, built this country, spilled literal blood, sweat and tears into the soil from which we eat, the water we drink, and the air we breathe. The *thingification* of black people is a fundamental component of the identity of this nation.

Reckoning with this reality is significantly more difficult than wrestling with prejudice, racism, and even institutional or structural racism. And it does more than any of these concepts do to help us make sense of over 400 years of black suffering — of our unremitting interminable pain, rage and exhaustion.

Mr. Floyd’s death is the story of our babies, of the numerous black children who grow up literally or metaphorically under the steel heel of a police boot. It is the story of our families, who since the Middle Passage, have had to suffer the unimaginable.

But when they kill our children, our mothers and fathers, we are expected to forgive, to be peaceful in the face of horrific violence. We are asked to respect a law that cannot recognize our humanity — that cannot provide redress. And when time and time again the law demonstrates it will never protect us, that it will never hold those individuals and systems that harm us accountable, we are expected to peddle a narrative that the system works, that justice will prevail.

Mr. Floyd’s brother lamented, “I just don’t understand what more we’ve got to go through in life, man.” People are in the streets today because years ago we marched peacefully and belted Negro spirituals, hoping they would recognize our humanity. We wore Afros like crowns remembering our beauty. We put our fists in the air demonstrating our strength. We declared that our lives matter in every gorgeous dimension, demanding they stop killing us in the streets and in our homes with impunity. People are in the streets today because despite all of the people who lost their lives — literally and figuratively, in this fight for black life, the struggle continues.

So let’s stop saying racism killed George Floyd, or worse yet, that a racist police officer killed George Floyd. George Floyd was killed because anti-blackness is endemic to, and is central to how all of us make sense of the social, economic, historical and cultural dimensions of human life.



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