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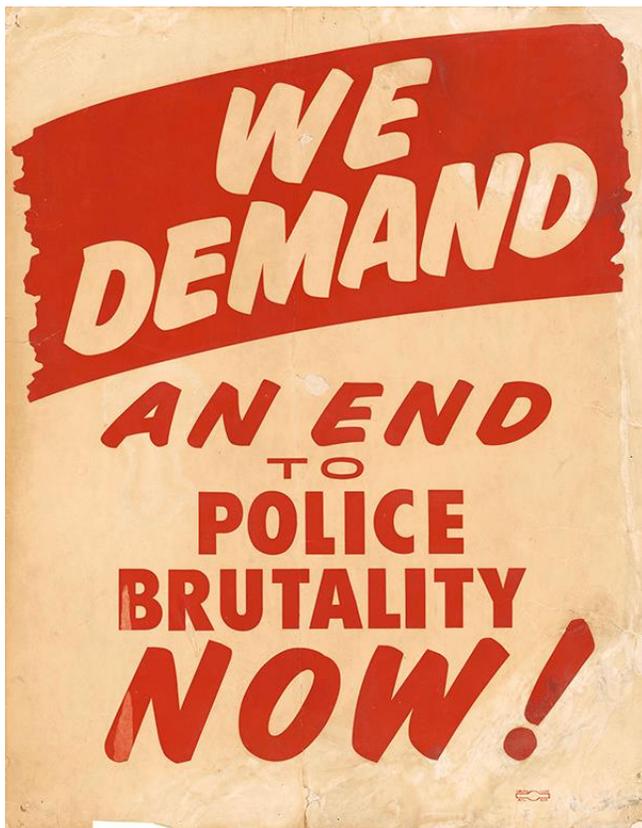
Dr. Womack

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The “Black Brute”: Police Rhetoric

In the National Museum of African American History and Culture, there is a sign that reads “We demand an end to police brutality now!” In today’s ever present political climate, one could mistakenly believe that this sign was retrieved from a Black Lives Matter protest, but this



sign was actually carried in protest at the 1963 March on Washington. Police brutality has been a problem in America since the Civil Rights Movement over fifty years ago, and it has yet to be resolved. In today’s America, about 1 in 1,000 black men and boys can expect to die at the hands of police, making their risk 2.5 times higher than white men and boys. This means that black men and boys, despite being less than a fourth of the white men and boys population (“Black Male Statistics”), are more likely to be killed

by police. It is time, as the poster says, for “an end to police brutality now.”

As a black girl growing up in Mississippi, a state with a long history of racial injustice and bigotry, feeling safe in my community that was 80% white was very important to my

parents. Growing up, my parents did what they could to keep me safe, and that notion was especially applied to my step-brothers. While I was given instructions on how to behave myself correctly in public, I noted that my step-brothers were given a different type of instructions. While I was gently taught about social niceties and to respond to questions with “ma’am” or “sir” behind my answers, my step-brothers were taught with a fervor I could not understand as a child. I would joke around with my step-brothers that our parents were teaching them how to behave as if their lives depended on it. We all wrote it off as having been punished with especially strict parents. As it turns out, my sarcastic jokes as a child were true.

When unarmed black man Michael Brown was fatally shot by police officer Darren Wilson, I was one of the millions of people who paid careful attention to what the criminal justice system decided to do to Wilson. I was taught in school that the role of police officers was to “protect and serve.” Watching no criminal charges be brought against Wilson and instead watching as he faded into oblivion killed my naivete. In fact, the opposite happened. Wilson and other media outlets vilified Brown, insinuating that he was, in some way, responsible for his own death and deserved his violent end. The vilification of Michael Brown as his past actions were examined under a microscope and Darren Wilson walking free after using fatal force were the forces that created the Black Lives Matter movement and a conversation about police brutality.

Painting black men as scary, inhuman, uncontrollable, savage, criminal, larger than life, and deserving of some kind of punishment—even death—is no new feat. In fact, it is so common that there is a name for it: the “black brute” trope (Nodjimbadem). Before the Civil War, blacks were depicted as docile and comedic as seen by *Uncle Tom’s Cabin’s* Uncle Tom, an older slave who is completely faithful to his master. Similarly, *Gone With the Wind* depicts slaves who are content with their station in life, culminating with Mammy who shooed away freedmen. In *Song*

of the South, Uncle Remus was content with his station, singing “Zip-a-Dee-Doo-Dah.”

However, at the end of the Civil War, when black minds were not able to be controlled, the narrative changed (Smiley). Black people were seemingly prone to violence and aggression. In fact, in 1893 Southern essayist Charles H. Smith wrote “A bad Negro is the most horrible creature upon the earth, the most brutal and merciless.” (Smith). The trend of punishing the so-called “black brute” continued throughout history until the end of Jim Crow with public lynchings to punish black men who stepped out of line. Since overt racism is no longer socially acceptable, these days, the “black brute” trope is not so explicitly stated. It is covered in coded language like “thug”, “ghetto”, “shady”, or, in Wilson’s case, “intense” and “demon-like.” (Welch). In today’s day and age, there are no longer public lynchings but mass incarceration of black men who make up 37% of the male prison population while only making up 12% of the United States male population (Quillian). While the language is now coded and the means of punishment are different, the intention is still the same: black men are violent criminals who must be stopped by any means necessary.

After Michael Brown’s death, Wilson claimed that Brown was defiant and inherently scary. One of the methods Wilson used to justify his actions was to use metaphors to make Brown seem inhuman and therefore unworthy of humane treatment. In Wilson’s testimony, he said Brown’s face looked “like a demon.” (Glenza). In comparing Brown’s face to a demon Wilson took away his human qualities. More than that, Wilson is utilizing pathos and urging his audience to see Brown in a negative light. Demons are evil, mythical monsters that possess humans. By Wilson saying that Brown’s face looked demon-like, Wilson was inherently claiming that Brown’s face was evil, inhuman, and monsterlike. Wilson goes on to say that Brown “charged” him to describe the way Brown advanced toward him, comparing Brown to a

bull (“Exclusive: Darren Wilson Speaks Out For the First Time to George Stephanopoulos”). By doing this, Wilson reduced Brown to animalistic instinct rather than describing him as a rational human being. Wilson also said that Brown “was almost bulking up to run through the shots,” further comparing him to an inhuman being. (Sorkin). Since humans are physically incapable of running through bullets, Wilson was further showing his audience that he did not believe that Brown was capable of feeling the pain that is normally associated with a bullet.

Wilson painted Brown as someone who was worthy of being afraid of by using pathos and loaded words. By using this strategy, Wilson justified his fear of Brown and described Brown as larger than life and frightening. Wilson said that Brown had “immense power.” (“Exclusive: Darren Wilson Speaks Out For the First Time to George Stephanopoulos”). Saying that Brown had “immense power” makes Brown sound like he is almost superhuman and like he could easily overpower Wilson. In Wilson’s words, Brown was “obviously bigger” and had an “intense, aggressive face.” (Calamur). By calling Brown “obviously bigger”, Wilson insinuates that because of Brown’s size, an act that is not criminal, Brown somehow instigated his own death. Wilson claimed that when he tried to hold Brown he felt “like a five-year-old holding on to Hulk Hogan.” (Glenza). By comparing Brown to Hulk Hogan, a wrestler with almost inhuman strength who had an ability to completely dominate other opponents who were about the same size as he was, Wilson added to his message that Brown was someone who he had to be afraid of and further justified his deadly force. Further, by comparing himself to a five-year-old, Wilson was claiming that in that moment, he felt weak and defenseless in the way that five year olds do. He was also conveying how small he felt by comparing himself to a five year old and Brown to Hulk Hogan. Further, by describing Brown’s face as “intense” and “aggressive”, Wilson paints a

picture of Brown as someone scary, further justifying that his use of fatal force was somehow necessary because he was afraid of Brown's face.

Wilson also showed himself as someone who was not in control because of Brown's so-called power and further showed that he did not see Brown as a human. Wilson said that he was "trying to contain" Brown, and when something is being contained, it is being controlled or restrained. By using the word "contain", Wilson is making it clear that he saw Brown as something to control and contain rather than as a person. Further, by using the word "trying", he showed himself as out of control in that moment because he had to work, or "try", to "contain" Brown (Calamur). When someone is attempting to control or restrain someone, rather than actually being able to do so, that person is further out of control in that moment. To add to the idea that Wilson saw himself as out of control, Wilson said that Brown ignored his "commands." When someone is commanding someone else, the commander is not in control in that situation. Also, the use of the word "command" had even more meaning; when someone is commanding someone else, the commander sees the commanded as something lesser.

Wilson also avoided referring to Brown as a human and instead used loaded words to destroy Brown's credibility with the audience. Wilson did this to take Brown's humanity away from him. After taking his life, Wilson said "the threat was stopped". (Sandburn). By calling Brown "the threat", he was portraying to his audience that Brown was not worthy of being seen as what he was, a human being, and Wilson reduced Brown to something that could cause him harm. Even in Brown's death, Wilson did not give him the respect any human being deserved and instead further criminalized him by calling him "the threat." Wilson also criminalized Brown to his audience by referring to Brown as "suspect." By calling him "suspect", Wilson reduced Brown to his earlier crimes and insinuated that his death was justified since he was an alleged

criminal. (McKay). Sadly, this vilification is not unusual. Unlike most memes, this meme (“Michael Brown’s Death”), pictured to the side, does not serve to make jokes or entertain but to highlight an important fact. After deaths like Michael Brown’s, people tend to focus on the negative parts of the lives of the victims to attempt to justify the death in some way. This phenomenon is apparent when, even in death, Darren Wilson described Michael Brown as a “threat” and a “suspect.” By making the victim appear like a criminal, there is an apparent sense of justice to his death, and the police officer gets excused. However, the public forgets that by using the word “suspect” instead of “criminal”, Wilson acknowledged that Brown had not been proven guilty. Brown had just been suspected of stealing, and it had not been proven. Further, by reducing victims like Brown to their former wrongdoings, the officers appear to excuse themselves for using fatal force because the victim was a suspected criminal and therefore had to pay with their life.

The fact that this language is named and has been around for over one hundred and fifty

Yes let's do that: Which photo does the media use if the police shot me down?

[#IfTheyGunnedMeDown](#)

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years signals a large problem with the way black men are perceived within society. Thinking of black men as “brutes,” consciously or not becomes fatal when done by police officers like Darren Wilson. By using this language, police officers justify taking the lives of innocent men because black men are seen as inherently “aggressive” and threatening. And because of this language and stereotypes that have existed since the end of the Civil War, black men are almost three times more likely than white men to be

shot and killed by the police. If America’s society is to ever become more equitable, this

language must cease to exist, and police officers must be able to put aside personal biases because lives are at stake. Michael Brown's death should not only be a tragedy but a lesson as well.

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