



Building Community Through Murder: 400 Years of Blameless Cops and Black Corpses

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The announcement last week by New York’s State Attorney General Leticia James that her office [would not prosecute the police officers who fatally shot an African-American man armed only with a metal pipe](#), was not entirely unexpected. [In New York City and across the nation](#), the police slayings of unarmed Blacks— such as Eric Garner in Staten Island, or 37-year-old Alton Sterling in Baton Rouge, Louisiana— seldom results in criminal charges, even when videotape evidence is available. When criminal charges are filed, the trials typically culminate in an acquittal—such as the [Minnesota police officer who fatally shot an African-American motorist, Philando Castile](#)—or, a relatively light sentence, as in the case of a [Chicago patrolman convicted of second-degree murder](#) for the shooting death of a Black teenager as he walked away from the police. Just last month, Sacramento’s chief prosecutor cleared two Sacramento police officers of wrongdoing in the fatal 2018 shooting of an unarmed black man, [Stephon Clark](#); According to the Sacramento Bee, Sacramento County District Attorney Ann Marie Schubert has exonerated police officers in 34 consecutive shootings of civilians.

Still, there is one case in recent memory that illustrates to activists and the legal community that the American justice system is indeed capable of holding police officers accountable in the killing of unarmed civilians. When two Louisiana police officers, Derrick Stafford, and Norris Greenhouse, [fatally shot a 6-year-old boy, Jeremy Mardis and wounded the boys’ father, Chris Few, during a traffic stop](#) on November 3, 2015, the officers were charged with second-degree murder and arrested within 72 hours. At the trial, witnesses testified that Few had his hands in the air when the officers opened fire. Jurors convicted Stafford of [manslaughter](#) [Like](#) and in March of 2017, a judge sentenced Stafford to 40 years, the maximum [imprisoning](#)

allowed by law; Greenhouse plead guilty to lesser charges and received a sentence of seven years.

What made the Louisiana case such a remarkable outlier in the traditional American narrative of Black corpses and blameless cops? Well, for starters, the corpse in this case, Mardis, was white, and the police officers, Stafford and Greenhouse, are both Black.

"If it had been two white men who killed that little baby, it would've been justifiable homicide," Stafford's aunt, Bertha Andrews, [told reporters outside the courthouse after the judge handed down his sentence](#). "If it had been a black baby, it would've been justifiable homicide."

History corroborates Andrews' interpretation of events. For all practical purposes, the penalty for killing an unarmed black man in the U.S. is usually [less severe than that for killing a white man in Maine](#).

The Mardis case shines a light on slavery's afterlife and its unyielding contradictions while demonstrating that America's criminal justice system is perfectly capable of addressing what amounts to state terrorism *when it wants to*. But it can also inform an unprecedented national discussion on what reparations to African-Americans should include.

To be sure, commercial exploitation has played a central role in the experience of the African in the Americas, virtually since the moment we first stepped ashore in the New World 400 years ago. But the chief mechanism for reinforcing that exploitative relationship is now—and has always been—*murder*. It is stunning to note that young African-American men are [21 times more likely to be murdered by the police than are young white men](#), or that one-in-three blacks can expect to be imprisoned during their lifetime compared to one-in-17 whites, but it is perhaps even more stunning to understand that such disparities provide whites with a certain emotional succor. In a 2007 study, white support for the death penalty [increased from 36 percent to 52 percent when informed of racial disparities in corporal punishment](#). In a 2014 study, researchers showed white Californians one set of photographs of inmates in which blacks accounted for 45 percent of the population and another in which blacks accounted for a quarter of the population. Whites presented with the "blacker" photographs were significantly less likely than whites shown the "whiter" photographs to sign a petition softening California's Draconian three-strikes law. A study of whites in New York City produced similar results.

Even more disturbing is the proliferation of Stand Your Ground laws. Since 2006, 33 states have overridden bedrock legal principles dating back to 17th-century British common law requiring anyone claiming self-defense to assume a defensive posture before using lethal force. The Castle doctrine—a man's home is his castle—provides an exemption in the event of an intruder or a burglar. Stand Your Ground, illogically, extends the Castle doctrine to public spaces, [effectively granting whites a license to kill people of color](#). A 2013 study by the [Urban Institute found that homicides in which the killer is white and the victim is black are 10 times more likely to be ruled justified than cases in which the killer is black and the victim white](#); in states with Stand Your Ground laws the racial disparity is even wider.

In a [video that went viral](#), the lone black state senator on Arkansas' Senate Judiciary Committee, Stephanie Flowers, angrily denounced a Stand Your Ground [bill](#) last month. "I'll be as quick as I can, as quick as it takes to kill somebody, I guess. You want me to be that quick. It doesn't take much to look on the local news every night and see how many black kids, black boys, black men are being killed with these 'stand your ground' defenses that people raise. And they get off. So I take issue with that. I'm the only person here of color. I'm a mother, too. And I have a son. And I care as much for my son as y'all care for y'all's. But my son doesn't walk the same path as yours does. So this debate deserves more time."

The result is that any financial recompense is worthless unless African-Americans' safety can be guaranteed as well. The profligate violence against blacks has sparked a growing nationwide movement to abolish the police. Endorsed by a wide range of activists and organizations that include Angela Davis, the Black Youth Project in Chicago, and Brooklyn College sociologist Alex S. Vitale, abolitionists reject the assumption that police forces are formed to protect the people from the worst elements among them, and that the thin blue line is the only thing standing between order and anarchy. In his groundbreaking 2017 book, ["The End of Policing,"](#) Vitale argues that police reforms implemented following the 2014 shooting death of 18-year-old Michael Brown are akin to rearranging the deckchairs on the Titanic.

"The suppression of workers and the tight surveillance and micromanagement of black and brown lives have always been at the center of policing," writes Vitale.

In May of last year, the mostly white [parishioners at First Congregational Church of Oakland](#) took the extraordinary step of pledging to never call the cops again in almost any circumstance. "We can no longer tolerate the trauma inflicted on our communities by policing," Nichola Torbett, a white church volunteer, said at a ceremony attended by churchgoers who held photos of African-Americans shot dead by law enforcement."

The abolitionist movement is wholly consistent with the theories posited by Frantz Fanon, the psychiatrist, revolutionary and writer from the French colony of Martinique, who wrote that white settler colonialism is expressed mainly through primitive violence, but that the European settlers' narcissistic self-image leaves them largely incapable of seeing themselves as they are, or acknowledging the violence that is their stock-in-trade. University of California-Irvine Professor of African American Studies, Frank Wilderson, takes Fanon a step further, asserting that attacks on blacks provide comfort not only to whites but all other ethnic and racial groups as well, serving as a mile marker of identity, status, and privilege in such a stratified society.

"What we're seeing is that the world secures its rights and privileges through this ritualistic violence against black people," Wilderson told me in an interview last year. "It is through our reproduction of the idea of a slave that we come to understand freedom. Violence against black people is absolutely necessary to build a sense of community and assure the psychic health of everybody else."

Known as Afro-pessimism, Wilderson's theory has spread like wildfire in recent years, especially among the generation of blacks who've come of age in an era when the desecration of the black body is broadcast and normalized on social media channels such as

YouTube, Facebook Live and Instagram. Wilderson travels the world explaining Afro-pessimism and the ideology has begun to inform college debate competitions, film studies, and hip-hop.

Wilderson says this is because all other theories of political economy are insufficient to explain the historical experience of blacks in the U.S.

“Marx assumes the essential oppressed unit in any society is the worker, and radical feminism posits that women suffer because they are, in fact, women,” Wilderson told me. “But Marxism and theories of feminist subjugation have an inadequate analysis of violence and are concerned chiefly with exploitation and alienation. Neither addresses the essential nature of black subjugation, which is murder.”

In impassioned testimony, community activists last month urged Sacramento City Council members to fire the police officers responsible for Stephon Clark’s death. One protester Jane Mantee pleaded with the board in language and a tone that seemed prophetic, transforming the public hearing into a kind of seance, summoning 400 years of murdered Africans to testify to the barbarism of a wretched land. .

“Y’all know what happened to Stephon Clark was wrong: morally wrong ethically wrong inhumane. That was someone’s child, he was a human, he was a father. It was wrong and y’all know that. Each one of y’all know it was wrong. If it was your child, your friend, your people your kin who got shot like that in his granny’s backyard, the very least you’d want is for the folks who did it to no longer have a badge or a gun to do it again.”

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