

Ferguson Must Force us to Face Anti-Blackness

Adaptation of article by Michale P. Jeffries, Boston Globe

Institutionalized racism and white supremacy are harmful to all people of color, but the “black” in “black lives matter” calls our attention to a related idea that produces more deaths like Trayvon Martin’s and Michael Brown’s: Anti-blackness.

Racism is a combination of prejudice, discrimination, violence, and institutions that reproduce racial inequality and injustice, regardless of intent. Our schools, neighborhoods, and criminal-punishment system actively privilege whites at the expense of people of color, even when the rules governing these systems are racially “neutral.” Anti-blackness is not simply about hating or punishing black people. It is about the disregard of black humanity, black suffering, and the denial of black people’s right to exist.

Focusing on anti-blackness rather than just racism makes some people uncomfortable. A recent study finds that, among white people, the word “black” is more closely linked to stereotypes and negative emotions than the phrase “African-American.” This shows that even the idea of “blackness” is associated with contempt.

So how does thinking in terms of anti-blackness help us move forward?

First, anti-blackness more accurately describes the **dehumanization** and constant physical danger that black people face. The “anti” in “anti-blackness” is the denial of black people’s right to life. Black humanity is openly disrespected like Mike Brown’s dead body that laid uncovered on the street for four and a half hours before being roughly lifted into an SUV. Brown is described as “it” and “a demon” in his killer’s testimony, and those who murder black people, like George Zimmerman and Darren Wilson, are rewarded or favored. Brown’s death is proof that for black people, walking home is risking one’s life.

Second, as Ta-Nehisi Coates, Patrick Sharkey, and others explain, the problems poor black American communities face are very different when compared to other disadvantaged groups, including segregation, continuous unemployment, lack of **social mobility**, and harsher legal sentencing. No other group can compare to the suffering of black Americans, but it is still not regarded as a national crisis. Anti-blackness captures how this part of black life is ignored and how people refuse to acknowledge the injustice.

Third, anti-blackness is tied to white supremacy, but it is not only practiced by white Americans. We see anti-black ideas enacted on continents halfway around the world: black labor is abused and black migrants and workers are regarded as social outcasts.

And finally, when people who mean well, away from discussing anti-blackness, they leave space for people like Rudolph Giuliani, who suggested that black people are killing themselves, and “black crime” is the root cause of black suffering. We can no longer ignore anti-blackness. We must identify it, and meet it with equal force.

Dehumanization: depriving a person or group of positive human qualities.

Social mobility: the ability of individuals, families or groups to move up or down the social ladder in a society, such as moving from low-income to middle-class.