

The Opinion Pages

THE STONE

# What's Wrong With 'All Lives Matter'?

By George Yancy and Judith Butler

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The Stone is a forum for contemporary philosophers and other thinkers on issues both timely and timeless.

*This is the fifth in a series of interviews with philosophers on race that I am conducting for The Stone. This week's conversation is with Judith Butler, Maxine Elliot Professor in the department of comparative literature and the program of critical theory at the University of California, Berkeley. She is the author of numerous influential books, including "Dispossession: The Performative in the Political," which she co-authored with Athena Athanasiou. She will publish a book on public assemblies with Harvard University Press this year. — George Yancy*

**George Yancy:** In your 2004 book, "Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence," you wrote, "The question that preoccupies me in the light of recent global violence is, Who counts as human? Whose lives count as lives?" You wrote that about the post-9/11 world, but it appears to also apply to the racial situation here in the United States. In the wake of the recent killings of unarmed black men and women by police, and the failure to prosecute the killers, the message being sent to black communities is that they don't matter, that they are "disposable." Posters reading "Black Lives Matter," "Hands Up. Don't Shoot," "I Can't Breathe," communicate the reality of a specific kind of racial vulnerability that black people experience on a daily basis. How does all this communicate to black people that their lives don't matter?

**Judith Butler:** Perhaps we can think about the phrase "black lives matter." What is implied by this statement, a statement that should be obviously true, but apparently is not? If black lives do not matter, then they are not really

regarded as lives, since a life is supposed to matter. So what we see is that some lives matter more than others, that some lives matter so much that they need to be protected at all costs, and that other lives matter less, or not at all. And when that becomes the situation, then the lives that do not matter so much, or do not matter at all, can be killed or lost, can be exposed to conditions of destitution, and there is no concern, or even worse, that is regarded as the way it is supposed to be. The callous killing of Tamir Rice and the abandonment of his body on the street is an astonishing example of the police murdering someone considered disposable and fundamentally ungrievable.

When we are talking about racism, and anti-black racism in the United States, we have to remember that under slavery black lives were considered only a fraction of a human life, so the prevailing way of valuing lives assumed that some lives mattered more, were more human, more worthy, more deserving of life and freedom, where freedom meant minimally the freedom to move and thrive without being subjected to coercive force. But when and where did black lives ever really get free of coercive force? One reason the chant “Black Lives Matter” is so important is that it states the obvious but the obvious has not yet been historically realized. So it is a statement of outrage and a demand for equality, for the right to live free of constraint, but also a chant that links the history of slavery, of debt peonage, segregation, and a prison system geared toward the containment, neutralization and degradation of black lives, but also a police system that more and more easily and often can take away a black life in a flash all because some officer perceives a threat.

So let us think about what this is: the perception of a threat. One man is leaving a store unarmed, but he is perceived as a threat. Another man is in a chokehold and states that he cannot breathe, and the chokehold is not relaxed, and the man dies because he is perceived as a threat. Mike Brown and Eric Garner. We can name them, but in the space of this interview, we cannot name all the black men and women whose lives are snuffed out all because a police officer perceives a threat, sees the threat in the person, sees the person as pure threat. Perceived as a threat even when unarmed or completely physically subdued, or lying in the ground, as Rodney King clearly was, or coming back home from a party on the train and having the audacity to say to a policeman that he was not doing anything wrong and should not be detained: Oscar Grant. We can see the videos and know

what is obviously true, but it is also obviously true that police and the juries that support them obviously do not see what is obvious, or do not wish to see.

So the police see a threat when there is no gun to see, or someone is subdued and crying out for his life, when they are moving away or cannot move. These figures are perceived as threats even when they do not threaten, when they have no weapon, and the video footage that shows precisely this is taken to be a ratification of the police's perception. The perception is then ratified as a public perception at which point we not only must insist on the dignity of black lives, but name the racism that has become ratified as public perception.

In fact, the point is not just that black lives can be disposed of so easily: they are targeted and hunted by a police force that is becoming increasingly emboldened to wage its race war by every grand jury decision that ratifies the point of view of state violence. Justifying lethal violence in the name of self-defense is reserved for those who have a publicly recognized self to defend. But those whose lives are not considered to matter, whose lives are perceived as a threat to the life that embodies white privilege can be destroyed in the name of that life. That can only happen when a recurrent and institutionalized form of racism has become a way of seeing, entering into the presentation of visual evidence to justify hateful and unjustified and heartbreaking murder.

So it is not just that black lives matter, though that must be said again and again. It is also that stand-your-ground and racist killings are becoming increasingly normalized, which is why intelligent forms of collective outrage have become obligatory.

**G.Y.:** The chant "Black Lives Matter" is also a form of what you would call "a mode of address." You discuss questions of address in your essay, "Violence, Nonviolence: Sartre and Fanon," where Fanon, for example, raises significant questions about sociality in talking about his freedom in relationship to a "you." "Black Lives Matter" says something like: "*You* — white police officers — recognize my/our humanity!" But what if the "you," in this case, fails to be moved, refuses to be touched by that embodied chant? And given that "racism has become a way of seeing," is it not necessary that we — as you say in your essay "Endangered/Endangering: Schematic Racism and White Paranoia"— install "an

antiracist hegemony over the visual field”?

**J.B.:** Sometimes a mode of address is quite simply a way of speaking to or about someone. But a mode of address may also describe a general way of approaching another such that one presumes who the other is, even the meaning and value of their existence. We address each other with gesture, signs and movement, but also through media and technology. We make such assumptions all the time about who that other is when we hail someone on the street (or we do not hail them). That is someone I greet; the other is someone I avoid. That other may well be someone whose very existence makes me cross to the other side of the road.

Indeed, in the case of schematic racism, anti-black racism figures black people through a certain lens and filter, one that can quite easily construe a black person, or another racial minority, who is walking toward us as someone who is potentially, or actually, threatening, or is considered, in his very being, a threat. In fact, as we can doubtless see from the videos that have swept across the global media, it may be that even when a black man is moving away from the police, that man is still considered to be a threat or worth killing, as if that person were actually moving toward the police brandishing a weapon. Or it could be that a black man or woman is reaching for his or her identification papers to show to the police, and the police see in that gesture of compliance — hand moving toward pocket — a reach for a gun. Is that because, in the perception of the police, to be black is already to be reaching for a gun? Or a black person is sleeping on the couch, standing, walking, or even running, clearly brandishing no gun, and there turns out to be evidence that there is no gun, still that life is snuffed out — why? Is the gun imagined into the scene, or retrospectively attributed to the standing or fleeing figure (and the grand jury nods, saying “this is plausible.”)? And why when that person is down, already on the ground, and seeks to lift himself, or seated against a subway grate, and seeks to speak on his own behalf, or is utterly subdued and imperiled by the chokehold, he never stops looming as a threat to security, prompting a policeman to beat him or gun him down?

It may be important to see the twisted vision and the inverted assumptions that are made in the course of building a “case” that the police acted in self-defense or were sufficiently provoked to use lethal force. The fleeing figure is coming this way; the nearly strangled person is about to unleash force; the man on the ground

will suddenly spring to life and threaten the life of the one who therefore takes his life.

These are war zones of the mind that play out on the street. At least in these cases that have galvanized the nation and the world in protest, we all see the twisted logic that results in the exoneration of the police who take away the lives of unarmed black men and women. And why is that the case? It is not because what the police and their lawyers present as their thinking in the midst of the situation is very reasonable. No, it is because that form of thinking is *becoming more “reasonable” all the time*. In other words, every time a grand jury or a police review board accepts this form of reasoning, they ratify the idea that blacks are a population against which society must be defended, and that the police defend themselves and (white) society, when they preemptively shoot unarmed black men in public space. At stake is a way that black people are figured as a threat even when they are simply living their lives, walking the street, leaving the convenience store, riding the subway, because in those instances this is only a threatening life, or a threat to the only kind of life, white life, that is recognized.

**G.Y.:** What has led us to this place?

**J.B.:** Racism has complex origins, and it is important that we learn the history of racism to know what has led us to this terrible place. But racism is also reproduced in the present, in the prison system, new forms of population control, increasing economic inequality that affects people of color disproportionately. These forms of institutionalized destitution and inequality are reproduced through these daily encounters — the disproportionate numbers of minorities stopped and detained by the police, and the rising number of those who fall victim to police violence. The figure of the black person as threat, as criminal, as someone who is, no matter where he is going, already-on-the-way-to-prison, conditions these preemptive strikes, attributing lethal aggression to the very figure who suffers it most. The lives taken in this way are not lives worth grieving; they belong to the increasing number of those who are understood as ungrievable, whose lives are thought not to be worth preserving.

But, of course, what we are also seeing in the recent and continuing assemblies, rallies and vigils is an open mourning for those whose lives were cut

short and without cause, brutally extinguished. The practices of public mourning and political demonstration converge: when lives are considered ungrievable, to grieve them openly is protest. So when people assemble in the street, arrive at rallies or vigils, demonstrate with the aim of opposing this form of racist violence, they are “speaking back” to this mode of address, insisting on what should be obvious but is not, namely, that these lost lives are unacceptable losses.

On the one hand, there is a message, “Black Lives Matter,” which always risks being misheard (“What? Only *black* lives matter?”) or not heard at all (“these are just people who will protest anything”). On the other hand, the assembly, even without words, enacts the message in its own way. For it is often in public spaces where such violence takes place, so reclaiming public space to oppose both racism and violence is an act that reverberates throughout the public sphere through various media.

**G.Y.:** I’ve heard that some white people have held signs that read “All Lives Matter.”

**J.B.:** When some people rejoin with “All Lives Matter” they misunderstand the problem, but not because their message is untrue. It is true that all lives matter, but it is equally true that not all lives are understood to matter which is precisely why it is most important to name the lives that have not mattered, and are struggling to matter in the way they deserve.

Claiming that “all lives matter” does not immediately mark or enable black lives only because they have not been fully recognized as having lives that matter. I do not mean this as an obscure riddle. I mean only to say that we cannot have a race-blind approach to the questions: which lives matter? Or, which lives are worth valuing? If we jump too quickly to the universal formulation, “all lives matter,” then we miss the fact that black people have not yet been included in the idea of “all lives.” That said, it is true that all lives matter (we can then debate about when life begins or ends). But to make that universal formulation concrete, to make that into a living formulation, one that truly extends to all people, we have to foreground those lives that are not mattering now, to mark that exclusion, and militate against it. Achieving that universal, “all lives matter,” is a struggle, and that is part of what we are seeing on the streets. For on the streets we see a complex set of solidarities

across color lines that seek to show what a concrete and living sense of bodies that matter can be.

**G.Y:** When you talk about lives that matter, are you talking about how whiteness and white bodies are valorized? In “Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity,” you discuss gender as “a stylized repetition of acts.” Do you also see whiteness as “a stylized repetition of acts” that solidifies and privileges white bodies, or even leads to naïve, “post-racial” universal formulations like “all lives matter”?

**J.B.:** Yes, we can certainly talk about “doing whiteness” as a way of putting racial categories into action, since whiteness is part of what we call “race,” and is often implicitly or explicitly part of a race project that seeks to achieve and maintain dominance for white people. One way this happens is by establishing whiteness as the norm for the human, and blackness as a deviation from the human or even as a threat to the human, or as something not quite human. Under such perceptual conditions built up through the history of racism, it becomes increasingly easy for white people to accept the destruction of black lives as status quo, since those lives do not fit the norm of “human life” they defend. It is true that Frantz Fanon sometimes understood whiteness in gendered terms: a black man is not a man, according to the white norms that define manhood, and yet other times the black man is figured as the threat of rape, hyper-masculinized, threatening the “virgin sanctity” of whiteness.

In that last formulation whiteness is figured as a young virgin whose future husband is white — this characterization ratifies the sentiments that oppose miscegenation and defend norms of racial purity. But whose sexuality is imperiled in this scene? After all, black women and girls were the ones who were raped, humiliated and disposed of under conditions of slavery, and it was black families who were forcibly destroyed: black kinship was not recognized as kinship that matters. Women of color, and black feminists in particular, have struggled for years against being the sexual property of either white male power or black masculinity, against poverty, and against the prison industry, so there are many reasons it is necessary to define racism in ways that acknowledge the specific forms it takes against men, women, and transgendered people of color.

Let us remember, of course, that many black women's lives are taken by police and by prisons. We can name a few: Yvette Smith, 48, in Texas, unarmed, and killed by police; or Aiyana Stanley-Jones, age 7, killed while sleeping on her father's couch in Detroit. After all, all of those are among the people on the street, outraged and demonstrating, opposing a lethal power that is becoming more and more normalized and, to that degree, more and more outrageous.

Whiteness is less a property of skin than a social power reproducing its dominance in both explicit and implicit ways. When whiteness is a practice of superiority over minorities, it monopolizes the power of destroying or demeaning bodies of color. The legal system is engaged in reproducing whiteness when it decides that the black person can and will be punished more severely than the white person who commits the same infraction, when that same differential is at work in the question, who can and will be detained? And who can and will be sent to prison with a life sentence or the death penalty? Angela Davis has shown the disproportionate number of Americans of color (black and Latino) detained, imprisoned and on death row. This has become a "norm" that effectively says "black lives do not matter," one that is built up over time, through daily practices, modes of address, through the organization of schools, work, prison, law and media. Those are all ways that the conceit of white superiority is constructed.

**G.Y.:** Yes. Whiteness, as a set of historical practices, extends beyond the skin. And yet, when a person with white skin walks into a store, it is assumed that she is not a threat. So, there is an entire visual technology that is complicit here, where the skin itself, as it were, is the marker of innocence. It is a visual technology that reinforces not only her sense of innocence, but that organizes the ways in which she gets to walk through space without being profiled or stopped. Hence, she contributes to the perpetuation of racial injustice even if she is unaware of doing so.

**J.B.:** Well, of course, class is also there as a marker of how anyone is perceived entering the door to the public building, the office, the post office, the convenience store. Class is in play when white people fail to look "moneyed" or are considered as working class, poor or homeless, so we have to be clear that the "white" person we may be talking about can be struggling with inequality of another kind: whiteness has its own internal hierarchies, to be sure. Of course there are white people who may be very convinced that they are not racist, but that does not necessarily mean



that they have examined, or worked though, how whiteness organizes their lives, values, the institutions they support, how they are implicated in ways of talking, seeing, and doing that constantly and tacitly discriminate. Undoing whiteness has to be difficult work, but it starts, I think, with humility, with learning history, with white people learning how the history of racism persists in the everyday vicissitudes of the present, even as some of us may think we are “beyond” such a history, or even convinced that we have magically become “post-racial.” It is difficult and ongoing work, calling on an ethical disposition and political solidarity that risks error in the practice of solidarity.

Whiteness is not an abstraction; its claim to dominance is fortified through daily acts which may not seem racist at all precisely because they are considered “normal.” But just as certain kinds of violence and inequality get established as “normal” through the proceedings that exonerate police of the lethal use of force against unarmed black people, so whiteness, or rather its claim to privilege, can be disestablished over time. This is why there must be a collective reflection on, and opposition to, the way whiteness takes hold of our ideas about whose lives matter. The norm of whiteness that supports both violence and inequality insinuates itself into the normal and the obvious. Understood as the sometimes tacit and sometimes explicit power to define the boundaries of kinship, community and nation, whiteness inflects all those frameworks within which certain lives are made to matter less than others.

It is always possible to do whiteness otherwise, to engage in a sustained and collective practice to question how racial differentiation enters into our daily evaluations of which lives deserve to be supported, to flourish, and which do not. But it is probably an error, in my view, for white people to become paralyzed with guilt and self-scrutiny. The point is rather to consider those ways of valuing and devaluing life that govern our own thinking and acting, understanding the social and historical reach of those ways of valuing. It is probably important and satisfying as well to let one’s whiteness recede by joining in acts of solidarity with all those who oppose racism. There are ways of fading out whiteness, withdrawing its implicit and explicit claim to racial privilege.

Demonstrations have the potential to embody forms of equality that we want to see realized in the world more broadly. Working against those practices and

institutions that refuse to recognize and mark the powers of state racism in particular, assemblies gather to mourn and resist the deadly consequences of such powers. When people engage in concerted actions across racial lines to build communities based on equality, to defend the rights of those who are disproportionately imperiled to have a chance to live without the fear of dying quite suddenly at the hands of the police. There are many ways to do this, in the street, the office, the home, and in the media. Only through such an ever-growing cross-racial struggle against racism can we begin to achieve a sense of all the lives that really do matter.

*This interview was conducted by email and edited. Previous interviews in this series can be found [here](#).*

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***Correction: January 13, 2015***

*An earlier version of this article misspelled the first name of the boy killed by a police officer in Cleveland. His name is Tamir Rice, not Tamar.*