

The New Racism

First you deny racism exists. Then you smear the reputation of any black man who appears to be a victim.

By Jamelle Bouie

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Did you know Michael Brown was a killer?

Did you know he was a devoted gang member with an extensive juvenile record who routinely robbed convenience stores and committed acts of mayhem? And did you know that when Officer Darren Wilson shot Brown, he wasn't using unjustified force, he was defending his life? The 6-foot-4, 300-pound 18-year-old fractured Wilson's eye socket while reaching for his gun, and was killed while charging at Wilson to land another blow.

If this sounds suspect—if it sounds almost unbelievable—then your head is in the right place. Nothing in this narrative is true. Racist innuendo aside, there's no evidence Brown was a violent gang member, nor is there evidence of any serious wrongdoing—as a juvenile, Brown was never convicted of a felony nor was he facing charges as an adult. And while Wilson was taken to the hospital after his encounter with Brown, he didn't suffer serious injuries—the fractured eye socket is a myth.

But if you read websites like the Independent Journal Review, dive into far-right media, or explore the world of Darren Wilson support pages, you'll find plenty of people who buy the fantasy. They reject the mainstream picture of Brown: A typical teenager, struggling to carve an identity and a life out of his beliefs, actions, and missteps. In their minds Brown was a budding criminal, and Wilson a hero. Or, as one Wilson supporter said during a demonstration for the officer, "We'll all see this in the end that it was a good shooting. You know, it was a good kill."

We know why the Brown family was quick to give a loving portrait of Michael. Like any parents in their situation, they wanted the world to see their son as they did—a decent boy who didn't deserve to die.

The question is for the other side: Why attack Michael Brown's reputation? After all, if the goal is an objective look, there's no need to explore Brown or Wilson as individuals. Brown could have been Gandhi

or he could have been the Unabomber; all that matters for the case is what happened in a few brief moments on the streets of Ferguson.

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At the same time, we shouldn't be surprised by attacks on Brown. We know from all kinds of crime—and sexual assault cases in particular—that people are quick to blame the victim. It's one reason sexual assault has such a poor reporting rate—many women (and men) don't want to deal with the attacks on their character. We also see it in the particular instance of young black men killed by white figures (police or otherwise) in ambiguous circumstances.

In 1955, Roy Bryant and J.W. Milam kidnapped and killed 14-year-old Emmett Till after he reportedly spoke to a white woman—Bryant's wife Carolyn—in their Money, Mississippi, grocery store. After the two were acquitted by an all-white, all-male jury, they told their story to Alabama novelist William Bradford Huie. In their (improbable) version of events, writes historian Philip Dray in *At the Hands of Persons Unknown*, Till was “sassy and unrepentant.” “He showed me the white gal's picture! Bragged of what he'd done to her,” said Milam, “I counted pictures of three white girls in his pocketbook before I burned it. What else could I do? No use lettin' him get no bigger!” Black observers were furious:

Olive A. Adams, who authored a booklet called *Time Bomb: Mississippi Exposed* for the Mississippi Regional Council of Negro Leadership in 1956, denigrated the “white girlfriend” story repeated by whites as “vicious propaganda, aimed at fitting Emmett Till into the ‘sexually depraved’ category among the stereotypes into which Negroes are so often cast. It was an obvious attempt to dream up a crime to fit the punishment.”

A half century later, you saw a similar dynamic with the killing of Trayvon Martin. And while countless Americans were sympathetic to the Martin family, many others were eager to smear the deceased 17-year-old, and they found voice on Fox News and conservative talk radio. “You dress like a thug, people are going to treat you like a thug,” said Fox host Geraldo Rivera, referring to Martin's hoodie sweatshirt. Glenn Beck's *TheBlaze* website published a list of crimes Martin may have committed while he was alive (the evidence was ... sparse), and right-wing websites passed around a photo called the “real Trayvon Martin,” which was quickly debunked as a photo of The Game, a 33-year-old rapper. Something similar happened with Brown: After his death, photos circulated of a young man with a gun, labeled Michael Brown. In reality, it was Joda Cain, a murder suspect in Oregon.

There's no doubt about the genesis of these memes. When people see black men, they think crime, and that cognitive link is so strong that some people will create “proof” to justify the association. Rather than treat Trayvon Martin or Michael Brown as typical teenagers turned victims, they'll work to dismiss them as “thugs.” But this says little about the proliferation of those memes in right-wing media. Fear of black men is a bipartisan problem—not something unique to conservatives—and it's unfair to say otherwise.

It's worth noting that the loudest voices in these events—figures like Rush Limbaugh and Bill O'Reilly—are also people who dismiss the significance of racism. In his corner of the media, O'Reilly denies the existence of racial disparities in the criminal justice system—calling it a problem of “culture” in “ghetto neighborhoods”—and denies that there's any kind of systemic advantage for white Americans. Limbaugh is more crude, alleging “reverse racism”—“In Obama's America, the white kids now get beat up with the black kids cheering, ‘Yay, right on, right on, right on, right on’”—and denouncing the president for “race-baiting” when he speaks on race and racial injustice.

For these anti-anti-racists, accusations of racism are a greater concern than actual discrimination and prejudice against blacks and other minorities. It's not that they support racism, but that they see it as largely irrelevant to contemporary life—any problems with minority communities, in their eyes, have more to do with cultural dysfunction, not racial inequality. Moreover, if there's a racial problem in America, it's not

against minorities, it's against whites: "Caucasian is not one of the colors getting helped," said Fox contributor Todd Starnes, attacking the president's My Brother's Keeper initiative.

As rhetoric, anti-anti-racism is popular in the conservative movement. You saw it in Andrew Breitbart's obsession with ACORN and Shirley Sherrod and Fox News' obsession with the New Black Panthers, and you see it in some attacks on Attorney General Eric Holder, alleging discrimination against whites. Against that backdrop, the memes against Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown make sense.

In other words, to dismiss racism as a general concern is to also stand against the claim that in the deaths of Martin and Brown, race matters. Indeed, you have to deny that discrimination mattered for either victim. And to do that, you have to challenge their victimhood. If Michael Brown was a thug, if he was violent and aggressive, then Officer Wilson was justified. Suddenly, it's a "good kill," not a deadly case of profiling.

Put another way, if countless people believe in the myth of the thuggish Trayvon and the dangerous Mike, it's because they have to—without the monsters, their worldview couldn't stand.

Victim mentality is key to the existence of the conservative movement.

-Brent Butterworth

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