



Are Whites Really Physically Afraid of Black Men?

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The furor surrounding the shooting of young Trayvon Martin has refueled an American dialogue that is older than the nation itself, centering on the idea that whites are afraid of black people, especially black men. From unspoken visceral reactions to violent encounters, fear is said to drive typical white responses to a black presence. Chauncey DeVega has made some cogent points on the topic ("Face It: Trayvon Martin is Dead Because Many White People Are Afraid of Black People"). But is fear really the whole story? And who really has reason to be afraid?

I believe what some define as a "fear" many white Americans harbor is more properly defined as disrespect. From the days of Nixon's euphemistic calls for "law and order" to the Willie Horton campaign ads, right-wing politicians have long exploited an inherent societal disrespect for black folks that is hidden under the false curtain of fear. A supposed fear of black men is a convenient pretense for abuse of everything from racial privilege to police power.

What often goes unmentioned, especially in mass media, is the hesitance with which millions of black Americans navigate daily interaction with whites -- a hesitance driven not by fear, but by the assumption of our powerlessness and our invisibility. You can bet that blacks are more afraid of white men in hoods, than whites are of black men in hoods.

History, along with personal and anecdotal evidence, illustrates that whites do not necessarily physically fear black folk, or more particularly, black males. From the colonial 1620s, through the 1960s, those white Americans who could afford African slaves, or later, domestic help, trusted their staff to bathe, clothe, tutor, and nurse their infants and children, prepare family meals, and tend to their livestock. Would you hire household help who are inclined to abuse your babies, sexually molest your daughters, or spit in your stew? Black men have served as stable grooms, valets, butlers, waiters, Pullman Porters and cooks for private schools, families, upscale hotels and resorts, and passenger trains on which they waited on male and female sleepover passengers.

If physical fear was the simple answer, blacks would not have so many "It happened to you too?" dinner party conversations recounting invasive white social workers of both genders, brassy insurance salespersons, and other door-to-door activity in inner-city apartments where our lives are invaded by whites who seem perfectly comfortable just barging in. We would not share so many stories of being asked inappropriate or insulting questions by whites without the slightest remorse or reservation.

My parents live in a college community in Washington, DC. Since the 1980s, when public decorum near the campus began to erode, students have strolled across their lawn on the way home from pubs or parties, littered in their front yard, and knocked down their lawn's stone bordering wall in a vehicle. In the late '80s when there was a theater near my folks'

home that hosted a few punk rock events, kids used to sit in their neighbor's front yard for hours after the concerts. None of these inconsiderations demonstrate a fear of black people, though they all speak to a disrespect for personal property and communities. So the integration-era phrase, "There goes the neighborhood" works both ways.

I have had white strangers ask me things, often crowding my personal space and loudly interrupting a conversation, in a way that hardly suggests physical intimidation. I've also heard racial slurs from whites that no cowering individual would dare utter. Even since the 1980s, I have seen both patrons and personnel in service industries disrespect my mother when whites have butted in front of her in lines waiting to be served. The pattern is always the same -- the bystanding customers rally to the defense of both the rude patron and the mistaken customer service person in a manner I doubt would occur if these self-appointed defenders imagined my mom had a shank in her handbag.

If whites simply feared blacks, or black men, a minority of Brits, Dutch, Portuguese, Belgians, or French, respectively, would never have been able to colonize and perform missionary work in the nations of Africa and the Caribbean. And where was this legendary, King Kong-metaphor, Birth of a Nation-style fear when those bigoted terrorists in Money, Mississippi found the black community Emmit Till was visiting during the summer of 1955, entered his grandfather's home, and demanded Till's relatives wake the sleeping teenager and deliver him? In the dead of night, surrounded by negroes (switchblade toting? violence prone?), did these whites fear for their lives? Till's older relatives told the men where the boy slept, and the child was dragged out of bed. Wasn't the fear actually on the other foot?

Trayvon Martin of Sanford, Fla., was a victim of dehumanization more than fear. Since most blacks arrived on American shores to fulfill roles of servitude, brown skin has carried with it the veneer of inequality. The stereotyping of black males as dangerous "others" has not been borne out in their comportment even when they gather en masse, as they did during the 1963 March on Washington and 1995's Million Man March. In the earlier example, all Washington, DC liquor stores were closed as a precaution. In the more recent case, law enforcement surveillance by air and land were the order of the day. Yet not a flea was harmed on either day.

Everyone has different fears and red flags, but in general, it is the oppressed or objectified groups that fear their oppressor more than the reverse. I recall vividly how a female colleague explained to me how physically intimidated women feel in not knowing which sidewalk cat callers and other verbal harassers will prove violent or threatening. The sense of the possibility of physical harassment is something that women carry with them in public situations as a matter of course. Catcalls are not experienced as "compliments" when the person making them brings an attitude of disrespect.

Those twin demons, disrespect and dehumanization, are both highly prevalent in Western racial psyche. When U.S. Representative Joe Wilson yelled "You lie," interrupting President Obama during a joint session of Congress in September 2009, he was motivated by a disrespect rarely associated with the presidency in such circumstances, not by fear.

Two months earlier, when jet-lagged Harvard professor Henry Louis Gates was arrested outside his Cambridge, Mass. home by Sergeant James Crowley, Crowley had nothing to fear from Gates. But Gates had plenty to fear from the armed and duly sworn Crowley. Black Americans, even those who are 6-foot-tall teenagers, own no tanks, atomic bombs, and govern no prisons, police forces armies, reserves, or chemical weaponry with which to

affect a hostile takeover of the American government, even one snatched purse at a time.

From the 1931 Scottsboro Boys case to more recent lies perpetrated by child murderer Susan Smith and 2008 McCain volunteer Ashley Todd, who falsely reported a mugging, much of the paranoia about predatory black males has been unfounded. The old "black man attacked me" ruse has triggered many a community sweep. From the 1900s through the 1940s, entire American cities have exploded into race riots based on similar rumors. But you'd be hard-pressed to find examples of major American urban uprisings that were actually instigated by angry black males.

From the 1920s through the 1970s, when migration patterns changed the racial face of urban America, black males from Boston to Oakland were traditionally harassed, asked to display draft cards and other form of identification, and often tossed on police squad car hoods and frisked by occupying police forces who didn't display timidity. In those days, a pocket knife, much less a handgun, had a very short shelf life in the black community. It wasn't simply fear that drove what the Black Panther Party likened to Gestapo tactics.

In the 1980s, fear of rampaging, "wilding" black males was hyped in the media. Stories of open-air crack cocaine merchants armed with illegal assault weapons flooded the airwaves. You would think that at any moment, young black males would turn these weapons on whites in some Malcolm X film-influenced, gangsta rap-inspired retaliation for slavery and Jim Crow. But if anything, it was the black middle-aged and senior residents of those communities who feared those heavily armed boys, and hunkered in their homes, nostalgic for the days when neighbor admonished neighbor, including other people's children. These citizens sometimes shirked community watch opportunities and volunteer neighborhood foot patrols in favor of their own safety. Rather than shoot the offending and intimidating youngsters in an ultimate act of dehumanization, those elders peeked through their curtains and longed for the times when young men treated them with respect.

If whites were as afraid of black men as we are asked to believe, then I would not, as a longtime commuter, have witnessed so many white subway passengers who have bumped, brushed past without apology, or opened their newspapers directly in the faces of black fellow riders. The truth is that in such situations, most black Americans are simply too invisible to fear, as innocuous and inconsequential as they were on early episodes of "Mad Men." A harmless ethnic blur.

Whites have little historic reason to fear the repercussions of rudeness, or even violent attacks on black men. The terrorist night riding, paddy rolling, and senseless police murders have been committed on the other side of the ledger. The Yusuf Hawkins, Rodney Kings, Amadou Diallos, Jena 6s, Sean Bells, and Trayvon Martins are black. The media and law enforcement would do well to be more attentive to a justified trepidation black Americans feel around some whites. This eggshell walk is evident every day in retail establishments, body language, excessive politeness, and even nightly travel routes.

Mythical monstrous black men have provided convenient scapegoats and false leads for criminal culprits and dirty cops. But black men experience a profound lack of respect that shapes our attitudes and behavior. Usually it manifests itself nonviolently, and one never knows. Sometimes it is fatal. Trayvon Martin, with his Skittles and iced tea, was not a physical threat. He was viewed as less than human. And now he is dead. Try carrying that thought around when you ride the subway at night.

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