

Contextualizing Police Use of Force and Black Vulnerability: A Response to Whitesel

Brooklynn K. Hitchens¹

Whitesel (2017) argues that racialized stereotypes about black bodies were used as foundations for the killing and subsequent character assassinations of Eleanor Bumpurs and Eric Garner. In response to Whitesel, I offer several points to expand on the arguments raised, as well as some critiques that should enhance future research on policing and state-sanctioned violence.

KEY WORDS: black bodies; police; race; social control; state-sanctioned violence; stereotypes.

In America, it is traditional to destroy the black body—it is heritage.

Ta-Nehisi Coates (2015:103)

The treatment of the Negro is America's greatest and most conspicuous scandal. It is tremendously publicized. . . . For the colored peoples all over the world, whose rising influence is axiomatic, this scandal is salt in their wounds.

Gunnar Myrdal (1944:1020)

INTRODUCTION

Whitesel's (2017) think piece explicates the multiple "interlocking oppressions" on the basis of race, class, size, and ability that alter civilian interactions with law enforcement and result in the disproportionate death of black Americans at the hands of police. In response, I offer several points to expand on the arguments raised, as well as some critiques that should enhance future research on policing and state-sanctioned violence.

RACIALIZED STEREOTYPES AND POLICE USE OF DEADLY FORCE

Using the case studies of 66-year-old black female Eleanor Bumpurs and 43-year-old black male Eric Garner, Whitesel (2017) argues that racialized stereotypes about black bodies were used as foundations for the killing and subsequent character assassinations of Bumpurs and Garner. Bumpurs, a heavysset, mentally ill, poor

¹ Department of Sociology, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, New Jersey 08901; e-mail: bkh40@scarletmail.rutgers.edu

mother and senior citizen, was murdered by the New York Police Department (NYPD) while standing naked in her apartment. Seven white male officers attempted to physically evict Bumpurs for unpaid rent by striking down her front door. Armed with gas masks and plastic shields, they shot Bumpurs to death while she held a kitchen knife. Garner, a heavysset, physically disabled, poor father was put into a chokehold by NYPD officers while standing in front of a convenience store. Six officers dogpiled on Garner, ignoring his 11 pleas that he could not breathe. Unarmed, Garner was denied oxygen by paramedics and was killed with the bare hands of an officer while handcuffed on the concrete.

These disturbing cases are emblematic of the socially accepted, state-sanctioned violence that wages a systematic war on black bodies. Bumpurs and Garner were both killed by police for their perceived threat to law enforcement, and this threat is rooted in racialized stereotypes about black identity. To be black in America is enough to warrant your death—whether armed or unarmed. In fact, data show that blacks are 2.5 times more likely as whites to be shot and killed by police (Lowery 2016), and unarmed blacks are seven times more likely to be shot than unarmed whites (Somashekhkar et al. 2015). Blacks are merely 13% of the U.S. population but represent roughly 25% of those killed by police officers (Swaine et al. 2015; see also Hirschfield 2015). Rather than deescalating encounters with civilians, racialized fear about the physical black body as *dangerous* emboldens police to use deadly force. And too often, racialized comments such as “I feared for my life” are then used by officers to justify use of deadly force and successfully absolve them of any wrongdoing. The Bumpurs and Garner cases were no different. Daniel Pantaleo, the officer who administered the chokehold on Garner, has not been indicted and instead reportedly received a pay raise after being placed on modified duty (Rayman and Fermino 2016). Stephen Sullivan, the officer who shot Bumpurs twice with a 12-gauge shotgun, was acquitted on all charges. Coates (2015:9) articulated this injustice when he contended, “The destroyers will rarely be held accountable. Mostly they will receive pensions.”

The lack of justice and accountability in these cases (and countless others) act as “salt in [the] wounds” (Myrdal 1944:1020) of people of color and reinforce the precariousness of black life and the devaluing of black death. The uncomfortable reality that you can be shot and killed while in the presence of your child (as in the cases of Philando Castile and Korryn Gaines), while running or walking away from police (as with Walter Scott and Rekia Boyd), while playing with a toy gun in an open-carry state (as with Tamir Rice and John Crawford), or even while in police custody (as with Sandra Bland and Freddie Gray)—wears on the psyche of black Americans. This injustice leaves many blacks to feel that their lives, and the lives of their loved ones, are expendable and violable. I hope that Whitesel continues to theorize about the overarching effect that witnessing and hearing about racialized police shootings has on black Americans, or as Jamilah Lemieux, senior editor at *Ebony* magazine admonished, “What sort of toll does this constant loop of black violent death take on people who see themselves in those images? And how might this be contributing to the dehumanization of blacks in the eyes of others, as opposed to making us look more human?” (Harwell 2016).

INTERLOCKING OPPRESSIONS

One of the key strengths of Whitesel's (2017) think piece is his analysis of the multiple forms of marginalized identities that act as interlocking sites of oppression for black Americans. For Garner and Bumpurs, these oppressions were used to justify their treatment in life and then justify their murders by police in death. Using critical race feminism, fat studies, and dis/ability studies as theoretical underpinnings, Whitesel (2017) contends that racial inequality, in tandem with inequities related to gender, class, age, body type, and disability, coalesced to lead police to abuse their power and "construe the situation into one of life and death" to then "justify the volley of shots fired" (Erevelles and Minear 2013:355). Data support this contention, as Corrigan and colleagues (2003) found that blacks who are mentally ill are almost four times as likely to perceive discrimination as whites who are mentally ill, and Gary (2005) agrees that ethnic minorities who already experience racial discrimination suffer a "double stigma" when faced with the added burden of mental illness. In addition, obese individuals are highly stigmatized, and this weight bias translates into differential treatment in various institutions (Puhl and Heuer 2009). Garner was depicted as a "hulk brute" and "big-and-bad black thug" whose race, coupled with his overweight appearance and health ailments, rendered him a threat to police—even though he was unarmed and pleaded to stop being harassed. Bumpurs was depicted as a "mad black woman" and "looming monstrosity" whose race, overweight appearance, and history of mental illness were used as rationale for police use of excessive force—even while nude and in the privacy of her home. Whitesel (2017) implies that these multiple layers of stigma exacerbated police encounters and "magnif[ied] stereotypes" derived from racialized ideals about poor, overweight people of color. The bodily aesthetic of a heavysset black person prompted a "racialized terror of otherness" (Erevelles and Minear 2013:355) that transformed the image of Garner and Bumpurs into one of grotesque repugnance and led to irrational reactions by police. This repugnance, grounded in the historical, racialized stereotype of the black male menace, stirred Darren Wilson to describe Michael Brown as "Hulk Hogan" and an aggressive "demon" although he and Brown were close in height and size, and then to fire fatal shots into Brown as he ran away (*State of Missouri v. Darren Wilson* 2014:212).

Whitesel (2017) adequately historicizes the mistreatment of black men through the mythical trope of the black male brute and how this mistreatment can be aptly applied to the Garner case. However, he spends less attention paralleling the Bumpurs case to the historical legacy of the mistreatment of black women through the mammy and sapphire caricatures. Whitesel (2017) understands that as a heavysset and disabled black woman, Bumpurs was deemed unfeminine and undeserving of respect by police given racialized constructions of desirable womanhood. But this treatment of black women is rooted in depictions of an asexual, overweight, and dark-skinned mammy and a threatening and argumentative sapphire, and have been used in the gendered assault of black women for centuries (West 1995). These historical, "controlling images" (Collins 2002) give rise to the contemporary stereotype of the "mad black woman" that is used to legitimize the use of force against

black women who are deemed as what Whitesel (2017) calls “irresolvable nuisances.”

STRUCTURAL VIOLENCE THROUGH NECROPOLITICS AND BIOPOWER

Finally, research on state-sanctioned violence could benefit from examining police abuse of black bodies in relation to structural violence, necropolitics, and biopower. Structural violence is the systemic harm embedded in the socioeconomic structure of society, creating unequal power and life chances (Galtung 1969:171). As Whitesel (2017) notes, Bumpurs received little help from social services for her mental illness, which could have included crisis counseling, therapy, or emergency funds to save her from eviction. This disregard for the humanity of Bumpurs is an example of structural violence, wherein her quality of life was truncated due to institutional harm and negligence. In my own work, I analyze how structural violence confines the lived experiences of low-income, urban black women, and influences their worldviews, behaviors, and actions (Hitchens, unpublished manuscript). Structural violence is also understood as the invisible, disproportionate, and excessive death and disability of poor persons as a function of their disadvantages and operates continuously to perpetuate racial and economic inequities (Gilligan 1996). Inadequate and racially biased policing that results in the excessive death and disability of poor blacks is a clear example of structural violence, as police use of force was an act of violence on the bodies of Garner and Bumpurs. The preservation of structural violence through “biopower” (Foucault 1990) and “necropolitics” (Mbembe 2008) can be dually understood as the capacity to dictate who should live or die through the subjugation of life to the power of death (Mbembe 2008:152). Contextualizing police violence as systemic harm wherein police use state-sanctioned power to incapacitate and debilitate blacks as individuals and as a collective could add to Whitesel’s (2017) argument about the reality of racism and oppression in America.

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