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## How Did We Get Here?

Tressie McMillan Cottom once wrote, “I am living in the most opportune time in black history in the United States and that means, still, that I will die younger, live poorer, risk more exposure to police violence, and be punished by social policy for being a black woman in ways that aren’t true for almost any other group in this nation”. This quote has never felt more accurate than in the past decade. In America, we have been told by our schools and government that our history of violent racism was “so long ago”, that people “aren’t like that anymore”, and that this prejudice was essentially dead. However, this is something we know is embedded in every single aspect of our lives, from pop culture to the judicial system, and that truth cannot be covered up. Beatings. Lynchings. Shootings. Because of the way we happen to look, we will get accused and punished for crimes that are either not committed by us or simply never occurred. And our aforementioned government, the one who is supposed to protect every human’s unalienable rights, does not and will not help this epidemic of black death and oppression because they ultimately can benefit from it. However, now that our world has social media and the internet, this could very well be the generation to put this torment to rest. But in order to do so we need to fully acknowledge the past and ask ourselves a hard question; how did we get here?

In 1989, five teenage boys were arrested under the accusation of raping and assaulting a white female jogger in Central Park, New York City. While they were innocent, they were ultimately convicted due to being coerced into false confessions by the police officers heading the case, using methods of manipulation, threats, and violence. Each teen spent six to thirteen years in prison without coverage in the media. They were deemed the Central Park Five, and after they were proven innocent acclaimed director Ava DuVernay went on to convey their story in “When They See Us”. This was the first time many people have ever heard of what happened to these men, and that was intentional. There have been many cases over the decades of black males being accused and punished for false crimes. These occurrences are not told in their full truth to further the narrative of aggressive black people. Individuals justified discrimination against African-Americans because if the news tells them black people have raped and murdered white people so much, then they must be dangerous. And that exact false narrative is what perpetuates racial stereotypes in order to exclude us from any realm outside our own culture. It is exactly what white supremacists need to hear in order to go out on killing sprees, claiming to be doing a service for their nation.

February 26th, 2012. A 17-year-old black high schooler is staying with his father in Sanford, Florida. While walking home from a trip to a convenience store- Skittles and a bottle of juice in hand- neighborhood patrol officer George Zimmerman spotted him and reported him as “suspicious” to the Sanford police. Though they advised him not to follow the teen, he proceeded. Soon after, he was shot and killed by that officer. His name was Trayvon Martin. There were no eyewitnesses to the event, just a bruised and bloodied cop who was able to claim self-defense because the true victim had already taken his last breath. It was later revealed that

Trayvon was seen as guilty because of his apparent “criminal record”, which began to leak into social media. This record consisted of skipping school, writing abbreviated profanity on a hallway locker, and “trace amounts of THC (marijuana)” in his system. At the time I saw this story, I was 6 years old. I’ve heard of the Civil Rights movement and slavery, but I’d never seen racism. I always grew up in my community, so surrounded by my people that I’d never been to school with white kids until my 10th-grade year. But when I saw what happened to Trayvon, all I could do was be scared. I didn’t know things like this could happen now, every picture of an activist was in black and white and all the diverse friends on Disney Channel seemed to be getting along great. So how could anyone be against defending an innocent kid who was barely younger than my brother? It was because the world has been fed a narrative that has been supported by decades of false accusations against us. See the previously mentioned Central Park Five, see Emmet Till, see Pervis Payne. This is a tragic pattern that has and will continue to repeat itself if we continue to ignore it. Trayvon Martin had not committed any crime, had barely even lived, and yet was deemed a suspicious thug for existing in America. So at 6 years old, I wondered, “If I exist, could I die too?”

In the end, America has a massive epidemic on its hands. Stemming from centuries of discrimination, stereotypes, brutality, and false media, African-American citizens are being killed at a staggering rate with no rhyme or reason, purely out of hate. It is ingrained into our community, into our media, into our government, and in every single aspect of our lives. But as dire as our situation is, I still believe that there is hope for the U.S. We need to educate everyone of all ages about Black history in depth, implement effective laws, and truly try to understand the systemic racism that is involved in our lives. We need to destigmatize being proud of our

blackness, because if we don't then the number of black deaths will continue to pile up. America as a whole needs to be better. So to conclude this essay, I'd like to leave you with one question; how did we get here?

#### Sources (In Order)

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