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The Problem with Saying 'All Lives Matter'

There's a difference between "true" and "helpful."

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by **TYLER HUCKABEE**

Imagine that you wake up late one night to the sound of your home being burglarized. Through the crack in your bedroom door, you see several figures hauling out your television, computers and nice china to their getaway car parked outside.

Thinking quickly, you dial 911 on your iPhone.

“911, what’s your emergency?”

“Help!” you whisper. “My home is being robbed!”

“Stay where you are, Miss,” the other voice assures you. “We’ll look into it.”

“Thank you,” you whisper. “My address is—”

“Woah, Ma’am,” the voice on the other end says. “Why are you bringing addresses into this?”

“What?” you say. “My home is being robbed! Aren’t you going to come and stop them?”

“Well, I don’t know why you need to make this about *your home*, ma’am,” the operator says. “All houses matter.”

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There is a difference between something being true and something being relevant. In the above conversation with an imaginary 911 operator, what he was saying was very true. All houses do matter. But at the moment, it wasn’t relevant. It wasn’t even helpful. All things considered, it was downright dangerous. You had an actual crisis going on at your house —that’s why your house mattered. While the operator was lecturing you on how important all houses are, bandits were trying to figure out whether they could get all your stuff in one load or if they’d have to make two trips.

It’s the same error people who respond to “Black Lives Matter” with “All Lives Matter” are

making. It's not that what they're saying isn't true. It's just that it's unhelpful. It's an attempt to erase an actual crisis under the guise of being fair. And by continuing to use "All Lives Matter" to drown out the cry of "Black Lives Matter," the real problems the movement is trying to address are being ignored. "All Lives Matter" is useless. It is destructive. It is hurtful. We need to stop saying it.

Black Lives Matter

Following the death of Trayvon Martin, three women named Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors and Opal Tometi began tweeting #blacklivesmatter. What started as a hashtag became an ethos, and has transcended Twitter to become a true movement, one of the most forceful and ubiquitous of this young century.

It has no official leaders or spokespeople. There's no agreed upon charter. The only thing being insisted upon is the value of black lives. As the website has it, it's "a call to action and a response to the virulent anti-black racism that permeates our society."

The idea that racism remains a very real reality in America is contentious, but it shouldn't be. The studies proving anti-black racism remains a common, if not *foundational* reality of everyday American life are too numerous to cite in one article, so we'll go with just a few.

We might as well begin with [pre-school](#). Black children make up 18 percent of America's preschool population, but represent nearly [half of all out-of-school suspensions](#). This treatment continues into the court system, where black children are [18 times more likely to be tried as adults](#) than their white peers. It also extends to the job market, in which white college graduates are [twice as likely to land a job](#) as black college graduates. We haven't even gotten to the justice system yet, in which black people are given [20 percent longer sentences](#) than white people are for the same crimes.

(For more on institutional racism, go read every word of Ta-Nehisi Coates' ["The Black Family in the Age of Mass Incarceration."](#))

Context Matters

These numbers could go on and on, but even if they didn't, it should be clear that the people who say racism remains a real, frequent reality in America have their heads on straight. They are not making this up. Those who suggest that black people are imagining racism aren't just devaluing someone else's experience—they're ignoring the plain facts.

It was in the face of these facts that #blacklivesmatter sprung, but now anywhere that cry is heard, you can be sure that someone else will come along with the rebuttal: "All Lives Matter."

It

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certainly *sounds* reasonable enough and in most contexts, it would be. But the thing is, when people say "Black Lives Matter," they are acknowledging an important context that involves several centuries of slavery, civil rights, mass incarceration and brutality. It's specifically highlighting the value of black lives because, historically, this country has often ignored that value.

The problem is "All Lives Matter" is that it *ignores context*. Like the 911 operator who doesn't understand why you're worried about your own house. Or, as *The Daily Beast's Arthur Chu says*, like someone who "runs through a cancer fundraiser screaming 'THERE ARE OTHER DISEASES TOO.'" The context of "Black Lives Matter" is not that other lives don't. The context of "Black Lives Matter" is that the value of black lives remains under assault in the United States.

Love Matters

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When a parent says, “I love my son,” you don’t say, “What about your daughter? Don’t you love *all* your children?”

When the president says “God bless America,” we don’t say, “Shouldn’t God bless *all* countries?”

And when a person says “Black Lives Matter,” we should not say “All Lives Matter.” It is an attempt to to diminish the ongoing reality of white supremacy in America. It’s effectively a way of demeaning other people’s stories, like Job’s friends who kept trying to point to the bigger picture of God’s ultimate plan instead of truly listening to Job and mourning his grief. It is rude. It is hurtful. It is dismissive. And it has to stop.

And yes, some people who associate themselves with #blacklivesmatter have called for police deaths. Some Christians have called for abortion clinics to be bombed. The cries of a few fringe groups do not invalidate an entire movement, thank God.

So when you hear the words “Black Lives Matter,” don’t be so quick to assume it’s a judgement about white lives. Instead, see “Black Lives Matter” for what it is: a rallying cry to make a difference and take down the unjust status quo that holds racial equality at bay in America. You can join the movement and commit yourself to the social and economic liberation of black people, or you can choose to stand on the sidelines. But don’t silence the cry with the words “All Lives Matter.” This is an emergency.

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