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CULTURAL COMMENT

# ENOUGH IS ENOUGH

By **Edwidge Danticat** November 26, 2014

I have seen police brutality up close. Both in Haiti, where I was born during a ruthless dictatorship, and in New York, where I migrated to a working-class, predominantly African-American and Caribbean neighborhood in Brooklyn at the age of twelve. In the Haiti of the nineteen-seventies and early eighties, the violence was overtly political. Government detractors were dragged out of their homes, imprisoned, beaten, or killed. Sometimes, their bodies were left out in the streets, in the hot sun, for hours or days, to intimidate neighbors.

In New York, the violence seemed a bit more subtle, though no less pervasive. When I started riding New York City Transit buses between my family's apartment and the high school I attended, three miles away, I noticed that a muffled radio message from an annoyed bus driver—about someone talking too loud, or not having the right fare—was all it took to make the police rush in, drag a young black man off the bus, and beat him into submission on the sidewalk. There were no cell-phone cameras back then to record such abuse, and most of us were too terrified to cry “Shame!” or demand a badge number.

Besides, many of us had fled our countries to escape this kind of military or police aggression, so we knew how deadly a confrontation with an armed and uniformed authoritarian figure could be. Still, every now and then a fellow traveller would summon his or her courage and, dodging the swaying baton, or screaming from a distance, would yell some variation of, “Stop it! This is a child! A Child!”

Of course, not all of the police's victims were children. Abner Louima, a family friend, was thirty years old when he was mistaken for someone who'd punched a police officer outside a Brooklyn nightclub, on August 9, 1997. He was arrested, beaten with fists, as well as with police radios, flashlights, and night sticks, then was sexually assaulted with the wooden handle of a toilet plunger or a broom inside a precinct bathroom. After Abner, there was Amadou Diallo, a Guinean immigrant, who, on February 4, 1999, was hit by nineteen of the forty-one bullets aimed at him as he retrieved his wallet from his pocket. Then there was Patrick Dorismond, who died on March 16, 2000, while trying to convince undercover cops that he was not a drug dealer. Then there was Sean Bell, whose car was shot at fifty times on November 25, 2006, the day of his wedding.

These are only a few cases—a few that made the news. I have no doubt that there were many others, ones involving women, too, though few got much attention, except for that of the sixty-six-year-old Eleanor Bumpurs, who, thirteen years before Abner's assault, was killed with a twelve-gauge police shot gun inside her own apartment.

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We marched for all of them in the Louima/Diallo decade, seven thousand of us across the Brooklyn Bridge one time. We carried signs and chanted “No Justice, No Peace!” and “Whose streets? Our Streets!” even while fearing that this would never be true. The streets belonged to the people with the uniforms and the guns. The streets at that time also belonged to Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, who believed then, and still seems to believe now, that police brutality is unworthy of public scrutiny so long as black people keep “killing each other.” The streets were never ours to begin with, because on these same streets our sons and brothers, fathers and uncles were, and still are, prey.

My father, a Brooklyn cab driver, used to half joke that the only reason the police didn’t beat him up was because he was too skinny and too old, and not worth the effort. Every now and then, when he was randomly stopped by a police officer and deigned to ask why, he would be given, rather than a beating, a handful of unwarranted traffic citations that would wipe out a few weeks’ hard-earned wages. Today, one might generously refer to such acts as micro-aggressions. That is, until they turn major, until they turn deadly. Until a man who is believed to be selling loose cigarettes has the life strangled out of him in a police chokehold. Until yet another unarmed brown or black body finds itself in the familiar path of yet another police officer’s gun.

The other night, while watching the St. Louis County Prosecutor Robert McCulloch declare that there would be no indictment against Officer Darren Wilson for the killing of Michael Brown, I kept thinking of Abner Louima, whose assault took place on another August 9th, when Brown was just eighteen months old.

Abner and I have known each other for years. Yet I have always steered clear, in my conversations with him, of what happened all those years ago. Yesterday, though, I decided to call him, just to hear his thoughts about Michael Brown and Ferguson, Missouri. If anyone could understand all those broken hearts, all the rage, all the desperation, the yearning for justice that we are seeing in Ferguson and all over the country, I thought, he would.

Abner Louima, unlike Michael Brown, survived. He went on with his life, moved to South Florida, started a business, has done charity work. He has a daughter and two sons. One son eighteen years old, the same age Michael Brown was when he died. His other son is fifteen.

I asked him what he thought of the grand jury's decision. The question seemed to wear on him. It was one, I could tell, that he was tired of answering. "Like everyone else, I'm very disappointed," he said, his voice sinking with every word. "It's not a good signal to send to a system that's already not working."

How does he feel each time he hears that yet another black man was killed or nearly killed by the police? "It touches me very deeply each time," he said. "It forces me to ask myself why so little has changed in all these years since this happened to me. It reminds me again and again that our lives mean nothing." His case, Abner reminded me, was the last one he could think of, in New York or elsewhere, in which the police officers who had assaulted or killed a black man actually went to jail. In his case, justice was served in part because of the public pressure, and because there were federal prosecutors involved, including the current nominee for Attorney General, Loretta Lynch.

What message does Louima have for Brown's family, whose son died on what could have been the anniversary of his own death? "My heart aches so much for them," he said. "I know how difficult this must be for them. Like them, I encourage peaceful protest. Too many lives are being lost, so we can't just close our eyes and hope it goes away. We must keep raising our voices until we find justice for those who lost their lives, and until these things stop happening." We both wonder: Will these things ever stop happening?

In 2007, on the tenth anniversary of his assault, Abner Louima wrote an opinion piece for the *Daily News* reflecting on what had happened to him. "It's time we all said, 'Enough is enough,'" he wrote. He still believes that—now more than ever.

*Edwidge Danticat is the author of many books, including, most recently, “The Art of Death: Writing the Final Story.”* [Read more »](#)

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