

bhtv-2014-09-01-loury-mcwhorter

MCWHORTER: Hey, Glenn, how you doing?

LOURY: Doing well. This is Glenn Loury of Brown University and the Glenn Show at Bloggingheads.tv talking with my erstwhile interlocutor, John McWhorter. John, what are your affiliations?

MCWHORTER: I am at Columbia University and these days I'm writing every week for the Daily Beast.

LOURY: Yes, I actually knew that. So OK, John, good to be talking with you again. It's been a while. Since we last talked the affair of Ferguson, Missouri has come upon us. And let me see now, we're in just the first of September and I think the events of the shooting of Michael Brown by Officer Darren Wilson and so forth --

MCWHORTER: That was three weeks ago?

LOURY: Three weeks ago minimum, I'd say, yeah. So a lot has happened. I won't try to summarize it all. I know our audience is aware of these events. And it falls to us, black guys at Bloggingheads.tv, to make sense of it all. So John, I'm all ears.

MCWHORTER: Well, you know, what this all comes down to is something that I've always said, which is that the main sticking point on race in America is not whether or not

people with names like Dwayne and Tamika get as much attention when they send resumes as other people. It's not whether or not a middle class black couple don't get as good a deal on a car loan as a white couple with the same statistics. Those things are real, but that's not why a considerable segment of this country think of race as a serious problem in America. The problem is the police. And it's not an accident that it's always when something like Trayvon Martin, or now Michael Brown, happens that black people take to the streets. And I think, more to the point, black America and its fellow travelers insist that race is still the same problem that it was 150 years ago, just in different form. It's this business of the police. And so what we're seeing is tragic right now, but I've been moved by the fact that this time all of the exact same things, the exact same cast of characters, the exact same dialogue, the exact same tropes, happened in the wake of the Trayvon Martin verdict last year. So we're not talking about something that happened 5 years ago or 10 years ago where somebody needs to remind us. All of this happened last year and that was supposed to be a teaching moment. Now here we are again. I'm not sure what we're learning now. What do you think?

LOURY: OK, hold on, I just want to parse this a little bit, what you've just said. So you say that it's not discrimination in the classical sense of auto dealers or employers not wanting to hire blacks. It is friction with the police. Now, I want to know whether you're saying that's objectively a significant problem on the order of magnitude of those prior problems or whether or not you're saying that's the site to which advocates of civil rights and black American interests repair now because those other problems have been solved, they have nothing else left to talk about. I just want to be clear about that.

MCWHORTER: Sure. No, I sincerely think that the police issue is real and legitimate. I definitely don't mean that the usual cast of characters jump on the police issue because it's good for copy. By no means. I think that it is the main reason that many black people feel that they are delegitimized as human beings in this country. The other things are there, but they alone would not furnish the basis for an idea that America remains a deeply racist country, etc. Nobody takes to the streets about those things. The police issue though is key to all of this and it's the most important racial issue in America today. Would you agree with that or do you think of it as just one of many things that require equal attention?

LOURY: I don't know if I'd want to rank, even though I did sort of invite you to do that. I think it's an important issue. Is it the most? I don't know. Schools that don't give the kids the kind of cognitive skills they need in order to function in modern society, you could chalk that up as a problem. Jails that are overflowing, although that does entail policing, but it entails a lot more than that. But anyway let me not go down that list. I want to, just picking up on what you said, highlight two different dimensions of the race relations problem as it affects African Americans in the United States today and it's kind of exemplified by the Ferguson brouhaha. One has to do with the nature of racial inequality and I think the police are critical in that because I think the site of contemporary racial hierarchy, domination, inequality, the legacy of the past, is largely in the low income black districts of urban America which are heavily policed and where these incidents take place. So that's kind of, you know, where the rubber is meeting the road in terms of inequality and friction. But then the other thing that I want to highlight is the kind of performance or the dramaturgical dimension of civil rights advocacy, of mobilizing people, black and white, to advocate on behalf of the interests of the underdog, of trying to keep the

questions of moral obligation of the country to the descendants of slaves alive. You know, of trying to mobilize -- so for example, and I won't talk too long here, I'll stop, what they're saying now, people like Al Sharpton and others, is register black people to vote. I even saw a piece in the New York Times where they say the Democrats fearful of losing the Senate, you know, these states like Georgia and Louisiana and Arkansas and whatnot where there could be a significant black component to the electorate, maybe Ferguson will mobilize -- so then Ferguson becomes a vehicle for this larger thing. And so I want to distinguish between those two dimensions of the problem. There's friction on the streets of low income black communities where the police and criminals are encountering each other and there's, if you will, collateral damage from that friction in the way in which police are interacting with black people, not all of whom are criminals, and that's a big issue. But then there's also whether the civil rights movement in the twenty-first century. Al Sharpton at the head of it and the funeral of Michael Brown as the site at which -- but you know, with respect, Michael Brown is not Rosa Parks. With respect, with respect, whatever happened between him and Officer Wilson is not what happened on that bus in Montgomery, Alabama. You know?

With respect, Al Sharpton is not Martin Luther King. I mean a long shot away from it. So are we witnessing the death throes of the mid-late twentieth century mobilization of African Americans to move the conscience of the nation? Is this what it has descended to and what it has become? Again, with respect at the tragic loss of that young man's life. So that's the kind of thing -- again, I'm talking too long, but just to distinguish between real friction over real objective confrontational circumstances that bespeak the condition of a minority of the African American community today, real friction, but also a movement that seems to looking for a theme, looking for a leader, looking for a voice, looking for a way to be relevant in the twenty-first century.

MCWHORTER: You know, it's interesting. Sharpton is key to this in that I actually think that he is perfectly predictable and perfectly suitable as a quote, unquote civil rights leader for today in that obviously he's no Martin Luther King, obviously he's got an awful lot of baggage, and I mean really, frankly, Sharpton is not even interested in policy. He's not somebody who sits down and works out a careful agenda to negotiate with the powers that be. He's never been that person. He's basically a street-level -- and I'm not going to say rabble-rouser

because that's not what he's doing any more, but he's somebody who leads in street-level protest. He's somebody who represents a certain kind of visceral, we're-not-going-to-take-it-anymore anger. And what he's all about, this is what he has really been significant for, is raising awareness of the dangers in the interactions between young black men and the police. Fifteen years ago he used to talk openly about wanting to become black America's leader and replacing Jesse Jackson and it seemed rather comical at the time, especially since there are things we could say about Jesse Jackson, but it's clear at this point that that has happened. But what does he lead? What he leads is what really is the remaining sticking point, which is the police. And so to me I figure that'll do. There's nothing else left to lead in the sense that there was 50 years ago. There does need to be somebody who leads these sorts of protests, and to the extent that he's a bit of an entertainer, to the extent that he is a bit of a performer, well, that's the other part because as far as America being a racist country in a true sense, in that un-complex way that people deal with it, well, you know, he represents that notion as well to the extent that there is an aspect of performance in it. So I'm not mad at Al Sharpton in the present. I think that, yeah, that'll do. If there's

somebody who goes in and says we as a community are angry about what happens to Michael Browns, it seems rather small compared to what the issues were 50 years ago, but what else would he lead? So I don't think he's doing anything wrong. I think that there does need to be somebody who symbolizes that rage. And so he's not hurting anything and, if anything, he ends up putting a certain point on things. Do you sense him as doing anything wrong at this point?

LOURY: Ah, Jesus. Well, not really. I mean he's being Al Sharpton. Doing anything wrong, certainly not as wrong as the Tawana Brawley fiasco. Certainly not as wrong as what happened in Crown Heights and the role that he played in fomenting -- not as wrong as what happened when Freddy's Department Store in Harlem ended up burning to the ground with eight dead bodies inside of it, if that's the right number, where he played a role of incitement. I mean you know, you don't like Jesse Jackson. I agree that Jesse Jackson can be criticized, but when Jesse Jackson ran presidential campaigns in 1984 and 1988, if I recall this correctly, there was, I don't know, a kind of seriousness about it politically, at least I thought. I mean not that he was going to win the nomination or he was going to win the election, and maybe I betray my age here, but I have a hard time taking Al Sharpton seriously. And I do think it

is emblematic of where we are, of the exhaustion of this movement, let me just put it plainly. I mean after all, we have Barack Hussein Obama to thank for Al Sharpton. Barack Hussein Obama has made Al Sharpton into the figure that he has become. Sharpton is an Obama administration flak. His television show is complete propagandistic bombast. There's not any doubt about this. This is not complex, it's not difficult to see. Why the President would take a man like Al Sharpton and make him into his instrument for communicating with the African American community is beyond me, but I think it shows a kind of manipulative exploitation. I mean you know, this is not really in the interest of African American people if you're asking me. OK, I'm a pointy-headed intellectual, an egghead, I sit in the ivory tower. I'm trying to take the long view here. In my mind recycling the same old act -- I mean Tom Wolfe got it right in the *Bonfire of the Vanities* and what was that, 30 years ago? I mean recycling the same old shtick when it has long since played out and everybody can see -- I mean it's political correctness. People are acquiescing in this because they're too polite to call it what it is. Again, in my humble opinion. So I don't know. I'll start foaming at the mouth if you get me talking about Al Sharpton. Al Sharpton, leader of black America? Oh,

please. It's a trivialization of 200 years of struggle, if you ask me.

MCWHORTER: The hardest thing about him, now that you're kind of getting me going, is the idea that the powers that be, the white powers that be, and now even the Obamas, are courting that man is disturbing in that -- you know, I don't bear any animus against Sharpton the way I used to. He told some lies in the past, he did some hideous things 25 years ago, he has kind of apologized, and you have to allow people some room for growth, but there's no excellence there. I don't see any gravitas, even to the extent that there was in Jesse Jackson. He's not excellent, he's a performer. And yet he is being courted as if he were excellent which in a way is as if the Clintons are saying this is the best that you people can be. OK, now we're going to shake his hand, we're going to be on camera with him, we're going to pretend that he makes a difference in black lives and all of it is just a matter of symbolism. I'm not impressed by that. It's kind of like -- we've talked about this with other prominent black figures. It would be nice if there were somebody who were excellent, but it's better than nothing in a way. I mean what Al Sharpton symbol-- it's very simple. The way he talks, the hairstyle, you know, the kind of salute to James Brown, he

is a symbol of rebellion, he is a middle finger stuck up in the air. It's interesting, if you try to think of an Al Sharpton quote it's always something he said during Crown Heights or during Tawana Brawley. In terms of what he says now it's not what he says, it's how he says it. It's his facial expressions, it's his eyebrows. He's a symbol, and you're saying that that symbol is played out, that it's tired, that it's a matter of shtick and we need to move on (overlapping dialogue; inaudible).

LOURY: Indeed. I'm saying it's pathetic. It's pathetic because if performance and bombast is all that's left out of Martin Luther King and company, and we could run down the list of heroic voices that were at the center of the American story and that had a -- I'll say it -- critique, had a serious critique -- now, you know, Cornel West is a serious person. Cornel West is an excellent person in the sense in which you were touting excellence. His mouth is no prayer book and everybody's not going to agree with everything he says and I know that he has gotten himself into some trouble by some of the things that he's said about the president that people have taken as an example of him being off the hook and off the reservation and whatnot --

MCWHORTER: Excellence isn't why he's famous though. He's famous because of his performance. I mean we've talked about that. Whether he's excellent --

LOURY: We have, but in the realm of public intellectual leadership and people who are speaking to the questions of the day he's read books, he's thought deeply and he has a broad view. I thought that's kind of what you meant by excellence. Now, I don't think in the world of scholarship that Cornel has achieved his potential at what he might have done if he had kept his nose to the grindstone about writing the big books, but I think as a guy who can say what has Obama done with Wall Street and how has it affected black people, what is Obama doing on the world stage with American power and how does it betray the legacy of the forbears on whose shoulders he stood to get himself elected, as a guy who can kind of help, I think, in formulating what a broadly allied progressive movement in the twenty-first century, and I'm going to -- the usual suspects of working people, immigrants, women and whatnot, I mean this broad coalition of progressives into which the African American component fits, what does that look like, how does it go, I think pretty highly of Cornel West's mind and his sort of critical review of the situation. Though I don't agree with everything he says. Anyway, anyway, again

I go on too long. You don't hear any of that in Al Sharpton, I agree with you.

MCWHORTER: No. I think though that the saddest thing about Ferguson is that I think as human beings we tend to live in the present rather than think historically in any real way. And I'm not sure anything's being learned at this point unless we have a real revolution, and you can imagine where I think it needs to go. I think that the war on drugs is at the top of all of this in terms of creating these interactions between the police and young black men, even when they don't happen to end up being about drugs. But all of these reporters who went to Ferguson and are tweeting and all the urgency, etc., etc., it's not -- frankly I wrote in the Daily Beast, "Next summer we can assume that another young black man is going to be killed under rather murky circumstances by some undertrained white officer." We're going to go through the exact same thing again unless we have some sort of real change. And I think that what a lot of people are waiting for is that America somehow comes to understand that we dehumanize black men and that Americans are going to stop doing that. Well, that clearly is not going to happen. You can't create a psychological revolution by writing [savory?] pieces in the New Yorker and saying things on MSNBC. It's not going to

change. There needs to be something more or otherwise I see Michael Brown's death as a tragedy but as one more thing. It's Trayvon Martin in a different guise, next year it'll be somebody else. I can even name the city. It'll probably be in Chicago. And we're not getting it. We're going around in circles.

LOURY: I want to say a couple of things, John.

MCWHORTER: Go ahead.

LOURY: I agree with what you're saying and of course it is going to happen or something like it is going to happen because, as I was saying earlier, the objective friction on the ground in all of these communities, I mean you know, it's going to happen again. And it's not, in my view, the reactive kind of demonstrative expressions of outrage when something like this happens. It's not an effective site for addressing the deeper underlying problems. I think that, but I want to say something else. That looting, the violence, the firing on police officers, the throwing of Molotov cocktails and other such projectiles, that behavior, where was the press in getting inside of it? In other words, I read story after story after story that followed the standard narrative line about woe is me, but I didn't read any inside reporting about who those people were, where they came from and what they were about. I'm talking

about the looters, the rioters, and the people who were violent, against whom the police overreacted. So we've read all about the militarization of the police and it's a bad thing. I think it's a bad thing. I've said so here on the Bloggingheads show. It's a bad thing. But who were those people firing on the police? Now (overlapping dialogue; inaudible). I'm not finished. A bunch of ministers come out and wring their hands and say, "We're trying to keep the peace." What does it say to the country about the character of the community which expresses its outrage in that way? Does it not -- and again, political correctness is operative here because no one's going to say so -- confirm the police, community and those who are their supporters in this Manichean view that they have of a bunch of black criminals who are making certain parts of their cities ungovernable and a heroic blue line that stands between the decent citizenry and these people? Where is the denunciation and, again, the press critically reporting? Who are these people? The ones who were there throwing bombs and throwing weapons on the police.

MCWHORTER: Glenn, you're misunderstanding.

LOURY: I'm sorry.

MCWHORTER: (inaudible) realize that those looters are responding to the racist society that they live in. They

are not to be faulted. The general idea for people who are reporting from Ferguson is that yes, the looters are bad apples, it's regrettable what they're doing, but you too might be a looter if you went to a lousy school, if the police terrorized your community, if you felt like you were less than a man. That's the idea. So we're not supposed to talk about the looters. They're just static and we have to understand that, and you and I certainly should understand as black men who live with racism 24/7, that there are times when this racism will make you act out even against your own self. You'll act out against your own body. You are a house divided against itself. I mean this is the understanding. And so surely you know that people consider those looters to be understandable. They're fed up. And I mean you saw all of that being said about Watts back in the mid '60s. People get fed up. So obviously we're not supposed to have a conversation about them because what they're doing is understandable and I don't think that we could budge any of the people we're talking about in looking at the looters as anything but understandable [static?]. You say that we need to have a conversation, and I'm being rather sarcastic, you're saying we need to have a conversation about those people and that

they should be castigated for taking advantage of the situation and stealing and shooting police and etc.?

LOURY: Here's what I'm saying. I'm saying in the same way that somebody goes into a fundraiser with their phone recorder on and comes out with video and audio about how whatever politician of whatever political orientation has said something behind closed doors that wasn't fit for public consumption, we should know a lot more than we know about who those people were because some reporters should have embedded themselves or otherwise got close to the people who were perpetrating these acts and caught them explaining where they came from, what their rationale was, what their motivation was, what their energy was. OK? Because it was not in the main -- I'm talking about the people who crash windows, who burn people's property to the ground, who looted and stole, who fired on police officers. It was not free speech. That was not expressing discontent with the manner of governance. That was, you know, thuggery. That was to some degree organized violence under cover of civil rights protests. And what I'm saying is it would be easy to know a lot more about it than what we know. And matter of fact, I'll bet people do know a lot more about it than they reported. I'll bet they're censoring themselves in what they report.

MCWHORTER: Of course.

LOURY: But I'm saying --

MCWHORTER: Of course they do.

LOURY: I'm saying that this complicity in the perpetuation of an obviously thin and self-serving narrative doesn't fool anybody.

MCWHORTER: Self-serving.

LOURY: So that the individuals who are going to vote Republican in Missouri and in Arkansas and in Louisiana and in a lot of other places besides, and who are deeply critical of the president who's unpopular in these regions and of its administration, the people at Fox News who are criticizing the attorney general for the way in which he's handled this matter and so on and so forth, will only be reconfirmed to the extent that there's this drumbeat behind, like I say, something that's an obviously inadequate account of the events that transpired there.

MCWHORTER: Yeah, it comes down if you were a white reporter in Ferguson ultimately what you were committed to doing was showing that you understand the operations of institutional racism, that you get it, that you're not a racist and that you're enlightened. As such the last thing that you're going to want to share with the world is what's going on in the mind of the looters. To you those people are not the

real story. If you are a black reporter in Ferguson you are thinking of it as a crucial opportunity to show the United States that institutional racism is why black people have problems and that our problems are not our fault and not ones that we can be expected to solve. And so of course the last thing that you're interested in, the last thing you want to share, is what's actually going on up close with one of the people whose actions is not exactly commensurate with that analysis of black people as beyond blame. And I must admit, and I don't like to blame people, but the narrative here is one that basically says that to be a black American is to be beyond judgment and to be not responsible for your fate, to a degree that I think is new in human history. It's a very sophisticated analysis that we have no control, that we have no agency, that circumstances are such that it's always the responsibility of the powers that be to fix what's going on with us. I feel condescended by it and it's why I have a hard time really jumping into it with both feet. It's why I'm, quote, unquote, controversial. I feel minimized by that analysis that nothing is something that we can control ourselves. It makes me feel small. And I'm just stuck there. How about you?

LOURY: That's an interesting way of putting it and you personalize it so.

MCWHORTER: It is personal.

LOURY: Yeah. The depriving of agency, including moral agency -- OK, I'm not going to judge you or your community or your compatriots as I might others. Imagine a similarly lawless reaction from the pro-life community, OK? They can get thousands, maybe even tens of thousands, to turn out. Suppose they started firing on police? The gun-huggers, the right to arms person, suppose they started throwing Molotov cocktails? So the deprivation of moral agency because you're not willing to make a judgment, you know? And the sense that you're helpless, that you're a victim, that you're -- of course, I've ranted against this all of my life. I mean I think it's death in terms of an existential integrity, a kind of a -- you know. So yeah, please, I'm a human being here, don't presume that I'm incapable of making judgments or of growth or of being held responsible --

MCWHORTER: Or doing wrong.

LOURY: And so on. Now I want to say something here because all of this is against a backdrop of a young man who was shot to death under circumstances that are at least suggestive of the fact that the police behaved with

excessive force in the circumstance. We don't know exactly what happened, but certainly whatever Michael Brown may have done or did he didn't, as it were, deserve to be left laying with a big hole in the top of his head bleeding to death with his body there for hours on the streets of Ferguson, Missouri. So there is an event here that one has to not lose sight of as we go off to talk about these larger things. Don't know where I wanted to go with that exactly, John.

MCWHORTER: Oh, I thought you just dropped out.

LOURY: No, I'm here.

MCWHORTER: OK. No, it's a very, it's been a very depressing issue. I have really, I have had a very strong response to Ferguson because it really does suggest that we're not really getting where we would like to go. But Michael Brown is interesting because really he symbolized a lot of what the problem is. And you're not supposed to go where I'm about to go, but I'm going to because I think that it's probably on everybody's mind and it matters in all this. Obviously he didn't deserve to die, he didn't deserve to get hurt, he was really an ordinary person going about his life. But the fact is that it had nothing to do with whether or not he deserved to be hurt or deserved to be detained by somebody who didn't know about it, but that kid

had just committed theft before that happened in what was apparently a very casual way. That didn't mean he deserved to die, but that fact did happen. And there's more. He and his friend are walking down the middle of a street and a cop comes up and says, "Get onto the sidewalk." Now, even if Darren Wilson didn't say that politely, and I'll bet he didn't, why didn't they just get on the sidewalk? I mean one thing that seems likely to have happened is that Darren Wilson said, "Stop walking in the middle of the street and blocking traffic that might come through here" and they said no. Now, what happened after that is tragic and disgusting, but still why didn't they get on the sidewalk? And so it seems to me that it's that basic position that a Michael Brown has, that there's the stealing the cigarettes, there is that the cop says get on the sidewalk and you don't. He seems to have felt like he was not a legitimate member of his society. He already had that engrained. And the question is why? What can we do to fix that so he wouldn't have stolen cigarettes, so that the cop can go through and say, "Please walk on the sidewalk" and probably doesn't say it in a mean way, and they just get on the sidewalk? What leads to these things? That's what depresses me, you know what I mean?

LOURY: I do know what you mean.

MCWHORTER: I'm not blaming Michael. Michael Brown didn't deserve to die, but those things need to be talked about.

LOURY: I don't know that we yet know exactly what happened, although the narrative that you just gave is consistent with the stories that I've been hearing, at least about the original encounter between --

MCWHORTER: All sides.

LOURY: Exactly, both sides, about the original encounter based on him asking them to come out of the street. And I'm reminded of a piece I read in the *Washington Post* a couple of -- maybe three weeks ago, by a police officer, former New York City police officer, who said basically if you don't want to have trouble with the cops would you please just do what we ask you to do when we stop you for a traffic violation or whatever it might be. Our job is hard enough as it is, how long is it for you to comply for 90 seconds, which is about how much of your time I'm going to need in order to do my job, this kind of thing. And another angle on this is, so people like the attorney general, even the president of the United States has gestured in this direction, and I've used this trope as well, here I am a professor or a graduate of Harvard Law School or the chief law enforcement officer of the United States of America or the president of the United States,

and even I have had the experience of the bad encounter. You know, cops gave me a citation for riding my bicycle on the sidewalk when I lived for a year in Harlem when I was visiting at Columbia University, and I'm still telling the story about how the cops (inaudible). But the point that you just made is right. I'm not likely to get shot in the top of my head by a police officer who's asking me to step to the curb because I'm likely to actually step to the curb. What am I saying? I'm saying I don't think -- and this is a little dicey because you don't want to seem to suggest that anybody brought on themselves the tragic events that befell Michael Brown just by being difficult with a police officer -- but this idea that all black people are subject to this generic risk of violation by the police is clearly false. I mean it's false partly for the reason that Sheryll Cashin -- you know this book about place and race?

MCWHORTER: I know her and her work pretty well.

LOURY: Yeah, I mean she's saying place. So north Philadelphia? The west side of Chicago? South central LA? I mean places where stuff is happening and where certain kind of actors are operating? These are very particular places. Policing these places, OK, it's a challenge and stuff that happens there -- not justifying the bad stuff that happens, not justifying it -- can't be just expected

to happen anywhere and everywhere because different places will elicit different responses from reasonable people, including police officers, to circumstances that they see because the generic nature of the implications of certain behaviors, certain situations, will be quite different in, if you will, safe places than they will in, if you will, risky places. So there's that. Class matters. Education matters. Comportment matters. The way in which you express -- yes, sir, officer, no, not a problem, officer, whatever -- matters. The ability to elicit the affect necessary to put this person with tremendous power over you at ease is a real asset and it's one that's possessed by a great number of black people, including the Attorney General of the United States and me. So for people like us to walk around because we have black skin or because we may have grown up on the south side of Chicago as I did, and I had my encounters with police, and telling somebody who's actually living in a war zone where the police have to contend with awful stuff and where, by the way, most of the collateral damage is engendered by criminals who are preying on other residents of those communities, to compare my experience to that and to say it's a generic thing that befalls me by my race is just to willfully ignore the

structure of the social situation that's at hand, in my humble opinion.

MCWHORTER: You know, talking about the social structure, one thing that I think we do need to get in here is that the cops can be really mean. I mean part of this, my whole take on this is just we need to keep the cops away from these Michael Browns. These people should not interact as often as they do. Not only because of maybe a young man's, often, tendency to resist, maybe to show off for his friends sometimes, but because a lot of that comes from the fact that the cops can be real assholes. Here in Jersey City where I live when we had all the snow last year I remember thinking about this when we've got two feet of snow and the streets are blocked and I'm driving through a street where they have a policeman blocking -- blocking! Directing traffic. And it wasn't quite clear what he wanted the cars to do. And he's white, he's probably about 55 and yeah, he's the genuine article, you can imagine this person. He's played by Danny Aiello circa 1990. And I'm going by and I'm not going fast enough for him and he looks into my window with this rage, with this almost recreational rage, and indicates that I should move the fuck on. And all I was doing was driving a little too slowly. And I thought to myself OK, that happened to me

and now I'm going to go off and teach a class at Columbia and I make a certain amount of money, imagine how that guy probably treats teenaged black boys. I don't even have to wonder. I would bet money on the fact that that man that says "nigger" in private, he does not like the blacks. He was a disgusting person and frankly, I've encountered that guy often in Jersey City and in New York. And so if Michael Brown doesn't want to get on the pavement it's probably because he's sick of that guy, and I'm not sure we can change that guy's attitude. We can teach him some things but, you know, put him in a class about profiling, that man isn't going to learn anything and nor is his son. I want that man to get away from black men and that's why I think about the war on drugs so much, because I see that as the only real solution. People are only so fixable. So there's that part too. I want to make sure that we don't look like we're letting the cops off the hook.

LOURY: You're doing a good job of (overlapping dialogue; inaudible).

MCWHORTER: Which is not what you're doing.

LOURY: Yeah, you're doing a good job of it. I've encountered my own share of asshole cops over the years and they do exist, there's no doubt about it. And indeed, you invite a certain kind of inquiry with your observation. In the same

way that you might stereotype and profile a minority community in a high crime urban district thinking that certain types are likely to be bad actors and deserve scrutiny you too might stereotype certain police forces. Jersey City is a particular place and it has a history. Who are these people? How did they get their jobs? What's the brotherhood of the fraternal order up to when they get to their lodge and they kick back after a few beers? Who are they?

MCWHORTER: Exactly.

LOURY: Are they veterans from military service? Are they ethnic Irish and Slavs and whatnot who are second or third generation inheritors of (overlapping dialogue; inaudible).

MCWHORTER: -- it's that.

LOURY: Is it a generational thing where 30 years ago the city's demographics looked one way, as in Ferguson, Missouri, and now it looks another and yet you have a remnant in the constabulary and other public services? Is it political patronage that, you know, etc.? Who are these people? I mean how much education do they have, how do they respond to the psychologists' tests of aggression and whatever? They've self-selected into a certain line of work? You know, are they the type who when they get a badge and a gun because, I don't know what, they were

bullied when they were in high school or they were the bully when they were in high school, whatever it might be, I mean we could do a profile. We could try to get a sense of it. And it seems to me one answer is the answer that you suggest, less contact between the police and communities where that kind of policeman might act in ways that elicit reactions that then pyramid into something that turns bad.

MCWHORTER: Exactly.

LOURY: And ending the war on drugs, which I'm certainly for ending, would be a big step in that direction, although you know there is crime and there are questions of public order and we're going to need police, especially in Jersey City. So having made that caveat, but sure, less contact. But also you say you can't train them out of it, well, I don't know. If you can do background checks of somebody who's applying to be a stock boy and find out that he served two years upstate for armed robbery and you don't want to hire him, how come I can't do background checks on someone who's applying to be a policeman and find out that he used the N word vociferously in the high school locker room and I don't want to hire him, not in Jersey City? I mean you know, in other words vetting, training -- I don't know that you can train racism out of people, but certainly you can

train them that the nature of their job requires, should they wish to avoid getting into trouble, certain protocols of behavior and respo-- you can train them to think of the people they encounter on the streets as their clients, not their subjects. I mean that can be a philosophy that can animate a police department and that presumably can penetrate with the proper leadership into the behavior of a bureaucracy. I mean I'm not an expert on police training, but it seems to me that there is a lot of room, once one recognizes the nature of the problem, for improvement here. But I commend you for putting your thumb on this thing about who are these people. Now we're not talking about who are these people, the black kids with the hoodies who are slinking around in the shadow of the urban environment, we're talking about the ones with the badges and the guns. Who are they?

MCWHORTER:       Where do they come from and what can we do about them?

LOURY:       What baggage do they bring on average, you know, etc.?

MCWHORTER:       Glenn, I think we've hit the point that is ideal for these discussions.

LOURY:       OK.

MCWHORTER: It's been depressing. Ferguson has been a very depressing story for me because it's so much like the story from Sanford, Florida that we just talked about last year.

LOURY: You know, that guy was acquitted.

MCWHORTER: Yes.

LOURY: That guy, George Zimmerman, in Sanford, Florida was acquitted. He walked. And there is a chance that this guy is going to be acquitted as well. We don't know, but he might end up walking.

MCWHORTER: And George Zimmerman, we hear something about him every few months. It's clear that he's a bit of a nut job. It becomes ever clearer that whatever went on between those two people in Sanford, Florida, it was his fault. He was the problem and he most certainly lied about what happened. And now here we are and he's free and he's going to stay free. And probably Darren Wilson, there will be some sort of explanation as to what he did and no one will ever know completely what happened. So we're stuck. I'm anticipating that next summer something like this will happen again and all the same statements will be made. And I'm hoping that there's something more we can do than watch Al Sharpton being indignant. That clearly is not fixing the situation. And here we are.

LOURY: Then don't tune in to MSNBC at 6:00 pm on the east coast.

MCWHORTER: What?

LOURY: If you don't want to see Al Sharpton being indignant do not tune in to MSNBC at 6:00 pm on the east coast. That's what I said.

MCWHORTER: Oh, Jesus.

LOURY: He is becoming a fixture in the pantheon of progressive struggle and I think it says an awful lot about the exhaustion of one of the great historic moral crusades in American history.

MCWHORTER: Exhausted. It's become performance and he's a great performer and that really does minimize us that the idea is that a performance is somehow civil rights advocacy. But ultimately what we need to fix is that -- most people wouldn't put it in this way, but a fundamental element of modern black American identity. This is one thing that renders one authentically black, and it's key, is an animus towards the police. And as I said, a lot of that is something that the police bring on themselves, but part of being black is that feeling about the police. I discovered that when I realized I was un-PC 20 years ago, that one thing I had not quite internalized, because of my privileged upbringing, was this animus towards the police.

And we've got to fix that. We need to have a generation grow up where part of your identity as a black person is not feeling like the cops hate you. Because it doesn't create anything good on any level, whether you're educated or not. We've got to fix it. And I'm afraid we're not going to and that's why Ferguson is such a depressing thing.

LOURY: You got the last word, John. Good summary. Thanks a lot. Catch you next time.

MCWHORTER: Glenn, have a good Labor Day and I'll talk to you soon.

END OF AUDIO FILE