

Hamilton College

## Hamilton Digital Commons

---

Student Scholarship

Works by Type

---

5-17-2021

### Racial Injustice and the Black Lives Matter Movement

Owen Anastas '22

*Hamilton College*

Jade Levitin '23

*Hamilton College*

Lena Schneck '23

*Hamilton College*

Hannah Terao '23

*Hamilton College*

Kelcie Zarle '22

*Hamilton College*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.hamilton.edu/student\\_scholarship](https://digitalcommons.hamilton.edu/student_scholarship)

---

#### Citation Information

Anastas, Owen '22; Levitin, Jade '23; Schneck, Lena '23; Terao, Hannah '23; and Zarle, Kelcie '22, "Racial Injustice and the Black Lives Matter Movement" (2021). Hamilton Digital Commons.

[https://digitalcommons.hamilton.edu/student\\_scholarship/28](https://digitalcommons.hamilton.edu/student_scholarship/28)

This work is made available by Hamilton College for educational and research purposes under a [Creative Commons BY-NC-ND 4.0 license](#). For more information, visit <http://digitalcommons.hamilton.edu/about.html> or contact [digitalcommons@hamilton.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@hamilton.edu).

**Group Witness Project: Racial Injustice and the Black Lives Matter Movement**

Owen Anastas, Jade Levitin, Lena Schneck, Hannah Terao, and Kelcie Zarle

May 17, 2021

Lit. 218 – Literatures of Witness

Professor Larson

Group #3

### **Introduction:**

The history of racial injustice in the United States toward the black community is a long one, beginning in 1619 when British colonists brought a group of approximately twenty enslaved Africans to Jamestown, Virginia (LaVeist 83). For almost the next two hundred and fifty years, slavery flourished as an economic institution, especially in the deep South. Even after President Abraham Lincoln abolished slavery and won the American Civil War in 1865, racism toward black individuals continued to remain ingrained in the social fabric of the United States in both the north and the south. “Jim Crow” laws created a system of supposedly ‘separate but equal’ treatment for whites and people of color, and would govern race relations in the United States for another hundred years, until the Civil Rights Movement (CRM) began its fight to deconstruct racial segregation in the 1950s.

However, our project focuses on the current form of racism in the United States and the social justice movement that opposes it. Black Lives Matter (BLM) is an organization founded by Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi in 2013, in response to the acquittal of George Zimmerman in his trial for the murder of Trayvon Martin, a young black man. BLM’s self-proclaimed mission is to “eradicate white supremacy and build local power to intervene in violence inflicted on Black communities by the state and vigilantes” (“About - Black Lives Matter”). The movement is best known for the protests and street demonstrations that have erupted in the wake of numerous murders of Black individuals, particularly those killed by police or while in the custody of the police. The most significant of these to date are protests over the death of George Floyd while in police custody on May 25, 2020, in the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic (“Say Their Names List 2021”). Floyd’s death provided a catalyst for a widespread call for racial equality, representing the discontent that has simmered among people of color for centuries.

While overt, explicit racism may be less common today than it was a century ago, the development of society through slavery and Jim Crow laws has normalized contemporary microaggressions in the place of more obviously racist actions and remarks. Tori DeAngelis writes that Derald Wing Sue, psychologist at Columbia University, breaks down microaggressions into three different types: microassaults, microinsults, and microinvalidations. Microassaults are “conscious and intentional actions or slurs,” which Sue writes can be anything from displaying derogatory symbols to serving a white person before a black person at a restaurant. Microinsults are subtle verbal and nonverbal communications that outwardly convey rudeness; Sue writes that an example of this is an employee who asks a colleague of color how they got their job, implying that there must be a personal connection or a quota system. Finally, microinvalidations are “communications that subtly exclude, negate, or nullify the thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality of a person of color.” Sue writes that an example of a microinvalidation is an Asian-American being asked where they were born (DeAngelis). Sue focuses on the latter two because they are more subtle and thus more difficult to define and identify. Buchanan cites a 2003 study conducted by Marianne Bertrand in which two identical resumes were sent to companies, with the only difference being the name: one version was given a traditionally black name, like Jamal, and the other had a traditionally white name, like Brendan. According to the study, resumes under Brendan’s name were 50% more likely to receive a first round interview than were those with Jamal’s name. The article also cites a study conducted by Steele in which black respondents who were primed with stereotypes about black peoples’ inferior test scores and intelligence levels performed significantly worse than others. The first study demonstrates the manifestations of microaggressions in the hiring process, as two identical candidates were perceived quite differently based on the hiring officer’s perception of

their skin color. The second study illustrates that the systematic reinforcement of these stereotypes makes it more difficult for black people to succeed. The pervasiveness of microaggressions in everyday interactions caused many to spread awareness about the systematic racism that plagues the United States and ultimately motivated support for the Black Lives Matter Movement.

In many ways, the Black Lives Matter protests echo those of the American Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 60s. Both movements have utilized the tactic of nonviolent marches and street demonstrations, in accordance with the legacies of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Mahatma Gandhi. Testimonies from BLM protesters emphasize this idea of peaceful protest by placing a sense of community and unity at the center of their narratives. One protester describes “the sheer joy of seeing racial and ethnic unity in the metro-Detroit community,” even as a non-Black person of color (Ray). Similarly, another protester describes a group of Native Americans performing at a BLM protest, remarking that, “It was beautiful seeing people of many backgrounds coming together” (Abdo). Although the BLM movement centers around prejudice toward the Black community specifically, its mission of fighting racial injustice draws a variety of members. This diversity is one of the primary differences between BLM and the earlier CRM, which was headed by a handful of Black men such as Dr. King and Bayard Rustin. BLM, on the other hand, was founded by black women, two of whom identify as queer (Morris). Furthermore, the BLM website makes a point to include these identity groups in its mission statement: “We affirm the lives of Black queer and trans folks, disabled folks, undocumented folks, folks with records, women, and all Black lives along the gender spectrum” (“About - Black Lives Matter”). Although this diversity appears to be a departure from the CRM, it can also be interpreted as a continuation of that same activism. The CRM initiated a wave of social protest movements in the

1960s, which included among others advocates of second-wave feminism and LGBTQ+ rights. Given this context, it seems only natural that this modern form of protest against racial injustice grew from the intersectionality of a myriad of different identity groups.

Both the emphasis on nonviolence and the diversity of BLM contribute to the movement's growth and popularity. In a study of the public perception of social protest movements, Ruud Wouters found that "demonstrations that succeed in mobilizing a more diverse crowd that behaves in a worthy manner and acts in unison elicited more supportive reactions." For the purposes of this study, Wouters defines worthiness as adherence "to the norm about the (non-)use of violence by citizens in democracies" (Wouters 420). He argues that this peaceful method of protest reflects well on the movement because it reflects a widely held image of a model American citizen, who respects the law and therefore does not engage in violence but is also conscious of social and political issues, such as institutionalized racism. According to Wouters, a diverse community of protesters can further enhance this positive reputation because it allows the general public to identify with individual protesters who may share similar characteristics such as ethnicity, gender, and age. The recent success of, and media attention to, BLM reflects this research; as of early June 2020, 67% of American adults expressed their support for BLM in a survey done by the PEW Research Center (Parker, Horowitz, and Anderson). Due to its diversity and nonviolent tactics, the BLM movement has grown into a formidable force, and continues to be so.

Scholars acknowledge that Black Lives Matter has attracted a fundamentally different segment of the population than have other civil rights movements in recent history. The size and scope of the movement are demonstrative of its profound impact and reach on the American people. Four reputable poll sources - namely The Kaiser Family Foundation, Civis Analytics,

N.O.R.C., and Pew - conducted surveys to attempt to grasp the degree of involvement across the country. According to a New York Times article, these studies yielded participation rates of respondents from 6 to 10%, which translates to an implied protesting population of anywhere from 15 to 26 million people. Even if we assume that the actual figure is on the lower end of the spectrum, this would make Black Lives Matter the largest movement in the history of the United States. In an article from Harvard Kennedy School, professor Erica Chenoweth writes that “if a movement can mobilize 3.5% of the population to participate,” then it becomes much more likely that “larger proportions of the population” will “sympathize with and support the movement.” She adds to this, writing that “no government has withstood a challenge of 3.5% of their population mobilized against it during a peak event” (Chenoweth). The proportion of the country that was mobilized by this movement greatly exceeds this threshold, which demonstrates the profound potential ramifications that Black Lives Matter could have on American society. According to Douglas McAdam, professor at Stanford University, it appears that “these protests are achieving what very few do,” which is to set in motion “a period of significant, sustained, and widespread social, political change.” He writes that we are on the brink of a “social tipping point,” (Buchanan) which underscores his understanding of the massive potential for social change that could result from the degree of involvement in the Black Lives Matter movement.

However, one aspect of modern protest that the CRM had no influence on is the use of social media. Social media posts have become essential in spreading news of racial injustice to a wide demographic of people on both a national and global scale. In July of 2013, the eventual founders of the BLM organization used the hashtag “#Blacklivesmatter ” was used for the first time. The hashtag’s creation responds directly to the shooting of Trayvon Martin, and by August 2014 the hashtag had been used upwards of 50,000 times (Freelon et al., 9). After Michael

Brown's murder in 2014, the hashtag was used 1.7 million times and in the wake of George Floyd's death in 2020, the hashtag was used nearly 50 million times on Twitter alone (JHTL, 2020). These numbers reflect the growing impact and importance that social media has had for the BLM movement over the years. They also reflect the increase in involvement as more and more people have joined in using the hashtag to raise awareness, show solidarity and share personal stories.

Today, smartphone cameras allow every bystander to become a witness to everyday instances of racial injustice and have played a role in the courtroom by providing video evidence of police brutality, as in the trial of Derek Chauvin and his assault of George Floyd. However, effects of video footage of police brutality can be both positive and negative. On one hand, they provide concrete evidence of the crime and allow perpetrators like Derek Chauvin to be brought to justice, and the pervasive nature of social media allows people to organize protests on a national and international level. On the other hand, viewing these videos can be psychologically and physically damaging to POC, inflicting a "unique harm on viewers, particularly African Americans, who see themselves and those they love in these fatal encounters..." which, according to research, may result in "eating and sleeping disorders, high blood pressure, and heart problems" (Gregory). These videos provide concrete evidence of racial injustice and police brutality, forcing viewers to bear witness to these traumatic events or to reflect on their own personal experiences with racism.

Much like the prevalence of footage documenting racial injustice, the BLM protests themselves have met with both positive and negative responses. On a positive note, the movement has grown into a wide network of thirty-eight different organizations in the six years since co-founder Patrisse Khan-Cullors first created the hashtag in 2013 ("6 Years Strong").



Protests have erupted all over the world that embrace the ideology and the name of the Black Lives Matter movement. Unfortunately, the protests have also engendered a sense of fear and insecurity among those whom the protests challenge, such as conservative white politicians who benefit from silencing Black voices. In the wake of the 2020 protests over the death of George Floyd, Republicans across the United States have introduced new legislation targeting protesters, aimed at “creating vague and ill-defined new crimes, or increasing penalties on already illegal conduct” (Gabbat). Many of these laws work around the Constitution’s protection of peaceful demonstrations by heightening the criminal penalty for blocking traffic. Another common theme among the proposed new legislation is penalizing protestors by preventing them from holding public office or running in an election. Conservative legislators justify these laws by arguing that protests have a tendency to turn violent, even though protesters have a vested interest in maintaining the peace, as shown by the Wouters article. In fact, one of our witness testimonies, “A First Person Account of a Black Lives Matter Protest in Minneapolis” describes how one particular protest became disrupted by police, who used violent tactics against the peaceful demonstrators. Another testimony, from the “Say Their Names List,” describes how James Scurlock, a 22-year-old black man, was shot during a BLM protest in Omaha, Nebraska, adding to the list of people killed in the pursuit of racial equality.

Understanding the psychology, causes, and conditions of the Black Lives Matter movement illuminates the connections between systematic racism and the complexity and mindset behind the movement. The murder of George Floyd not only acted as a catalyst for the BLM movement but also unveiled the deep psychological consequences of slavery and centuries of racial discrimination. In explaining the aftermath of America’s deep-rooted racism, what researcher Joy DeGruy calls Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome (PTSS), he describes “the

consequences of multigenerational oppression from centuries of chattel slavery and institutionalized racism, and [the current need] to identify the resulting adaptive survival behaviours” (DeGruy). Thus, Floyd and the unjust death of many other black individuals by white officers serve as a larger psychological experience for the racial oppression that many have felt for centuries. The BLM movement is extremely complex and complicated as it serves as a platform for the expression of past and present psychological trauma, resulting in a range of protest movements, goals, and effectiveness.

The BLM movement serves as an extremely complex and complicated platform for the expression of past and present psychological trauma, resulting in a range of protest movements, goals, and effectiveness. As NPR's social science correspondent, Shankar Vedantam puts it, “the psychology of how protests are perceived means that protest movements often have to choose between visibility and effectiveness” (Vedantam). The following testimonies bear witness to both the long history of racial injustice in the United States that has recently erupted into the BLM movement, as well as the joy of coming together as a community to fight for equality.

### **Conclusion:**

Historically, bearing witness has allowed individuals like Holocaust survivors, ex-slaves, and incarcerated individuals to communicate and spread awareness of the experiences they both witnessed and endured. Bearing witness offers individuals a means by which they can directly address a reader or an audience of people and make them aware of a larger societal issue at hand. In more recent times, with the continuation and rise of racial injustice, bearing witness has contributed to the success of the BLM movement. For both POC and non-POC people, sharing eye-witness testimonies gives individuals a voice and allows them to share their stories and spread awareness on a local, national and global scale. From filming off a smartphone camera, to testifying to a first-hand account of police brutality, to sharing how it felt to attend a BLM protest, individuals have been able to contribute to the BLM movement in more ways than one. Social media has also provided people a voice from the comfort of their own homes. The use of various social media platforms and hashtags provides people around the world with the opportunity to become involved and spread information and awareness. Without the spread of witness testimonies on social media, the BLM movement would not have grown into the force it is today.

The digitization of the movement is partly advanced by the incredible amount of youth activists. Elizabeth Alexander, reflecting on her evolving perception of the BLM movement, named Gen Z “The Trayvon Generation” due to the effects of youth watching and participating in this movement from its inception. She explains that the constant onslaught of images of violence and trauma forced upon both Black adults and children,

“formed their world view. These stories helped instruct young African-Americans about their embodiment and their vulnerability. The stories were primers in fear and futility. The stories were the ground soil of their rage. These stories instructed them that anti-black hatred and violence were never far” (Alexander).

Generation Z has had more exposure to this prejudice and hostility growing up due to social media's rampant accessibility. Black youth specifically are seeing hate crimes occurring not just around their local communities but on a national level. America's response, especially when those reactions are dismissive or racist, forces these young individuals to produce a deep racial consciousness. Rachel Godsil and Brianna Goodale examine the role that America has played in the development of racial identity for young individuals, writing, "Because dominant American values largely emerged from a flawed ideology of assumed superiority and inferiority of human worth, these deeply held mythologies continue to serve as barriers to cooperative and collective action on behalf of vulnerable children and the future viability of our nation" (Godsil, Goodale 11). The BLM movement directly challenges lifetimes of discrimination and resentment; young people of color are finding themselves standing up and joining the fight because they understand their intrinsic connection to it. From leading protests to becoming witnesses to acts of police brutality, these roles within the movement have no age limit or sign-up sheet. Darnella Frazier, a seventeen-year-old girl, took an eight-minute video on her phone recording the death of George Floyd (Alexander). Thrust into the violence of simply not being white unveils the macro- and micro-aggressive racialized actions occurring all over America. This movement aims at shedding light on the circumstances of being black in this nation, and the horrific acts that have occurred in the shadows over hundreds of years.

The history of the BLM movement and the associated lasting impacts of slavery can especially be seen in America's incarceration system. Much of what the Black Lives Matter movement seeks to address lies within America's incarceration system as it

thrives on the villainization and oppression of Black individuals and minority groups. Narratives that directly address the BLM movement, found from the American Prison Writing Association, as well as larger texts including Shaka Senghor's *Writing My Wrongs* and Maria Taylor's story as described in *Inside This Place, Not of It*, illuminate the interdependence between the movement and the effects of incarceration. T.T. Thomas, a currently incarcerated individual, describes how the BLM movement seeks to address how "...the entire population of African Americans is perceived by the broader society (1) as a potential threat and (2) as unworthy of being listened to when we protest through legal, institutional, or other means" (Thomas, APWA). Similarly, Jack Hays, an inmate in an Iowa detention facility, notes how "It is easy to villainize people who are incarcerated for various crimes whether they are innocent or not" (Hays, APWA). This societal perception that villainizes Black individuals perpetuates violence and racial inequality in prison systems. Shaka Senghor experiences this oppression from white officers as before he attacks an officer, he "...thought of all the Black men [he] had read about, the ones who had been dragged from their beds in the middle of the night kicking and screaming, their cries silenced by the thick rope that was wrapped tightly around their necks" (Senghor, 180). Thus, the cycle and connection between racial discrimination, incarceration, and violence can be illustrated through the intentions of the BLM movement and testimonies from incarcerated individuals.

The narratives from APWA and Shaka Senghor emphasize an overarching issue that the BLM movement aims to address: the need for underrepresented and oppressed communities to recognize their rights to create systematic change. The narratives and readings in class reflect each other, emphasizing the cycle of oppression and violence against the Black community and

providing concrete examples of what the BLM movement aims to address. What Jack Hays emphasizes in his short essay and what much of the BLM movement focuses on is the need for citizens, whether incarcerated or not, to recognize their rights to enact political and social change. Hays notes how “Part of the problem for prisoners and the average citizens to stand up for their rights is that they don't even know what they are in the first place” (Hays, APWA). On a similar note, Maria Taylor reflects on her incarceration experience as after countless instances of sexual, verbal, and psychological abuse by peers and officers, she recognizes how “When you’re a prisoner in that environment, you don’t feel like you have the power to say no. Your life, your every move, is controlled by these people...At the beginning of my prison term, I didn’t feel like I was a human being. I didn’t feel like I had any rights” (Taylor, 66). While not directly connected to the BLM movement, the overall idea of the inability to recognize fundamental human and legal rights is an omnipresent issue within incarceration facilities and within the movement.

When reading witness literature, it is easy to fall into the trap of comparing the degree of suffering of one group to that of another in an attempt to determine which issue is the most urgent to address. However, the testimony of BLM protesters demonstrates the need for unity among activists by emphasizing the idea of community among members of the movement. Whether black, white, a person of a different color, or some combination thereof, each of the protesters from whom we have read testimony reiterated the same emphasis on banding together as one movement under the collective banner of Black Lives Matter.

This theme of intersectionality is common to many genres of witness literature, but it stands out especially within slave narratives. In *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Harriet Jacobs describes how her race and gender increased her suffering at the hands of Dr. Flint, and

how these experiences shaped her reaction when she gave birth to a girl. When she gives birth to her daughter, Jacobs laments that “Slavery is terrible for men; but it is far more terrible for women. Superadded to the burden common to all, they have wrongs, and sufferings, and mortifications peculiarly their own” (Jacobs 86). This quotation reflects not only Jacobs’ identity as an enslaved Black person but also her identity as a woman and a mother. Similarly, one of the protesters in the Minneapolis protest described by Ziyne Abdo decided to attend the demonstration after she “[heard] Floyd say “mama” as one of his last words. ‘He called me,’ she said in tears. To her as a Black woman, with Black children, a Black person calling out to their mom called for any Black mother. In Floyd she saw her own kids” (Abdo). Like Jacobs, this protester’s identity as a woman and mother combined with her race to tie her inextricably to the suffering of others. The prevalence of intersectional interests within witness testimonies reminds us as readers of the innumerable different perspectives of those who participate in these events. It brings their unique identities to the fore so that what was once a faceless mass of people becomes a meeting of individual human beings, each with their own story to tell.

The testimonies in this collection also reflect the themes of racial inequality that have come to light in recent times, as well as in the past. COVID-19 transformed the BLM movement in ways that were completely unexpected. Racial injustice didn’t follow a lockdown order or safety guidelines. After the events of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Elijah McClain, Ahmaud Arbery, and countless others who died due to police brutality during the past year of the pandemic, countless Americans showed up and protested in spite of the threats to their physical health. As Sheryl Gay Stolberg explains, “Black Americans are bearing the brunt of three crises — police violence, crushing unemployment and the deadliest infectious disease threat in a

century” (Stolberg). George Floyd himself had survived COVID yet died in police custody. Dara Lurie reflects on contracting COVID at a BLM congregation,

“[Being in the hospital gave] me nothing but time to reflect on this illness and the place where I most likely contracted [COVID]. I can’t stop thinking about the glaringly obvious metaphor – it was in a space of Black folks gathering, yet again, to reaffirm that Black Lives Do Matter, where we were repeating the words of Eric Garner and George Floyd, ‘I can’t breathe,’” where I began to have trouble drawing breath.” (Lurie)

The lens of survival goes further than just a physical illness; the movement forces people to confront the truth of racism in the United States. Seven out of ten Americans in June during the height of the protests had conversations about racial equality (Parker, Horowitz, and Anderson). Police violence and the pandemic both have caused massive amounts of harm and damage to Black Americans; that result is palpable to not just Black communities but to the larger public as well. Dara Lurie discusses the similarities of COVID and the experiences of racism by explaining how that feeling of being trapped by forces outside of one’s own and forced to act in ways one normally wouldn’t mirror the experience of Black Americans (Lurie). For her, the pandemic is a method to describe to the nation how African Americans must tailor their lives to the whims of white individuals and oppression in the name of safety. With so much of America at a standstill due to quarantines and safety guidelines, the BLM movement really captured the focus of the media and of everyday individuals. Daniel Q. Gillion, a professor at the University of Pennsylvania, stated that “With being home and not being able to do as much, that might be amplifying something that is already sort of critical, something that’s already a powerful catalyst, and that is the video” (Buchanan, Bui, and Patel). The George Floyd video and the accompanying BLM protests finally placed pressure on the system of racial inequality by forcing the public eye on issues of racism and police brutality. As racial hostility still proceeded in its many forms—police violence and the disproportionate impact of COVID on Black communities—



many companies, organizations, and everyday Americans pledged to address inequity in their personal lives and communities (Buchanan, Bui, and Patel). This widespread unity among a diverse population formed a key aspect of the success of the BLM movement.

Much of the success of the BLM movement can be attributed to the fact that so many people of different backgrounds have had the opportunity to participate and bear witness to racial injustice in America. As seen throughout this course in Holocaust survivor testimony, slave narrative, and work written by incarcerated individuals, witness testimony is humanizing in nature as it gives people a voice. Bearing witness allows individuals to share their personal stories with both national and global audiences. This allows people around the world to come together and form this sense of unity and community that makes the movement just that much more powerful. Social media has allowed people to directly share their stories in the form of videos and media from the comfort of their own home. Whether people participate physically in protests or digitally from their phones and computers, the movement will continue to share stories, spread awareness and work to put an end to the racial injustice that continues to exist in America. It is up to all of us to continue to bear witness and come together to participate in a movement that has grown so incredibly over the years.

## Witness Testimonies

**Section 1: The Act of Protesting:** The following accounts document the experience of participating in a BLM protest, including the author's reasons for attending the event, their emotional reactions to it, and their interactions with fellow protesters. Another one of these testimonies bears witness to the death of James Scurlock, who was killed during a BLM protest.

**Abdo, Ziyne. "A First-Person Account of a Black Lives Matter Protest in Minneapolis Turned Violent by Police." *The Issue*, 17 July 2020,**  
<https://www.insideedition.com/a-first-person-account-of-a-black-lives-matter-protest-in-minneapolis-turned-violent-by-police>.

I decided to go to a protest on May 30. Personally, I had to, for myself, for Black people. The killing of George Floyd earlier that week churned my gut in a different type of way. I live in Brooklyn Park, a city just outside of Minneapolis. On May 25, I was in Minneapolis, testing out my new camera, completely unaware until the end of the day that on the other side of the city, a Black man was pleading for air under the knee of a white cop.

I had been anticipating the start of my internship with Inside Edition Digital. The thought of bringing my camera to the protest crossed my mind, but I chose not to. Though I study journalism, film and TV production, I did not want to go as an observer, but as a participant.

It was scheduled for 2 p.m. I packed my backpack with water bottles and snacks to prepare for the day. A friend of mine and her sister picked me up and we headed toward W 31st Street and Nicollet Avenue. We parked a few blocks away from the intersection. My parents and I agreed to meet each other there. This was an event we felt we had to be at; it hit close to home.

There were easily thousands of people in that intersection that Saturday. The mood was optimistic. Everyone circled around a woman standing against the fence who was speaking into a megaphone. From where I was standing, it was hard to make out what she was saying, but people clapped and cheered.

People tried to stay as far from each other as they could. Everyone seemed to be patient with each other. When someone wanted to pass through people, others would make way for them without second thought. Anyone who was bumped into let the other know that there was nothing to worry about.

Then suddenly the crowd started to part. I didn't know why until I saw bright and colorful headdresses. A group of Indigenous people wearing their traditional clothing formed a circle at the center of the intersection. The crowd made space for them. We were encouraged to sit on the ground and we did. One person from the group placed a drum in the center of the new circle and he started playing it. The Indigenous man who seemed to be leading the group called out commands and they started to dance. I felt appreciative that a community who have had to face centuries-long violence against their people and whose land was stolen took the time to

stand in solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement. It was beautiful seeing people of many backgrounds coming together.

Everyone in the crowd started to cheer. The Indigenous people in the center moved to the rhythm of the drum and the bells on their ankles followed along. In between what seemed to be dances, the lead would pause and belt out, “say is name!” “George Floyd!” the crowd would respond. After about 30 minutes, they finished their cultural display, receiving applause and cheers as the rest of the crowd stood up. It was then when I realized how hard the sun was beating down on us.

A young Black woman walked into the center of the circle and encouraged the crowd to again cheer for our Native brothers and sisters. She then announced we would have a moment of silence. Everyone fell down onto one knee, bowed their heads down and held their fists up. It was so quiet all that could be heard was birds chirping and sirens coming from a distance. I personally had never experienced something like that before, a group that large all collectively thinking, grieving about the same thing. This, surprisingly, was one of the most emotionally weighing parts of the day for me. I prayed, which I don’t normally do. I prayed for the safety of everyone around me, for the people who looked like me and for change to happen without the cost of death.

Eventually we all stood back up and speakers started to take turns with the microphone. People took turns with the microphone to tell their own stories of police brutality and racial injustices against them. The crowd listened to them All of them. A Black woman who seemed to be in her 50s cried into the microphone. She said she was tired of seeing Black people in pain and that we have suffered for too long. The crowd patiently waited for her to finish her sentences.

A Black man also took the microphone. He reminded us that police were stationed on top of the fifth precinct on the other side of the intersection. “We’re showing love; we want every single one of [the police] to know this ain’t the way it goes,” he said. “We want [the police] to know this ain’t never gonna be okay.”

To my right was a group of people holding a large painting of Floyd with the words “no going back,” “change starts now” and “justice for George” on it.

The painting of Floyd made its way from the center of the crowd toward the front. One man took it upon himself to climb to the top of a traffic light to hand the painting over it. Some closed their eyes, fearful for any fatal accidents but crowded under the light, ready to catch him at any second. A white man climbed up the light to hold onto the first to increase safety. Everyone intently watched with anxiety growing as he further and further away from the base of the traffic light. Eventually it was up and cheers erupted.

Instead of climbing back down, the man hung from the top bar of the traffic light with his arms looking at the people under him, and he let go. He was safely caught and as he walked through the crowd, everyone patted his back in support.

More people spoke. A Sudanese woman who was working at the medic tent behind the crowd told us about how she risked her life to arrive in the United States to see that Black people

were treated unfairly. What moved her to come to the protest was hearing Floyd say “mama” as one of his last words. “He called me,” she said in tears. To her as a Black woman, with Black children, a Black person calling out to their mom called for any Black mother. In Floyd she saw her own kids.

This moved me to tears, seeing her in pain— seeing a Black woman in pain. Listening to her speak created some sort of pull in my chest that wanted me to go up to her. I was in close proximity to her experience in a way that was different from the other speakers. She was a Black woman living in the United States. She fled war from an African country, the same way my parents did when they fled Ethiopia as Oromo people to escape ethnic cleansing. She was a mother, a title I may hold one day and hope to hold until my own passing.

We were encouraged to remain peaceful, even when the 8 p.m. curfew hits to show the world that it is the police who started the violence, not the protesters. People from various media outlets were encouraged to station in the front, to get the message out on TV screens across the country.

People were passing around food and water for anyone to take, we were all taking care of each other, especially since the heat felt like it wasn’t going away.

We kept getting updates about what was going on in the city. This road was closed, that road was closed, all of the major highways were closed. A Black woman took the mic and told everyone to sit down and stay seated for the rest of the night. We were reminded to stay calm and as long as we were all there collectively, we were going to be safe.

Before 8 p.m., everyone got an alert on their phones about the city’s curfew. I got a phone call from my mother who was at the protest earlier but went home. She was watching the live feed from a local news channel telling me that she could see police marching down a street from the aerial view.

I could tell she was trying to hide her worry. She did not tell me to leave, but to be safe. I knew she was proud of me for protesting, for defying the stupid curfew, for being out with a group of people committed to protect each other. She continued to call me with updates about how close the police were getting and I continued to tell her that everyone was still there. I could hear my dad behind my mom during one of the calls saying that if anything happened—which I took to mean, if we were to be arrested— to me or my friends, they would be ready to pick us up. I felt appreciative of my parents then. Of course they were nervous— their daughter was in the position of potential harm— but they knew that it was for a cause that needed to be addressed.

The clock struck eight, and nothing happened. Some people in the crowd started to stand to look down the street but they were met with people telling them to sit down. 8:05 p.m. hit and nothing happened. 8:10 p.m. hit and nothing happened. The crowd started to hush and brace themselves. We could hear what was coming— the police— but we stayed put.

The feeling of fear did not come over me. The police marched closer and closer and I did not want to move. We heard what sounded like a gunshot go off in the area of the police, and some people started to leave, but a majority of the demonstrators there continued to sit. I found

myself surprisingly calm. After the phone calls I was getting from my mother, I knew what was coming and I wasn't planning on leaving.

But suddenly, the sound of guns going off raged and did not stop. The police kept marching without stopping. If we wanted to avoid injury, we had to run. The crowd got up and made a run for it. As people got up, the police threw tear gas at us.

Every few feet there was someone on the ground crying because they couldn't see. I had glasses on so my eyes hardly stung, but my chest felt tight. A friend I was with said her eyes burned and all I had was water, so I poured it on her face. I looked at the intersection that was once so peaceful now turned into a war zone and I was angry. I was angry that after an entire day of sharing stories and showing love for one another, the police came, and without pause, tore the community into shreds. There was a part of me that thought maybe if the police saw we were sitting and remaining peaceful, they wouldn't attack us. But, I was completely wrong. They were being ruthless.

Someone was holding a megaphone and in the midst of the gas and shooting, he announced to the world, anyone who could possibly be listening, "look what they are doing to us."

We ran down W 31st Street and police cars blocked off the street, afraid of getting arrested. We turned onto a street that seemed to be quiet. As we walked down a sidewalk, a man came out of his out and offered a jug of water with baking soda in it which supposedly helps eye irritation after tear gas. Luckily it worked.

My friends and I got back to our car, but we wanted to go back, so we did. After each block we looked around for police cars before advancing onto the next. We got to one block and were met with trucks one after the other, carrying the National Guard troops and we watched.

After they passed we went onto the next block and we heard sirens. We looked behind us to see about seven police cars driving down the street and we ran into an apartment building to hide.

We waited for the coast clear until we made it back to the car. We drove home because it wasn't safe to stay. The car ride was silent as we tried to figure out how to get home with major highways being closed. I kept re-imagining the police marching towards us and people running. I wish we didn't have to run away and could instead stand our ground and continue to build on the energy we were putting out into the world.

When I got home, I called one of my close friends to tell her what happened. As I explained how the day went, it became harder and harder to speak without my voice quivering. I started to cry, though it was not out of fear. It was out of hatred. I felt a hatred for the police in a way I never had before. I kept thinking "we didn't do anything to them but they fired at us like our lives meant nothing to them."

The impact of that night did not hit until two days later, the day my internship with Inside Edition Digital started. My eyes welled with tears every half hour of the morning. I couldn't focus during my orientation and was afraid to speak because I didn't want anyone to hear the sound of my voice shaking.

But over the next few weeks later, the effects of that trauma subdued. The event did not prevent me from going to protests. For me, personally, going to protests and community events is an important way to be part of the Black Lives Matter movement. I liked the feeling of community empowerment.

On June 4, I went to Floyd's memorial with my mom. The space where a Black man died turned into a space where Black people could live in whatever way helped them process that grief. Flowers were laid on the street. I walked by people with a mix of emotions.

A young Black woman stood at the center of an intersection crying, saying "This shouldn't be here." There was a tent set up where a Black man was giving free haircuts. People played basketball. A couch was placed outside for people to sit and spend the day. Without police, people supported each other by passing out masks and hand sanitizer, having a designated medic station and setting up booths to display art and pass out free food.

I am committing my work as a journalist to write stories centering Black people and Black life, all Black stories, not just the traumatic ones. I came into this internship thinking that and will now hold onto that commitment even tighter.

**Ray, Aakash. "Protesting Racism: A First Person Perspective." *The Michigan Daily*, 9 June 2020, <https://www.michigandaily.com/mic/protesting-racism-first-person-perspective/>.**

With the Black Lives Matter movement gaining momentum in the last couple weeks, it has become routine to wake up to social media feeds brimming with infographics on "the history of racism in America," "defunding the police" and other ways to support the cause. We scroll away on our phones, reading relevant articles and casually sharing sensational stories of police brutality as regularly as we once broadcasted our weekends at the lake. What was once the outcry from primarily Black Americans has transformed into a nationwide pursuit for systematic racial justice. Yet, as with any movement, I predict media attention will subside, people will stop posting and other news will take greater precedence.

The backdrop of "quarantine life" present within our daily lives, has left people with the easy excuse to digress from in-person activism. Reading experiences from behind a screen and having conversations within the comfort of our homes is far less engaging than hearing the voices of those in pain amplified in person. I decided to attend a protest in Detroit this past weekend to empathize, to grieve and to fight alongside Black Americans.

As a non-Black POC, I have always shied away from discussing anti-Blackness within my own South Asian community. As an individual with few Black friends, it has been difficult for me to confront the racial prejudices within my own social circles and feel confident that I was being the best ally that I could be. Trying to overcome this doubt, I felt a pit in my stomach as I traveled to Detroit knowing this will be the first time I face this discomfort in-person.

Arriving at Eastern Market, I felt the thick heat in the air as I positioned my mask. I felt a bit disoriented and lost at first not knowing where to begin. I was met with hundreds of other individuals ready to march down to the riverfront, carrying all types of signs, from "Black Lives

Matter” posters to ones donned with the names of dozens of Black Americans who died at the hands of police brutality. One sign in particular relayed the words of human rights activist Malcolm X who said, “I don’t see an American dream; I see an American nightmare.”

As the words circled in my head, I was overcome with deep sadness. Why is it that thousands needed to gather together to prove ending racism isn’t controversial? Why must it take outcries from across the world for the systems in power to pay attention? Is there any American dream at all for marginalized communities in this nation?

With these thoughts lingering in my mind, we slowly began to march. Initially, we walked in silence and spread out far apart from others; however, as time went on, we began to draw closer together. With this cohesion came synchronization, and the once muffled chanting became strong and melodic.

“No justice” was quickly followed by a powerful punch, “no peace.”

“Hands up!” “Don’t shoot”

“Say their names?” “Which one?”

The sun was beating down and I could feel my voice being strained from chanting through my mask for hours. Sweat had begun to drip down the side of my face along with tears, racing towards the sides of my mouth where I could taste a faint saltiness. The efforts were largely led by Black Americans whose voices echoed the pain and injustice of the past 400 years — reminding myself and other protestors to continue pushing through the heat and fatigue. Alongside the pathway, volunteers of all ages, including young boys and girls, hung “BLM” signs off the side of their coolers as they lugged them along, offering water bottles, snacks and popsicles to aid the protestors on their march down to the river.

Protesting can be both physically grueling and emotionally taxing. I experienced the sheer joy of seeing racial and ethnic unity in the metro-Detroit community. I realized addressing my discomfort was a meaningful and necessary part of the process. But, I also experienced anger and confusion — at our broken down institutions, at the systems which continue to perpetuate inequality and division and at the merciless deaths of so many Black Americans across the country – and Black civilians across the world. Towards the end of the protest, I felt a mix of empowerment, feeling pride in being part of a collective movement for justice, and defeat, knowing one protest would not be enough to bring the necessary change.

Even though it is hard to see the collective impact of protests, what I recognized was these demonstrations are truly making systematic, legislative change, especially in the state of Michigan. Gov. Gretchen Whitmer has expressed her approval for a stream of policy plans for police reform. She has requested that the Michigan Commission of Law Enforcement Standards provide guidance to law enforcement agencies on issues facing the community such as diversity and implicit bias training. The Michigan Senate adopted Senate Bill 945, requiring all incoming law enforcement officers to go through training on implicit bias, de-escalation techniques and mental health screenings. In accordance, the Michigan State Police has created an Equity and Inclusion Officer position and implemented recurring implicit bias training for all enforcement members.

As a result of the BLM movement, state representatives are starting to reevaluate and take steps forward in the right direction. So, stay enraged. Keep protesting. Continue fighting for the next revolution.

**O., Anna. “Justice for James Scurlock, killed by Omaha racist during George Floyd protest.” *Change.org*, 31 May 2020, <https://www.change.org/p/demand-justice-for-james-scurlock-killed-by-omaha-racist-during-george-floyd-protest?redirect=false>.**

Last night, there was a peaceful protest in Omaha, NE, against the police murder of George Floyd. A known racist bar owner, Jake Gardner began using racial slurs, and inciting the protesters. When he was pushed by a young protester, James Scurlock, he shot and killed Scurlock. There is a widely-spread video of Scurlock’s murder and many witnesses.

Gardner was taken into police custody for HIS protection. His supporters set up a Go Fund Me (now taken down), that updated that he had been released, even as the Omaha Police Chief stated during a televised press conference on May 31st that Gardner was still held in custody. He never used Jake Gardner’s name. Omaha media is not reporting the details of this murder or the murderer’s name.

Assistant U.S. Attorney Frederick Franklin, Governor Pete Ricketts: please do everything in your power to raise awareness and prosecute Jake Gardner to the fullest extent of the law. We demand justice for James Scurlock. The world is watching.

Selected comments from supporters of the petition:

“The same thing is happening again, and it should not be. This is wrong. I am signing because I am hoping for change. Justice needs to be served.” -Neydra Lelotar

“BLACK LIVES MATTER.” -Aada T.

“I’m signing because innocent black men should not be failed so indefinitely by a corrupt system.” -Asatta Easterling

**Shah, Dhruvi, et al. “George Floyd Death: The Man Who Sheltered 80 US Protesters.” *BBC News*, uploaded by BBC News, 3 June 2020, [www.bbc.com/news/av/world-us-canada-52896871](http://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-us-canada-52896871).**

Rahul Dubey (Indian-American healthcare entrepreneur who opened the doors of his home to over 70 strangers when Police started closing in on BLM protesters in Washington DC):

I was here. I heard screaming, I heard beating, people getting their heads slammed down on the ground and they were running for their lives so you opened the door. They were kind of pinned in on the street and I’ve been here for a while so I noticed the crowd was starting to come in a little bit heavier. They had nowhere to go. It happened really fast, I flung open the door. The people that were on the steps ran in and then just all these people just started running in and they were coughing and tripping and their eyes were burning. They were yelling as they were falling on the steps. We were grabbing them by the t-shirt and saying, ‘get in the house! Get in the house! [...] It’s my house, it’s my community’s house and you can stay here as long as you need



to because they will not let you leave. Overnight, yeah, every square inch of this place had a person or body in it and they were all strangers. That was amazing. They didn't know each other. It wasn't a group of people. From age to race to ethnicity to sexual orientation. It was amazing. It was America. It just gave me a lot of hope. And we got everybody home.

**Simonetti, Isabella. "Why These First-Time Black Lives Matter Protesters Showed Up."**

***Vox*, 2 July 2020, [www.vox.com/first-person/2020/7/2/21306987/black-lives-matter-protests-george-floyd-protesters-first-time](https://www.vox.com/first-person/2020/7/2/21306987/black-lives-matter-protests-george-floyd-protesters-first-time).**

Gina (White Mother):

With everything happening, we felt that it was important to help them understand the importance of speaking up for others and to model what peaceful action looks like [...] After we told them what happened, we discussed how we felt that it's important to speak up for people who don't have a voice or don't feel like they're being heard [...] It was surreal. It was emotional for me to hear stories of others, to have my children participate in something that is a moment in history, to teach them what it means to have a voice, and to hear others who haven't been heard for so long [...] Basically, realizing it's not enough just to be not racist, to find ways to be anti-racist, and to educate myself on some of these other issues moving forward. (Gina, 2020)

Stephen (White Male from Conservative Family)

I know they do not agree at all with my views, so they would probably be pretty disappointed to know that I'm trying to be out there and supportive [...] [I protested with my] chest was tight [and my] eyes were burning with tears [...] Honestly, I've never really experienced anything like that [...] I didn't expect just, like, the surge of emotion and adrenaline and anger [...] This time feels so different and like such a tipping point in our nation [...] I know that the Black and brown communities across our country are not new to this, and this is not a new struggle for them or a new awareness for them, but I think this time is different because of the more involvement from the white communities.

**Bethea, Charles. "A Witness to Terrorism in Charlottesville." *The New Yorker*.**

***The New Yorker*, 13 Aug. 2017. Web. 10 May 2021.**

**<https://www.newyorker.com/news/as-told-to/a-witness-to-terrorism-in-charlottesville>**

"I'd known about this alt-right rally—I hate using that word, because it makes it sound like something good—for at least a month. I was vacillating between fear of violence and the importance of standing up against this hatred as a white person. By not going out there, I'd be basically saying, 'Everything is fine.'

\*\*\*

"I was prepared, in my mind, for tear gas and pepper spray. And possible conflict with the police. I was also scared of, like, 'O.K., could I get stabbed by the white supremacists? Could I

get shot?’ We all knew—through reading alt-right posts online—that they were bringing their guns. Virginia is an open-carry state, and they can walk around with their assault rifles. I was worried about getting beat up and having my teeth knocked out.”

\*\*\*

“I was about ten feet away when the car came. I had joined a group marching from the Downtown Mall—a group of anti-fascists and Black Lives Matter folks—and we were silently marching by Friendship Court, a low-income-housing area where many minorities live. We’d heard that the fascists had already gone there and tried to cause problems. So we marched by, in silence. We didn’t want to make a scene. We just wanted to be in solidarity with the people there. Then we saw a bunch of other counter-protesters coming down Second Street. Another diverse group. We all were cheering together, marching together, clapping and chanting. There was no one else around. No standoff. We were just marching, being peaceful. This was around two o’clock, I guess. It was a very exuberant feeling of solidarity, community, all that.”

**Section 2: Witness Testimonies on Personal Impact:** The following testimonies talk about the personal perspectives of individuals as they encounter racial injustice. Some testimonies discuss COVID-specific perspectives, while others simply reflect on their lives and experiences.

**Lurie, Dara. “We Can’t Breathe: COVID During the Black Lives Pandemic.” *TMI Project*, 2020, <https://www.tmiproject.org/daralurie/#>.**

I walk up to the reception desk at Albany Medical and say, “I have COVID.” I do not say, “I think I have COVID,” because at this point I am certain. I don’t need a test to tell me what’s going on.

Earlier that evening my heart rate spiked to 122, 138 then 148; my temperature shot up to 104. I don’t really think the ER can help me but I need a witness, other than my husband, Lee, to what’s happening to me. Maybe I’m hoping they will magically restore my weakened will to survive.

They send me to a quarantine room and the waiting begins. After the first hour, a deep chill sets in. This room with its refrigerated air feels like a slow death. I can feel my fever going back up. It takes two blankets for my body to stop shaking. I stand up and do my breathing exercises as I’ve been doing these past ten days.

\*\*\*\*\*

I had spent most of quarantine sheltering-in-place as suggested, but two weeks prior to my trip to Albany Medical, on the Sunday after George Floyd’s murder, I attended a Black Lives Matter Congregation in Poughkeepsie, NY. I was invited by the event organizers to facilitate one of the breakout circles that explored the question, “What would change for you if Black Lives Mattered?”

We created a wide spacious circle but were still not the recommended six feet apart. During my active facilitation, I removed my mask and put it back on when listening. Later that week, I attended a large rally across the Hudson River in Kingston, NY. Everyone wore masks

but social distancing was impossible. On Saturday, driving through an unfamiliar part of Columbia County, I stopped and asked a woman for directions. She came ridiculously close to me and began speaking. I turned my face away but did not move away. I wish I had.

The following Sunday, I woke with a high fever and knew I was in trouble. I texted Isa Coffey, an herbalist, friend, and partner in a COVID wellness initiative we'd been working on together, to get resources into the black and brown communities in and around Hudson and Kingston areas. I wasn't anticipating being a recipient of these services. Isa responded immediately, meeting Lee with a kit containing important elements such as a thermometer, an oximeter to measure the levels of oxygen in my blood, and herbal tinctures to support my breathing and heart health.

I had no idea, no precedent in my life, for the frightening journey I was about to embark on, through the strange terrain of a COVID infection. Unlike many of the illnesses we are accustomed to, COVID does not progress in a linear fashion. One day the temperature and oxygen levels are good and you believe you are getting better. The next day there are strange pains pulsing through your body and your fever goes up while the oxygen in your body declines. Because COVID has the ability to access 90% of our cells, it is a highly flexible entity – one that can evade our frontline attempts to put it down. Before this day when my will to survive seemed to be slipping through my fingers, I thought I had been improving.

\*\*\*\*\*

Now, in this frigid hospital room, I breathe and raise my arms, just as I learned to do in Aunt Peggy's ballet class when I was four and five, opening the space in my chest, releasing the oxygen I no longer need. Hold and open. Hold and open. Hold and open a little more, until something releases, places in my lungs that were starting to close down, go to sleep, gradually numbing off into death. My breath says, "NO! Wake up. I won't have this!"

By the third and fourth hours of waiting, I'm exhausted and then desperate. They won't give me any Tylenol for my rising fever. Fortunately, I've brought my own water.

I wait five hours to finally be admitted into the inner sanctum of the hospital where a nurse administers an IV to hydrate me. I lie on an examining table plugged into a large monitor that I'm unaware of until it suddenly begins beeping. I turn to see the red display showing my oxygen levels dropping to 86 then 79, far below the acceptable level of 95. I watch my heart rate spike again. Lee tells me to calm down and I breathe willing myself into calm. The numbers stabilize and the beeping stops.

Waiting and more waiting. Giving me nothing but time to reflect on this illness and the place where I most likely contracted it. I can't stop thinking about the glaringly obvious metaphor — it was in a space of Black folks gathering, yet again, to reaffirm that Black Lives Do Matter, where we were repeating the words of Eric Garner and George Floyd, "I can't breathe," where I began to have trouble drawing breath.

I tally the ways in which white supremacy, a set of cultural and legal controls gradually put in place over the course of this country's history, reminds me of the COVID infection, which is now the most pressing threat to my well-being.

COVID and white supremacy are both stealthy and cruel diseases. COVID doesn't just mess with your respiratory system; it attacks your heart, brain, and other organs. White supremacy enters our bodies carrying a diseased set of subconscious beliefs and unless you are acutely aware of what you are truly feeling and thinking, you will never notice its presence as it silently infiltrates your heart and mind.

COVID is new to me but I've been long aware that I carry the disease of white supremacy in my body. I know because I have been paying close attention. So many liberal and progressive white people bristle at the idea they might be racist. They say, "I don't have a racist bone in my body," or "I'm the least racist person in the world." For so many years, I too lacked the language and concepts to help me understand what I was experiencing but that did not inoculate me from the disease.

Many years ago, walking up the street in my old Upper West Side neighborhood I passed two teenage Black girls from the projects. For some reason, on this particular day, I caught a soundtrack that had probably played out unnoticed hundreds of times in the past. I heard myself thinking, "These girls in their big earrings, tight jeans, popping gum as they talk, are going to grow up to be baby-mothers on welfare and never make anything of their lives." I was horrified by the level of racism and self-betrayal implicit in this judgment. I was disgusted with what I heard myself thinking but there it was; my own unadorned racism and I had to deal with it.

It's taken me years to understand the mechanics of how I became so alienated from my own identity. There are so many stories along this path and I see how they stretch all the way back to my Jamaican great-grandparents, and grandparents passed on to me by my American-born mother.

I see the long path of those first ancestors emerging from the slave ship into a new world fraught with new rules and signifiers that needed to be grasped, and quickly because survival depended on it.

My great-grandmother, Isabel Turner, was an acknowledged daughter of an Irish plantation owner and his 'mulatto mistress'. This was an important marker. I can see how, already from the slave ships of the late 18th century to the mid-1900s, my family line was progressing steadily along a path that would erase as much of its African origins as possible. I see myself at a crossroads on this path, in the late 20th century, when, as my aunt once said, "If you were to have children with a white man, those children would be seen as white."

\*\*\*\*\*

Eight hours of waiting in these freezing hospital rooms and I finally have to stand up. I can't deal with being prone and plugged in any longer. I work my way around the IV tube and monitor line attached to my finger and stand by the examining table. The nurse comes in.

"I want to go home," I say.

"I'm so sorry," the nurse says as she detaches the IV drip. "I can't do anything."

Outside, in another room a man, large by the sound of his voice, is bellowing, "I'm in pain! I'm in pain!" He sounds angry. I've tried to stay away from anger because it drains my

energy and sets my heart rate into an uneasy pattern. Despite my best efforts, I have felt the roiling in my blood, my own impulse to shout, “I’m in pain. I’m furious. Fuck this shit.”

I have been carrying this impulse for most of my life — sometimes venting it, but mostly suppressing it — understanding that an angry Black woman is perceived as a threat. I understood the price of the white privilege extended to me was my silence, or at best, a voice muted in academic tones of reason when speaking about my experience. It meant never shouting, “I’m in pain!”

Now, I feel a wave of petulant anger emerging. I want others, the doctors and nurses to feel my discomfort. One part of my brain understands they are working hard but another part says, “Fuck it. I’ve been here for 8 hours and need to go home. I need you to care about me!”

I recognize my voice of white privilege; a voice formed early from the belief that the world should/would/must care about me. I have moved through my life alternately expecting and demanding that the world care about me. Unlike so many Black people in this country, I have not lived a life where my daily survival is a question. Until contracting COVID, and having to turn my entire focus to survival, I have not known a life where, “I can’t breathe,” is my truth. It has been a frightening and strange new reality for me.

I have been fortunate. People, society, and circumstance have extended much grace to me throughout my life. I felt that grace walking out of the ER, 12 hours after checking in, at six in the morning, with Lee by my side, steadfast and loving. As we walked down the hospital ramp to find our car, I felt we were walking away from the scene of a battle. Gazing at the sunrise, I felt gratitude knowing that I would have a chance to heal.

\*\*\*\*\*

It is impossible for me to imagine the lives of Black people who have lived with the daily struggle to breathe easy whether because of daily microaggressions or outright violence experienced in white spaces, systemic oppression, harsh working conditions, fear, anxiety, high blood pressure, PTSD and so many conditions common to the Black experience in this country. I cannot imagine these lives but I now have a real corollary: like the disproportionate number of other Black people experiencing COVID, I understand what it means to struggle to breathe, to feel my entire body overtaken by an invisible force that desires only to crush my will.

COVID. White supremacy. They both attack the hearts, minds and bodies of all whom they enter.

On the day that my fever spiked to 104, Isa said to me “I truly believe that this virus carries fear into the body.” A little while later, as I immersed myself in the soothing bath she recommended, I felt the essence of my fear emerge from behind the heat and confusion of my fever. I understood what my body had been feeling. The presence of an invasive intelligence that, having gained entry, was now attempting to rewrite the very language in which my body functioned.

As I named this fear to myself, I felt a burst of coherence, a simple determination that would carry me through the next 12 hrs in the ER and beyond to the following days where my body would begin the slow process of healing.

There is great power in the naming of a thing. In myth, fairytales, and fantasy these words, incantations or codes hold the key to truths that have been intentionally hidden, truths that are needed for the survival of a people, sometimes their very planet.

We are at the convergence of many crossroads now, a place where magic words need to be spoken by each one of us. We must be willing to listen with deep honesty to the words we've been speaking to ourselves all along and acknowledge the fears and judgments we hold against ourselves and others. We must be willing to stand, as I did many years ago on the Upper West Side, in astonishment and shame, and resolve to do better. And, we must learn to care for ourselves in the process because, like COVID, white supremacy is a shape-shifting disease that has worked its way into the deepest recesses of our beings.

Each one of us must become willing to name our hidden words and move forward with intention and with gratitude for this opportunity to heal.

**Alexander, Elizabeth. "The Trayvon Generation." *The New Yorker*, June 15, 2020,**

**<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/06/22/the-trayvon-generation>**

This one was shot in his grandmother's yard. This one was carrying a bag of Skittles. This one was playing with a toy gun in front of a gazebo. Black girl in bright bikini. Black boy holding cell phone. This one danced like a marionette as he was shot down in a Chicago intersection. The words, the names: Trayvon, Laquan, bikini, gazebo, loosies, Skittles, two seconds, I can't breathe, traffic stop, dashboard cam, sixteen times. His dead body lay in the street in the August heat for four hours.

He was jogging, was hunted down, cornered by a pickup truck, and shot three times. One of the men who murdered him leaned over his dead body and was heard to say, "Fucking nigger."

*I can't breathe*, again. Eight minutes and forty-six seconds of a knee and full weight on his neck. "I can't breathe" and, then, "Mama!" George Floyd cried. George Floyd cried, "Mama . . . I'm through!"

His mother had been dead for two years when George Floyd called out for her as he was being lynched. Lynching is defined as a killing committed by a mob. I call the four police officers who arrested him a mob.

\*\*\*

The kids got shot and the grownups got shot. Which is to say, the kids watched their peers shot down and their parents' generation get gunned down and beat down and terrorized as well. The agglomerating spectacle continues. Here are a few we know less well: Danny Ray Thomas. Johnnie Jermaine Rush. Nania Cain. Dejuan Hall. Atatiana Jefferson. Demetrius Bryan Hollins. Jacqueline Craig and her children. And then the iconic: Alton Sterling. Eric Garner. Sandra Bland. Walter Scott. Breonna Taylor. Philando Castile.

Sandra Bland filmed the prelude to her death. The policeman thrust a stun gun in her face and said, "I will light you *up*."

\*\*\*

I call the young people who grew up in the past twenty-five years the Trayvon Generation. They always knew these stories. These stories formed their world view. These stories helped instruct young African-Americans about their embodiment and their vulnerability. The stories were primers in fear and futility. The stories were the ground soil of their rage. These stories instructed them that anti-black hatred and violence were never far.

They watched these violations up close and on their cell phones, so many times over. They watched them in near-real time. They watched them crisscrossed and concentrated. They watched them on the school bus. They watched them under the covers at night. They watched them often outside of the presence of adults who loved them and were charged with keeping them safe in body and soul.

This is the generation of my sons, now twenty-two and twenty years old, and their friends who are also children to me, and the university students I have taught and mentored and loved. And this is also the generation of Darnella Frazier, the seventeen-year-old Minneapolis girl who came upon George Floyd's murder in progress while on an everyday run to the corner store on May 25th, filmed it on her phone, and posted it to her Facebook page at 1:46 a.m., with the caption "They killed him right in front of cup foods over south on 38th and Chicago!! No type of sympathy </3 </3 #POLICEBRUTALITY." When insideMPD.com (in an article that is no longer up) wrote, "Man Dies After Medical Incident During Police Interaction," Frazier posted at 3:10 a.m., "Medical incident??? Watch outtt they killed him and the proof is clearlyyyy there!!"

Darnella Frazier, seventeen years old, witnessing a murder in close proximity, making a record that would have worldwide impact, returned the following day to the scene of the crime. She possessed the language to say, precisely, through tears, "It's so traumatizing."

In Toni Morrison's "Sula," which is set across the bleak black stretch of Ohio after the First World War, the character Hannah plaintively asks her mother, Eva Peace, "Mamma, did you ever love us?" To paraphrase Eva Peace's reply: *Love you? Love you? I kept you alive.*

I believed I could keep my sons alive by loving them, believed in the magical powers of complete adoration and a love ethic that would permeate their lives. My love was armor when they were small. My love was armor when their father died of a heart attack when they were twelve and thirteen. "They think black men only die when they get shot," my older son said in the aftermath. My love was armor when that same year our community's block watch sent e-mails warning residents about "two black kids on bikes" and praising neighbors who had called the police on them. My love for my children said, *Move*. My love said, *Follow your sons*, when they ran into the dark streets of New York to join protesters after Eric Garner's killer was acquitted. When my sons were in high school and pictures of Philando Castile were on the front page of the *Times*, I wanted to burn all the newspapers so they would not see the gun coming in the window, the blood on Castile's T-shirt, the terror in his partner's face, and the eyes of his witnessing baby girl. But I was too late, too late generationally, because they were not looking at the newspaper; they were looking at their phones, where the image was a house of mirrors straight to Hell.

My love was both rational and fantastical. Can I protect my sons from being demonized? Can I keep them from moving free? But they must be able to move as free as wind! If I listen to their fears, will I comfort them? If I share my fears, will I frighten them? Will racism and fear disable them? If we ignore it all, will it go away? Will dealing with race fill their minds like stones and block them from thinking of a million other things? Let's be clear about what motherhood is. A being comes onto this earth and you are charged with keeping it alive. It dies if you do not tend it. It is as simple as that. No matter how intellectual and multicolored motherhood becomes as children grow older, the part that says *My purpose on earth is to keep you alive* has never totally dissipated. Magical thinking on all sides.

I want my children—all of them—to thrive, to be fully alive. How do we measure what that means? What does it mean for our young people to be “black alive and looking back at you,” as June Jordan puts it in her poem “Who Look at Me”? How to access the sources of strength that transcend this American nightmare of racism and racist violence? What does it mean to be a lucky mother, when so many of my sisters have had their children taken from them by this hatred? The painter Titus Kaphar's recent Time magazine cover portrays a black mother cradling what should be her child across the middle of her body, but the child is literally cut out of the canvas and cut out of the mother, leaving a gaping wound for an unending grief that has made a sisterhood of countless black women for generations.

My sons were both a little shy outside of our home when they were growing up. They were quiet and observant, like their father, who had come to this country as a refugee from Eritrea: African observant, immigrant observant, missing nothing. I've watched them over the years with their friends, doing dances now outmoded with names I persist in loving—Nae Nae, Hit Dem Folks—and talking about things I didn't teach them and reading books I haven't read and taking positions I don't necessarily hold, and I marvel. They are grown young men. With their friends, they talk about the pressure to succeed, to have a strong public face, to excel. They talk their big talk, they talk their hilarity, and they talk their fear. When I am with them, I truly believe the kids are all right and will save us.

But I worry about this generation of young black people and depression. I have a keen eye—what Gwendolyn Brooks called “gobbling mother-eye”—for these young people, sons and friends and students whom I love and encourage and welcome into my home, keep in touch with and check in on. How are you, how are you, how are you. How are you, baby, how are you. I am interested in the vision of television shows like “Atlanta” and “Insecure,” about which I have been asking every young person who will listen, “Don't you think they're about low-grade, undiagnosed depression and not black hipster ennui?” Why, in fact, did Earn drop out of Princeton? Why does Van get high before a drug test? Why does Issa keep blowing up her life? This season, “Insecure” deals directly with the question of young black people and mental-health issues: Molly is in and out of therapy, and we learn that Nathan, a.k.a. LyftBae, who was ghosting Issa, has been dealing with bipolar disorder. The work of the creative icon of their generation often brings me to the question: Why is Kendrick so sad? He has been frank about his depression and suicidal thoughts. It isn't just the spectre of race-based violence and death that



hangs over these young people. It's that compounded with the constant display of inequity that has most recently been laid bare in the covid-19 pandemic, with racial health disparities that are shocking even to those of us inured to our disproportionate suffering.

\*\*\*

Black creativity emerges from long lines of innovative responses to the death and violence that plague our communities. "Not a house in the country ain't packed to its rafters with some dead Negro's grief," Toni Morrison wrote in "Beloved," and I am interested in creative emergences from that ineluctable fact.

There are so many visual artists responding to this changing same: Henry Taylor, Michael Rakowitz, Ja'Tovia Gary, Carrie Mae Weems, Lauren woods, Alexandra Bell, Black Women Artists for Black Lives Matter, Steffani Jemison, Kerry James Marshall, Titus Kaphar. To pause at one work: Dread Scott's "A Man Was Lynched by Police Yesterday," which he made in the wake of the police shooting of Walter Scott, in 2015, echoes the flag reading "A man was lynched yesterday" that the N.A.A.C.P. flew outside its New York headquarters between 1920 and 1938 to mark the lynchings of black people in the United States.

I want to turn to three short films that address the Trayvon Generation with particular power: Flying Lotus's "Until the Quiet Comes" (2012); his "Never Catch Me," with Kendrick Lamar (2014); and Lamar's "Alright" (2015).

In "Until the Quiet Comes," the director, Kahlil Joseph, moves us through black Los Angeles—Watts, to be specific. In the fiction of the video, a boy stands in an empty swimming pool, pointing his finger as a gun and shooting. The bullet ricochets off the wall of the pool and he drops as it appears to hit him. The boy lies in a wide-arc'd swath of his blood, a portrait in the empty pool. He is another black boy down, another body of the traumatized community.

In an eerie twilight, we move into the densely populated Nickerson Gardens, where a young man, played by the dancer Storyboard P, lies dead. Then he rises, and begins a startling dance of resurrection, perhaps coming back to life. The community seems numb, oblivious of his rebirth. That rebirth is brief; he gets into a low-rider car, that L.A. icon. The car drives off after his final death dance, taking him from this life to the other side. His death is consecrated by his performance, a ritual that the sudden dead are not afforded. The car becomes a hearse, a space of ritual transport into the next life. But the young man is still gone.

What does it mean to be able to bring together the naturalistic and the visionary, to imagine community as capable of reanimating even its most hopeless and anesthetized members? What does it mean for a presumably murdered black body to come to life in his community in a dance idiom that is uniquely part of black culture and youth culture, all of that power channeled into a lifting?

A sibling to Joseph's work is Hiro Murai's video for Flying Lotus's "Never Catch Me." It opens at a funeral for two children, a black boy and girl, who lie heartbreak-beautiful in their open caskets. Their community grieves inconsolably in the church. The scene is one of profound mourning.

And then the children open their eyes and climb out of their caskets. They dance explosively in front of the pulpit before running down the aisle and out of the church. The mourners cannot see this resurrection, for it is a fantasia. The kids dance another dance of black L.A., the force of black bodily creativity, that expressive life source born of violence and violation that have upturned the world for generations. The resurrected babies dance with a pumping force. But the community's grief is unmitigated, because, once again, this is a dreamscape. The children spring out into the light and climb into a car—no, it is a hearse—and, smiling with the joy of mischievous escapees, drive away. Kids are not allowed to drive; kids are not allowed to die.

\*\*\*

What does it mean for a black boy to fly, to dream of flying and transcending? To imagine his vincible body all-powerful, a body that in this society is so often consumed as a money-maker and an object of perverse desire, perceived to have superhuman and thus threatening powers? In the video for Kendrick Lamar's "Alright," directed by Colin Tilley, Lamar flies through the California city streets, above sidewalks and empty lots, alongside wire fences.

"Alright" has been the anthem of many protests against racism and police violence and unjust treatment. Lamar embodies the energy and the message of the resonant phrase "black lives matter," which Patrice Cullors, Alicia Garza, and Opal Tometi catapulted into circulation when, in 2013, they founded the movement. The phrase was apt then and now. Its coinage feels both ancestral in its knowledge and prophetic in its ongoing necessity. I know now with certainty that there will never be a moment when we will not need to say it, not in my lifetime, and not in the lifetime of the Trayvon Generation.

The young black man flying in Lamar's video is joyful and defiant, rising above the streets that might claim him, his body liberated and autonomous. At the end of the video, a police officer raises a finger to the young man in the sky and mimes pulling the trigger. The wounded young man falls, slowly—another brother down—and lands. The gun was a finger; the flying young man appears safe. He does not get up. But in the final image of this dream he opens his eyes and smiles. For a moment, he has not been killed.

Black celebration is a village practice that has brought us together in protest and ecstasy around the globe and across time. Community is a mighty life force for self-care and survival. But it does not protect against murder. Dance itself will not free us. We continue to struggle against hatred and violence. I believe that this generation is more vulnerable, and more traumatized, than the last. I think of Frederick Douglass's words upon hearing slaves singing their sorrow songs in the fields. He laid waste to the nascent myth of the happy darcy: "Slaves sing most when they are most unhappy." Our dancing is our pleasure but perhaps it is also our sorrow song.

My sons love to dance. I have raised them to young adulthood. They are beautiful. They are funny. They are strong. They are fascinating. They are kind. They are joyful in friendship and

community. They are righteous and smart in their politics. They are learning. They are loving. They are mighty and alive.

I recall many sweaty summer parties with family friends where the grownups regularly acted up on the dance floor and the kids d.j.'d to see how quickly they could make their old-school parents and play-uncles and aunties holler "Aaaaayyyy! That's my jam!" They watched us with deep amusement. But they would dance, too. One of the aunties glimpsed my sons around the corner in the next room and said, "Oh, my God, they can dance! They've been holding out on us, acting all shy!"

When I told a sister-friend that my older son, during his freshman year in college, was often the one controlling the aux cord, dancing and dancing and dancing, she said, "Remember, people dance when they are joyful."

Yes, I am saying I measure my success as a mother of black boys in part by the fact that I have sons who love to dance, who dance in community, who dance till their powerful bodies sweat, who dance and laugh, who dance and shout. Who are able—in the midst of their studying and organizing, their fear, their rage, their protesting, their vulnerability, their missteps and triumphs, their knowledge that they must fight the hydra-headed monster of racism and racial violence that we were not able to cauterize—to find the joy and the power of communal self-expression.

This essay is not a celebration, nor is it an elegy.

We are no longer enslaved. Langston Hughes wrote that we must stand atop the racial mountain, "free within ourselves," and I pray that those words have meaning for our young people. But our freedom must be seized and reasserted every day.

People dance to say, *I am alive and in my body.*

*I am black alive and looking back at you.*

**Marable, Karen Good. "Remembering Sandra Bland's Death in the Place I Call Home."**

*New Yorker*, July 13, 2016, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/remembering-sandra-blands-death-in-the-place-i-call-home>

Last summer, I travelled with my infant daughter from our apartment in Brooklyn to Dixie, Georgia, to spend a month with my mother-in-law, whom I affectionately call Mama Marable. Her immaculate three-bedroom brick house sits on twenty-three acres of land, most of which she rents out to local farmers. To get to the house, you have to travel on a farm road for about a mile, past an Ag-Pro dealership that sells John Deere farm equipment, with endless rows of cotton on both sides. The nights are so dark my husband insists that, were his car to break down more than four hundred yards from the house, he would stay put until morning.

The visit was an attempt to remove myself from the distractions of the city, so that I could work on my master's thesis while also getting reliable child care. There are only two places in the world with caretakers trustworthy enough for me: my mama's house (and my childhood home), in Prairie View, Texas; and in Dixie.

In Dixie's blessed semi-solitude, Mama Marable and I found comfort and common ground in cheesy Hallmark movies, after-church dinner at Cracker Barrel, and our love of cable news. So it was that, one July morning, after putting my daughter down for a nap, I turned on the television and heard a newscaster describe a video documenting an exchange between a state trooper and a black woman in Prairie View. The woman had been arrested and was found dead in her jail cell three days later.

I stood up and put my hand on my hip, as if the gesture alone could help me understand what I was hearing. Though I have lived in many places, Prairie View, a rural college town about fifty miles northwest of Houston, is the place I've called *home* for forty-five years. I lived in the same red-brick house until I was eighteen years old, when I left for Washington, D.C., to attend Howard University, or, as I described it then, "The blackest college I can find the farthest away from home." Back then, I was ready to leave the place where I believed nothing ever happened. Now something had happened, and it was terrible.

Mama Marable joined me on the couch. Our souls were still weary from the massacre at Mother Emanuel, in Charleston, South Carolina, where nine black people in a Wednesday Bible study were killed by a young white man less than a month before. We were about to confront another incident, yet another video of another disastrous encounter between the police and a black person. So many others had come before: Eric Garner, Freddie Gray, LaQuan McDonald, Tamir Rice.

In this case, the victim's name was Sandra Bland. She was twenty-eight and a Prairie View A. & M. University alumna, who had come back to town from Chicago to start a new job at the college alumni association. On July 10th, she was pulled over by a state trooper named Brian Encinia for failing to signal a lane change. The episode was recorded on the officer's dashcam, and now it was in front of us on the TV news. As I watched the officer walk over to Bland's car, I searched the landscape: in the blurry distance was a sign for the BBQ Pit, and another for Highway 290. Bland was stopped on University Drive heading east, toward the highway, just past Hope A.M.E. Church. She wasn't even half a mile from the flagpoles at the campus entrance.

I know this road. I used to line up on this road with my family, friends, and neighbors to cheer high-stepping bands that were marching in the homecoming parade, and to catch the candy thrown by frat brothers and sorority sisters, sweethearts, kings, and queens, as they rode by on elaborate floats and festooned pickup trucks. My friends and I walked to middle school on this road, wearing matching miniskirts. On the way home, we stopped by Super Save to buy Now and Later's, Hot Stix, and Stir 'n Frost cake mix, which we'd make together if the box didn't have weevils.

On the television screen, a tense hostility simmered underneath the exchange between Encinia and Bland: "You O.K.?" Encinia asked, goading. "You seem very irritated." Bland's response only seemed to make matters worse. "I was getting out of your way, you were speeding up, tailing me, so I move over and you stop me. So, yeah, I am a little irritated. But that doesn't

stop you from giving me a ticket.” “Are you done?” Encinia asked. “You asked me a question and I told you,” Bland replied. “So now I’m done, yeah.”

The exchange should have ended there. Encinia should have written the ticket; Bland should have driven away. But no. “Would you mind putting out your cigarette, please?” The glint of an edge flashed in that “please.” Less than a second after her response—“I’m in my car; why do I need to put out my cigarette?”—came the order: “Step out of the car.”

Mama Marable was looking at the TV and shaking her head. Though we are of different generations—I’m in my forties; she is in her seventies—we are both women from the South. We know the subtleties and potential dangers in such scenarios, and Bland was decidedly in the danger zone. Still, neither of us expected the officer to open Bland’s car door and attempt to physically extract her from her vehicle. “I’m gonna drag you outta here!” he yelled, hand on taser. “I will light you up!”

His was a desperate, cartoonish act. Almost involuntarily, I thought of an episode I once saw of “South Park,” in which eight-year-old Eric Cartman is deputized by the town’s lone police officer. He rides around town on his Big Wheel, wearing mirrored aviators, stopping drivers indiscriminately. When they protest, he clubs them in the shins, yelling, “You will respect my authori-tah!”

But this wasn’t funny. “I just wish she’d calm down!” Mama M said, as if we were in a theatre watching a movie, rather than at home watching the news. I wanted her to calm down, too, but I also understood Bland’s outrage as the officer dared to put his hands on her, attempting to remove her from her car for reasons he had yet to articulate. Without regularly articulating them to myself, these duelling impulses—to calm down, to rise up—have been a part of my life for as long as I can remember.

\*\*\*

When folks ask where I’m from, I proudly let them know that my home town is Prairie View, Texas, which is ninety-four per cent black and the home of a historically black school, Prairie View A. & M. University. I want them to know who I am: a Southern girl who knows the echo of a drum beat and trumpet blare from the college band practicing on open fields, who knows how to chew sour grass and lick nectar from honeysuckle, who learned how to play Beethoven and Brahms because Mrs. Weaver up the street taught me.

That such beauty could exist in Prairie View is a kind of miracle, a sweet revenge, considering the city’s history. The area was once a fourteen-hundred-acre cotton plantation named Alta Vista, which is also the name of the subdivision where I grew up. The land was owned by a Confederate Army colonel whose wife turned the mansion into a boarding school after his death, at the end of the Civil War. Nine years later, the land was sold to the state.

When Texas was readmitted into the Union after the Civil War—and had to swear that no citizen or class of citizens would be deprived of an education—the state became eligible, under the Morrill Land Grant Act, to establish a university. In 1876, William H. Holland, a former slave who became a legislator, sponsored a bill founding the Alta Vista Agricultural and

Mechanical College of Texas for Colored Youth. A part of the Texas A. & M. University system, Prairie View is the second-oldest institution of higher learning in the state. (It is worth noting that many other former plantations are now owned by the Texas Prison System.)

In 1969, ten years after my parents moved from South Carolina to Texas, and one year before I was born, Prairie View became an incorporated town in Waller County, and our neighborhood of Alta Vista became a vibrant community of young, middle-class black families. Our neighbors were farmers and also educators, like my mathematician father, who worked on the campus, a mile up the road. To paraphrase James Baldwin, my crown had already been bought and paid for. All I had to do was wear it.

Prairie View kids attended Waller Independent School District, in Waller, Texas, five miles away. Even at school, which drew students from a wider area, there was a general sense of self-satisfaction with our diversity. We were the white Future Farmers of America, the Mexicans who listened to Selena, the goths who liked the Cure, the blacks who chanted Public Enemy's "Fight the Power." And everyone loved Michael Jackson.

Still, despite this near-utopia, I was not unaware of the racist attitudes that existed in Waller County. As kids, we were cautioned against driving down Field Store Road, because it was "Klan territory." My first white best friend—a thin girl with freckles, who had a ponytail that reached her butt—called me a "nigger" in our first big fight, in the second grade. I saw how my parents made sure that my younger brother was placed in the proper class; it was common knowledge that some schools were quick to place your black child—particularly your black male child—in special-education classes. And when my middle-school homeroom teacher suggested that I be put in regular classes instead of the advanced ones that I had merited, simply because I'd be "the only one," my mother insisted otherwise.

There were other incidents in the community—some violent and long buried, some like a million paper cuts. I remember all of it, and I was changed. As time went on, I learned about Alta Vista's plantation past, and that Waller County had been a site of double-digit lynchings and had a long history of voter suppression. I always knew that racism existed, but a veil lifted and I began to understand why my father, a church deacon, prayed on his knees for the strength to prevent a creeping hatred for the ways of white folks from overtaking his heart.

\*\*\*

Sandra Annette Bland was the fourth of five daughters, whose mother, like mine, lovingly but firmly reminded her, "I'm not here to be your friend." A music scholarship brought her from Naperville, Illinois, to Prairie View A. & M., where she played the trombone in the school's Marching Storm band. A member of the Sigma Gamma Rho sorority, she graduated, in 2009, with a degree in animal science. Bland returned to Illinois, and after taking several odd jobs found work as an administrative assistant at a food-service and equipment company.

After seeing the film "Selma," Bland was inspired to "be the change," so to speak. She decided to put her soul-searching and outspoken personality into service, by making YouTube videos of personal truth and uplift. In January, 2015, she began taping a series entitled "Sandy Speaks," often greeting her viewers, "Good morning, my kings and queens!" The videos were

plainspoken and evangelical. “God has got your back,” she said in one post. “Invest in you to invest in our future.” On her birthday, Bland told her viewers, “On this day, Carter G. Woodson established Negro History Week, which became Black History Month.” And, while she carried a sign in a Chicago mall that read, “All white people are not against us,” Bland was nevertheless clear about her intended audience: “At the moment, they’re not for everybody.”

A job prospect brought her back to Prairie View. A week before that, she and her mother, Geneva Reed-Veal, went on a road trip. The two reportedly played gospel music, healed past rifts, and bonded. Bland told her mother that she felt her true purpose in going back to Texas was “to stop all social injustice in the South.”

\*\*\*

After watching the video of Bland’s arrest, Mama Marable and I were quiet. Before long, I heard my daughter through the monitor calling “Mama-ma-ma-ma.” I turned off the television and went to pick up the baby. While my mother-in-law warmed up leftovers of baked chicken, cabbage, and Rice-A-Roni, I asked her an impossible question: “What do I do?”

She knew without asking what I was talking about: What do I do to keep my black child safe? Mama Marable has three children whom she and her husband, who was a chief master sergeant in the Air Force, brought up all over the world. She didn’t answer immediately, and when she did her tone was resigned. “I don’t know,” she said, shaking her head. “I guess ... tell her to pick her battles.”

I knew what she meant. She was speaking as a seventy-year-old woman from Quitman, Georgia, who came up picking cotton and tobacco and now owned all the farmland around her. She was advising her granddaughter not to engage. Just get home.

\*\*\*

In January, I flew back to Prairie View for my mother’s seventy-eighth birthday. The drive from the George Bush Intercontinental Airport, in Houston, to Prairie View is about an hour. I exited Highway 290 onto the road that, in September, 2015, was named Sandra Bland Parkway; it will be called this for at least the next three years. Instead of turning left into Alta Vista, however, I kept straight until I saw the memorial that is situated, as my mama might say, pieceways up the road. An altar sat just off an empty cement lot that used to be the Leon’s gas station. Next to it, a banner read “#justiceforsandrabland.” A few yards away, in an open field, was a poster: “Future site of proposed Sandra Bland Memorial Park.”

I made a U-turn and parked on the side of the road. A yellow ribbon was tied around the trunk of an oak tree. Artificial yellow flowers crowned a photograph, along with the words “In Loving Memory of Sandra Bland.” In the picture, she had a wide, toothy smile and her hair was styled in a shoulder-length bob. A colorful scarf covered her neck. At the base of the tree, white rocks were arranged in an oval; inside this were more flowers, along with the remnants of seven-day candles and an array of stuffed toys. I had no flowers, so instead I said a prayer before climbing back in the truck with my baby girl and heading home.

When I walked into my mother’s house, the local evening news was on. Officer Encinia had surrendered to police earlier that afternoon, after being charged with perjury. “He turned

himself in,” my mother said, talking on the phone to her sister. The news showed Encinia being driven into the back entrance of the county jail; a gate closed fast after him. A couple of months later, in March, he was fired.

I’d be lying if I didn’t admit that there are some Prairie View residents who feel the outcry about Bland was overblown. They point to her reported marijuana use, rumors of a mental condition, and a history of arrests as proof of her culpability. They say she should have been more cooperative during the stop. The actor and activist Jesse Williams beautifully mocked this blame-the-victim mentality in his Humanitarian Award acceptance speech at this year’s BET Awards: “She would have been alive today if she hadn’t acted so ... free.”

Baldwin once wrote, “To be a Negro in this country and to be relatively conscious, is to be in a rage almost all the time.” This is the rage I imagine Bland—who was growing in her activism—felt when Encinia reached into her car and spoke to her as if nothing had changed since the Alta Vista plantation days. In this era of Black Lives Matter, in which the deaths of black people by the police or while in police custody are at the forefront of our national consciousness, who could blame Bland for being wary of getting out of her car when Encinia refused to answer her most basic questions: *Why am I being stopped? Why do I need to put out my cigarette? Why am I being arrested?*

\*\*\*

I don’t know what happened to Sandra Bland in that jail cell, whether or not she committed suicide by hanging herself, but I do know that Bland was one of six black women found dead while in police custody within a two-week span last summer. I don’t know whether the “depression and P.T.S.D.” that Bland spoke of in one of her videos was a clinical diagnosis, but I do know that the damn-near-daily reports (and desensitizing viral images and video loops) of dead black people at the hands of the police—most recently the back-to-back deaths of Alton Sterling, in Baton Rouge, and Philando Castile, in Minnesota—are an unquestionable cause for mental anguish and a violence on the souls of black folk.

In these recent cases, what has most affected me are the children, their voices, and their weeping: Sterling’s son, Cameron, fifteen, collapsing into tears while his mother spoke at a press conference; Dae’Anna, the four-year-old daughter of Diamond Reynolds, Castile’s girlfriend, who sat in the back seat as he was shot several times, and who bravely comforted her mother, sitting handcuffed in the back of a police car, saying in her wee but firm voice, “It’s O.K. I’m right here with you.”

What do I do? The question I’ve asked the women who mother me lingers. I already know I will have to sit down and tell my daughter, as my mother told me and her mother told her, the grotesque and triumphant history of black people in America. I have to tell her that, even in all its undeniable glory, the color of her skin will, to a foolish few, render her at turns invisible, superhuman, worthless, a threat. No matter the survival skills that I teach her, a police officer might pull her over and not see her humanity.

So, yes: pick your battles. But there are times when we must engage. What happens when, at a simple traffic stop, you look annoyed, as Sandra Bland did? What happens when, at a



simple traffic stop, you inform the officer you have a permit for the gun you are carrying and reach for your license, as seems to have been the case of Philando Castile? What happens when you're eating Skittles, wearing a hoodie, selling loose cigarettes or CDs, or are a child playing with a toy gun—while black?

The question I am really asking is: What do you do when the battle picks you?

**Burke, Tarana. “Artists Stories: About Tarana.” *Colors of Change*, 10 October 2018, <https://tellblackstories.org/tarana-burke/>**

I'm three generations in the Bronx. My grandfather came from St. Kitts to the Bronx and my grandmother came from South Carolina to the Bronx – both as little children. The Bronx is part of my family's identity. I grew up in what they call the south Bronx which is really the west Bronx, around Jerome avenue. I also grew up right at the dawn of Hip-Hop becoming more mainstream. Seeing people like Slick Rick and Dougie Fresh and growing up as a teenager, Hip-Hop in the 90s was a big part of my life. Public Enemy coming out was the marriage of what I loved, which was Hip Hop, being from New York, and also social justice.

I was always moved by thinking about Hip-Hop as an organizing tool particularly Public Enemy, Poor Righteous Teachers or even Tribe in the ways they told stories and presented an alternative for Blackness. I come from a family that was very Black. I couldn't wear combinations of red, white and blue. My grandfather would pick me up on the weekends and we would drive to 125th street to Harlem Music Hut, where you could get all your mixtapes from, but they also had cassette tapes of elder scholars like John Henry Clark or Dr. Ben Joseph. And we would drive around listening to that. We were Black like that.

And when I was in the seventh grade I was in catholic school and my grandfather started telling me about how Catholics had slaves, and started giving me books to read like *Roots*, then *Before the Mayflower* and *They Came Before Columbus* in the seventh grade. I was like 'why are you trying to destroy my life and what I understand to be the way the world works.' I appreciated what he did, but I also wish it had been done differently because then I went through a period of anger. That carried me halfway through high school and then I found a way to take that feeling and make that become work.

I joined 21st Century Leadership Movement at 14. It became a way to take all this knowledge and cultural awareness and historical awareness my family gave me, and put that into action. They helped me identify and understand what injustice and justice looked like.

I remember in the 6th and 7th grade loving history and American history. I used to know the preamble to the Constitution. I was drawn to the story of America and how we came to be. Even though I knew about slavery and I knew about how we were enslaved, there was still something that was attractive about the American story until my grandfather introduced me to all these different narratives that started peeling away at that. I remember when I recited the preamble to the Constitution to him, he was appalled. That's when he gave me *They Came Before Columbus* and said 'You need to read this.' And as I was introduced to these different narratives, on my own, I started to understand the complexity of what it is to be American, and

what America was. And then the truth, and also the idea that the truth is not just the truth. The truth based on who you are and who's telling it, and how it's been told, and when it's being told, and who it's being told to. I didn't realize that Black people had our own truth of what it was to be American, and what it was to be in America.

That understanding made me confused. It made me angry trying to grapple with that. Then I was introduced to this idea that you don't just have to read about oppression, you don't just have to study and look at it and see it and be angry about it, but you can be active. You can be out here. The premise of 21st Century, the organization, was to continue the legacy of the civil rights movement, Black power movement, labor movements, in a new generation. When I was introduced to those narratives, I realized these people were my age. They were in the marches getting hosed. Once I saw that, I realized that we shape history.

Our truth has always been weaponized against us. The way to push back against these other false narratives is to weaponize it for us. It's also what I'm dealing with now around the #MeToo movement. People keep saying 'oh the white people have taken it from you, the white people are co-opting, the #MeToo movement is not for us, it's for white people.' Here's a thing that you know is true. You have a person here who founded or started doing this work. How can it also then be true that it's not for us? And so I'll continue to hold it up and say this is for us. This is true this is for us. Non Black people are going to do whatever they want to do, it doesn't matter. We stay so focused on what they're doing as opposed to what the power we have that we just give our power over. If we teach our children and teach each other to stop relinquishing our power – it is what we say it is. This is powerful because I said it's powerful and it doesn't matter what somebody else is saying.

**“George Floyd trial | New bodycam footage of Floyd's arrest | Day 3 highlights.”**

**YouTube, uploaded by WION, 1 April 2021,**

**<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qax9Q2SbQQ4>.**

Video Transcript:

George Floyd: I'm not a bad guy, man. I'm not a bad guy...Please, officer, please. I can't—I can't breathe. Ah, my wrist—my wrist, man, please.

Male onlooker: You know that's bogus right now, bro. You know that's bogus. You can't even look at me like a man because you're a punk, bro.

Floyd: Mama, I love you. Lisa, I love you. Tell my kids I love them.

Male onlooker: You going to choke him like that, bro? You should check on him. He's not responsive right now. He's not responsive right now, he's not responsive right now. Look at him, he's not responsive right now, bro.

\*\*\*

Prosecutor (at the Derek Chauvin trial): I know this is difficult. Can you just explain sort of what you're feeling?

Charles McMillian (witness at the trial): I kinda feel helpless. I don't have a mama either. My mom died June 25.

Genevieve Hansen (firefighter, witness at the trial): I offered to kind of walk them through it, or told them, if he doesn't have a pulse you need to start compressions, and that wasn't done either.

Prosecutor: And when you couldn't do that, how did that make you feel?

Hansen: Totally distressed.

Prosecutor: Were you frustrated?

Hansen: Yes.

Unnamed teen witness: I heard George Floyd saying, "I can't breathe. Please, get off of me. I can't breathe." He cried for his mom. He was in pain. It seemed like he knew...he knew it was over for him. He was terrified. He was suffering. This was a cry for help.

**Amen, Asar Imhotep. "Black Lives Have Never Mattered in the United States of America and Never Will: A 'Modern'-Day Slaves Perspective | American Prison Writing Archive at Hamilton College." *American Prison Writing Archive*, [apw.dhinitiative.org/islandora/object/apw%3A12344475?solr\\_nav%5Bid%5D=646bc39dbdc10046eaac&solr\\_nav%5Bpage%5D=0&solr\\_nav%5Boffset%5D=0](http://apw.dhinitiative.org/islandora/object/apw%3A12344475?solr_nav%5Bid%5D=646bc39dbdc10046eaac&solr_nav%5Bpage%5D=0&solr_nav%5Boffset%5D=0).**

"One of the most tragic beliefs widely shared by Blacks throughout the world is that white people need or want us or will treat us equally and share societal resources with us. Faith continues to prevail in spite of overwhelming evidence which disputes this belief. Blacks continue to ignore the irrefutable truth that, in a racist social system, all institutions will reflect, protect, and sustain values that are consistent with racism/white supremacy. This should not be considered surprising or profound since all institutions serve to perpetuate the social theory of the group which created them." —Dr. Bobby E. Wright, African-Centered Psychologist

Sometimes, different people can independently arrive at the same conclusion. I didn't start and haven't been affiliated with the Black Lives Matter Movement, but I respect their analysis of the problem and their desire to end it. Around the same time as #BLM was starting, I, like many other people, was thinking along the same lines about what the fundamental problem was behind seemingly rampant police murders of Black people. And for once, I didn't feel alone in centering the problem of what Black life means. If Black life doesn't mean anything, the USA would be a genocidal slave state in which the killing and punishment of Black people is meted out and widely considered acceptable, regardless of guilt or innocence, gender, socioeconomic status, or other factors. And that's exactly what it is.

#BLM (Black Lives Matter) is a grassroots coalition-based social movement started in the United States by Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi in the wake of several unpunished (or lightly punished) incidents of police killing unarmed Black people, including the killing of Oscar Grant and Kenneth Harding in Oakland, as well as Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner, Renisha McBride, and Michael Brown. While it consists of people with diverse viewpoints and tactics, the movement's central aim is to oppose the systematic normalization of Black people's deaths, which makes violence against Black people more likely and more acceptable. #BLM began as a social media movement, but has quickly become an on-the-ground social movement

with many different actors and organizations that aren't necessarily connected as one organization but have the same general aims.

Actions and policies of the state result in the disproportionate killing, injuring, and incarceration of Black people, but the struggle for Black life to matter is not just about opposing policing practices against Black men, boys and girls. It is also about how domestic abuse victim Marissa Alexander was not allowed to defend herself against her abusive husband under the same “stand your ground” defense in Florida law that George Zimmerman used to get exonerated in the killing of Trayvon Martin. It is also about how Black trans woman Cece McDonald was prosecuted and convicted for defending herself against a hostile and racist group of white youths in Minneapolis. It is also about how broader political practices, like the mass disenfranchisement of Florida and Ohio Black voters, the shutting down of water services to Detroit residents, and the anemic federal response to Hurricane Katrina in 2005, show a remarkable disregard for Black lives.

Because the nature of racism is not just prejudice but also the power to enforce prejudice, these problems cannot be addressed individually, by punishing or educating those who commit violence against Black people without justification. It's too big a problem. The conservative Wall Street Journal reported that in 2011 NYPD had more stops of young Black men in Manhattan than there are young Black men in Manhattan. And at least one former NYPD police officer has stepped forward to say that he was specifically ordered to stop young Black males at every opportunity. But he is just one officer, and NYPD just one department. Police officers everywhere have broad latitude to stop anyone they suspect may be involved in a crime and use that latitude to systematically target Black and Latino men and boys. The problem is deeper than any one department and its “stop-and-frisk” policies.

For one thing, it's everywhere, not just New York. One report described anti-black racism as “baked into” police practices. “The root of the problem,” says #BLM co-founder Alicia Garza, “is anti-black racism.” In other words, there is a unique, deeply ingrained, and pervasive kind of racism that American society at large feels toward Black people that goes a long way toward explaining these disparities as well as many others.

What does blackness mean to America? There are not-so-subtle hints everywhere.

Black people make up approximately 12 percent of the US population, but constitute more than 40 percent of the prison population.

White Americans use illegal drugs at rates that are comparable to, or well in excess of, the rates at which Black Americans use illegal drugs, but Black Americans are incarcerated for drug offenses 10 times more.

In 2012, a Black American was killed by police and security forces at least once every 28 hours. According to another report, “black teens were 21 times more likely to be shot dead [by police] than their white counterparts.” The problem is not just that a de facto police state is ready to descend on Black people at any time, but also, more broadly, that the entire population of African Americans is perceived by the broader society 1) as a potential threat and (2) as unworthy of being listened to when we protest through legal, institutional, or other means. This

problem must be viewed as a systemic one, not just an individual or institutional one, and it must be addressed on multiple levels, including not only institutionally or interpersonally but especially in our unconscious thought, the deeply ingrained thought processes that are reflected by our actions before we even have the opportunity to think. Before we can change our thinking to make Black lives matter, we must truly understand that the problem of Black lives not mattering is a problem of meaning that isn't just individual or institutional but structural. It is rooted in what America is.

America needs Black lives to not matter. Due to centuries of negative images and stereotypes about Africans and racial blackness, in the collective psyches of the United States, throughout the Americas, and across the world blackness means, as the late psychiatrist Dr. Frantz Fanon said, “the lower emotions, the baser inclinations, the dark side of the soul.” A field of study within cognitive psychology known as implicit cognition (or implicit bias) finds quantifiable evidence of what Black people have been knowing for better than 1,000 years (had anyone with power bothered to listen): that deeply rooted negative attitudes toward people of African descent are held widely across the American population, even among those who claim to be non racist, even when other possible causes for these attitudes (like socioeconomic class or education level) are taken into consideration—and these attitudes tend to increase people's willingness to use violence (interpersonal, institutional, or state) and punishment against Black people.

One recent quantitative study from Stanford, titled “Not Yet Human,” shows that people of African descent are commonly associated with apes at an unconscious level of mental processing. According to the study: “this Black-ape association alters visual perception and attention, and it increases endorsement of violence against Black suspects. In an archival study of actual criminal cases, the authors show that news articles written about Blacks who are convicted of capital crimes are more likely to contain ape-relevant language than news articles written about white convicts. Moreover, those who are implicitly portrayed as more ape-like in these articles are more likely to be executed by the state than those who are not. This finding agrees with the earlier work of Stanford literature professor Sylvia Wynter, who found that police in Los Angeles in the 1980s and early 1990s commonly used the incident code “NHI”—meaning “no humans involved”—for incidents involving African Americans. While many people acknowledge this police code to have been racist, the Stanford quantitative study shows that even people who don't think themselves racist have the same thoughts.

Other studies show that children of African descent are believed to be older, more mature, and less innocent than their white counterparts are, something that might explain why teachers suspend African American preschoolers at triple the rate of white preschoolers and why police and prosecutors are more likely to charge African American youths with harsher crimes or in adult court than they are in cases involving non-Black youths. It might also explain why 12-year-old youth Tamir Rice was shot dead by police at a playground in Cleveland, Ohio, while holding a toy gun, whereas white youths are free to regularly play with toy guns in their neighborhoods.

Another set of studies ("shooter bias" studies) shows that Black males holding cell phones are, on quick glance, believed to be holding guns, while white males are believed to be holding cell phones. These studies also found that people would be quicker to shoot and to holster their weapons when faced with a Black male who might be holding a cellphone or a gun, compared with a white male in the same position. These studies might explain why plainclothes police shot unarmed immigrant Amadou Diallo after he reached for his wallet presumably thinking the officers wanted to see his identification or were trying to rob him.

Still other studies have shown that a stereotypically-named hypothetical Black defendant will receive a higher rate of conviction and harsher degree of punishment for the same crime than will a stereotypically-named hypothetical white defendant, even when identical evidence is presented.

A hypothetical job applicant with an African-American-sounding name is less likely to receive further consideration when a hypothetical job applicant with a white-sounding name is granted further consideration, even when both have the exact same resume except for the name at the top. An applicant for housing or mortgage will be similarly screened based on assumptions about whether they are Black or not, thereby shaping geographic segregation patterns.

African-American employees are more likely to be evaluated poorly by employers than are white employees.

Black NFL players are required to return from injury sooner than their white counterparts with the same injury. Other studies show that the medical profession is slower to give aggressive treatment to African-Americans and less sensitive to the pain of African-American patients.

Regardless of whether one stands on the side of addressing the problem, like the founders of #BLM, describing the problem, like researchers at Stanford, or even denying the problem or defending police murders of Black people, the central problem is not a swirling morass of practices to be altered. It is a structure. These problems of anti-black racism are not simply problems of individual or institutional practice or prejudice because they are repeated across widely disparate individuals and institutions with the same independent results. The psyche of anti-black racism is not individual or institutional. Both the psyche and the institution are networked together as part of one dynamic, fluid, and massive structure. The psyche, like the institution, is a structure. The problems of Black life mattering are hence fundamentally problems of structural power. In other words, structural racism encompasses the entire system of white supremacy, diffused and infused in all aspects of society, including our history, culture, politics, economics and our entire social fabric. Structural racism is the most profound and pervasive form of racism—all other forms of racism (e.g. institutional, interpersonal, internalized, etc.) emerge from structural racism.

The key indicators of structural racism are inequalities in power, access. Opportunities, treatment, and policy impacts and outcomes, whether they are intentional or not. Structural racism is more difficult to locate in a particular institution because it involves the reinforcing effects of multiple institutions and cultural norms, past and present, continually producing new, and reproducing old forms of racism.

The problem of Black life mattering extends to unconscious levels of thinking and is not only deeply rooted, but also widely diffused and reinforced through multiple networks of power. It is therefore quite challenging to uproot without a massive change in the social structure that abolishes the ways that both personal and institutional practice, as well as individual and social frames of meaning are tethered to the genocidal slave empire of the “modern” world, the United States. If we only think about the practice of prejudice without centering the ways that all racism derives from structural racism—what I call antiblackness—we will be at pains to explain why there is so deep a reserve of animosity that can result in normalized violence toward Black people (and people of color in general) and why the mass loss of Black life does not constitute a national emergency or a cause for widespread grief. True dedication to the principle that Black lives matter will require a revolution using all means necessary to end the structure of anti-blackness.

Racism/white supremacy in America is deeply rooted in a global system of settler-colonial capitalism, land theft, mass murder (or if you prefer the sanitized euphemism of the term “genocide”) racial chattel slavery and its consequences. White privilege is the manifestation, consequence, and flip-side of Black oppression and exploitation, violence of indigenous sovereignty, and the Eurocentric imposition of private property relations on both land and people to extract profit through domination. This is a global Empire, and it is an empire here within the US itself as well. White supremacy, white privilege and racism can only be uprooted by overturning that system of settler colonialism and imperialism, here in the US and throughout the world. Nothing short of decolonization, self-determination of oppressed and colonized people and revolutionary social, political, economic and ecological transformation of the entire society will do.

“Powerful people never educate the victims of their power in how to take their power away from them... the ideology of our “former” slave masters cannot save us. We will not be truly liberated until we are the main instruments of our liberation.”

-Dr. John Henrick Clarke

**Hays, Jack. “The Corona Virus and Black Lives Matter in Iowa Prisons.” APWA. June. 2020**

**[https://apw.dhinitiative.org/islandora/object/apw%3A12360370?solr\\_nav%5Bid%5D=619da04d5e5a7849cf76&solr\\_nav%5Bpage%5D=0&solr\\_nav%5Boffset%5D=6](https://apw.dhinitiative.org/islandora/object/apw%3A12360370?solr_nav%5Bid%5D=619da04d5e5a7849cf76&solr_nav%5Bpage%5D=0&solr_nav%5Boffset%5D=6)**

The marginalized and imprisoned here in Iowa have no voice—whether you are Black, Mentally Ill, poor, other minority, or all the above. The silence is deafening. In the age of Corona Virus and Black Lives Matter, there is no "black lives matter movement" in the Iowa Prisons.

I recently read in the Cedar Rapids, Iowa, "Gazette" that prisoners have generally agreed with the Corona Virus response by the Iowa Department of Corrections however, this statement was made by an elderly Lady whom is the President of a Non-profit organization, no prisoners were consulted.<sup>2</sup> The Iowa DOC response to the Corona Virus has been incompetent and self-serving. In fact, this prison—the Clarinda Correctional Facility in Clarinda, Iowa—has added beds to an already over-populated prison.

Here is the Iowa Department of Corrections' (IDOC) response to the Corona Virus in the order of each action (or inaction):

1. Taking contact visits from prisoners, statewide. (There has been no talk of giving them back though states have "opened" up)
2. Given one 20 minute Skype visit per week to all prisoners, regardless of how many children or family members they have.
3. Given one "free" 5-minute phone call per week.
4. Make everyone wear a surgical type mask fabricated in Iowa Prison sweatshops .<sup>3</sup>
5. The counselors and people they call "psychologists" moved their offices out of the building. (See footnote #5 below)
6. Add an extra bunk to at least 32 3-man rooms (4 men in an 8'x10' space) that are already too small here at the Clarinda Correctional Facility.
7. Fail to sell envelopes for 4 weeks in-a-row...

Iowa was the worst in the Nation for the incarceration of Black Folks—a fact freely admitted by the Iowa Supreme Court.<sup>4</sup> Iowa continues to be in the top 3 worst in the Nation. Are they doing anything specific to deter this? No. Are they planning anything to do about this? No. Is there even a discussion about this? No. There is some random statements being made by the "talking heads" on the television about the Black Lives Matter protests in Des Moines, Iowa, and elsewhere around the world, but no real discussion nor comprehensive planning taking place.<sup>5</sup> In the 90's, Joe Biden helped pen the "Omnibus Crime Control and Safe Streets Act" which help over-fund the police, but he has made no mention of trying to repeal this law on the National Level.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, the Clinton administration and Biden's Congress in the 90's are largely responsible for the legislation resulting in the Mass Incarceration we now live with.

In 2016, I was the Secretary of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, Anamosa Prison Branch. Our executive Board worked directly with the President, Betty Andrews, of the Iowa/Nebraska branches. Everything we tried to do to bring awareness to the literal crises for both the Mentally Ill and Black Folks was blocked by the administration of the Anamosa State Pen.—this effort was largely blocked by the current "Director of Prisons", William Sperfslage, whom was the Deputy Warden and then Warden. In fact, I was given a retaliatory transfer and when I then tried to contact Betty Andrews she would no longer accept my calls.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, the Warden of the prison never met any consequences for his illegal actions—instead, they promoted the man to Director of Prisons here in Iowa. Indeed, it is evident that the Administration of the Iowa Department of Corrections agrees with racially biased policies, as well as less than the legal requirements for treatment of the mentally ill.



I have written and witnessed the writing of literally hundreds of letters to the press and other organizations about the corruption and conditions of confinement in the Iowa Department of Corrections. We get no response from the press and they do not print our letters nor investigate our claims, no matter how legitimate. However, there is a great deal of villainizing.

It is easy to villainize people whom are incarcerated for various crimes— whether they are innocent or not. It does not satisfy the newspapers' and broadcast stations' agendas to publicize the corruption", neglect", exploitation' and abuse" that is very real and exists in Iowa's prisons. Men are apathetic about writing or telling anyone about the problems in Iowa's prisons and the ones who are not are, for the most part, scared...retaliation is very real and rampant—as rampant as the nepotism, cronyism, and corruption.

I have recently become the Secretary of the Council for prisoners in this institution. Usually what follows is solitary confinement for various reasons—most likely being argumentative (which they call "threats and intimidation") or being a jailhouse lawyer (which they call "running a business", even though I am not getting paid!). I am hoping that it is not just a matter of time before I am, once again, targeted for my advocacy.

I am a 46-year-old man whom is so poor that I cannot hardly afford to call my Son (27 years old) and my grandchildren once-a-month—I cannot afford to stay in touch with the outside world. In fact, these essays are the best I got for informing the outside world about what is, and is not, happening to the prisoners and myself here in Iowa. I do not know how many people ever even read the essays that I write. I do know that this is one of the few things that I can do to try to bring awareness to the evils of Mass Incarceration and what is called the "Prison Industrial Complex" here in Iowa.

You see, there is no "movement" here in Iowa Prisons in any way, shape, or form. Sadly, most men here in this prison spend more time talking about things they did, or did not do, and try to manipulate each other or the state in whatever way, shape, or form they can. The closest thing to a "movement" is the beating of my own heart and the firing of the synapses in my brain taking any direct or oblique action (or inaction and "noncooperation") that I can to promote change and awareness...

My mother was involved with the Civil Rights Movement in the 60's and 70's. She also married a black man that she was married to until the day he died, when it was not popular for a white lady to marry a black man. Compared to the things they did to try to change the world, my own effort seems to be almost non-existent. Moreover, even the prison efforts in the 60's and 70's had more solidarity amongst prisoners than we have today...

Though there is no movement in here in the Iowa prison system, there is one across the world. I can see on the news and in the newspapers the movement across the world concerning police brutality and "Black Lives Matter" since a man named George Floyd was murdered by Minnesota police. I believe that part of the reason for the movement here in the United States is that so many people have been put out of work due to government restrictions and "stay home" orders due to the Corona Virus scare.

No-one in my family has ever been rich. Therefore, I can imagine what the Corona Virus restrictions and orders have done to the poor and even the middle class who live paycheck-to-paycheck." Worst still, it is not even constitutional for the government to put these restrictions and orders in place, nor to put "curfews" on the protestors of movement.' Part of the problem for prisoners and the average citizens to stand up for their rights is that they don't even know what they are in the first place.

**Gonzalez, Jillian. "Testimonies of Microaggressions." *Harness Magazine*. 26 Nov. 2020.**

<https://www.harnessmagazine.com/testimonies-of-microaggressions/>

A Black male said, "I had to put baby wipes and a stuffed animal in the back seat of my car even though I don't have a child, so that when another police officer pulls me over when I come home late from work, I look like a family man."

\*\*\*

A Black male talking about his dating experiences, ""You're not like the rest. My family would accept you."

\*\*\*

A Black female stated, "There was a time I was minding my own business, getting a train ticket and an elderly white woman came up to me and started petting my head, asking about my 'cool' hair style. I was followed around at Victoria's Secret as if I was going to steal something, and it was even worse because I worked at a different Victoria's Secret location at the time."

## Works Cited

- Abdo, Ziyne. "A First-Person Account of a Black Lives Matter Protest in Minneapolis Turned Violent by Police." *The Issue*, 17 July 2020. <https://www.insideedition.com/a-first-person-account-of-a-black-lives-matter-protest-in-minneapolis-turned-violent-by-police>
- "About - Black Lives Matter." *Black Lives Matter*, 16 October 2020. <https://blacklivesmatter.com/about/>
- Amen, Asar Imhotep. "Black Lives Have Never Mattered in the United States of America and Never Will: A 'Modern'-Day Slaves Perspective | American Prison Writing Archive at Hamilton College." *American Prison Writing Archive*, [apw.dhinitiative.org/islandora/object/apw%3A12344475?solr\\_nav%5Bid%5D=646bc39dbdc10046eaac&solr\\_nav%5Bpage%5D=0&solr\\_nav%5Boffset%5D=0](http://apw.dhinitiative.org/islandora/object/apw%3A12344475?solr_nav%5Bid%5D=646bc39dbdc10046eaac&solr_nav%5Bpage%5D=0&solr_nav%5Boffset%5D=0).
- Alexander, Elizabeth. "The Trayvon Generation." *The New Yorker*, June 15, 2020, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/06/22/the-trayvon-generation>
- Bethea, Charles. "A Witness to Terrorism in Charlottesville." *The New Yorker*. The New Yorker, 13 Aug. 2017. Web. <https://www.newyorker.com/news/as-told-to/a-witness-to-terrorism-in-charlottesville>
- Buchanan, Larry, Quoc Trung Bui, and Jugal K. Patel. "Black Lives Matter May Be the Largest Movement in U.S. History." *New York Times*. 3 July 2020. Web. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/07/03/us/george-floyd-protests-crowd-size>.
- Chenoweth, Erica. "Questions, Answers, and Some Cautionary Updates Regarding the 3.5% Rule." *Carr Center for Human Rights Policy*. Harvard Kennedy School. Apr. 2020. [https://carrcenter.hks.harvard.edu/files/cchr/files/CCDP\\_005.pdf](https://carrcenter.hks.harvard.edu/files/cchr/files/CCDP_005.pdf)
- Cullors, Patrisse. "6 Years Strong." *Black Lives Matter*, 28 August 2020. <https://blacklivesmatter.com/six-years-strong/>
- DeAngelis, Tori. "Unmasking 'racial Micro Aggressions'." *American Psychological Association* 40.2. February 2009. Web. <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2009/02/microaggression>
- Freelon, Deen, McIlwain, Charlton, and Clark, Meredith. *Beyond the Hashtag. #Ferguson, #Blacklivesmatter, and the Online Struggle for Offline Justice*. Center for Media & Social Impact, American University, Forthcoming, 19 Mar. 2016. [https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=2747066](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2747066)
- Gabbat, Adam. "Republicans push 'tsunami' of harsh anti-protest laws after BLM rallies." *The Guardian*, 12 April 2021. [https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/apr/12/republicans-push-anti-protest-laws-blm-demonstrations?mc\\_cid=b4a91e4008&mc\\_eid=31a04cb05d](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/apr/12/republicans-push-anti-protest-laws-blm-demonstrations?mc_cid=b4a91e4008&mc_eid=31a04cb05d)
- "George Floyd trial | New bodycam footage of Floyd's arrest | Day 3 highlights." YouTube, uploaded by WION, 1 April 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qax9Q2SbQO4>.
- Gregory, Kia. "How Videos of Police Brutality Traumatize African Americans and Undermine the Search for Justice." *The New Republic*, 13 February 2019. <https://newrepublic.com/article/153103/videos-police-brutality-traumatize-african-americans-undermine-search-justice>

- Godsil, Rachel D., Brianna Goodale. "Telling Our Own Story: the role of narrative in racial hearing." *American Values Institution, America Healing*, June 2013, <https://perception.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/Telling-Our-Own-Story.pdf>
- Gonzalez, Jillian. "Testimonies of Microaggressions." *Harness Magazine*. 26 Nov. 2020. <https://www.harnessmagazine.com/testimonies-of-microaggressions/>
- Harris, DeWayne L. "Incarcerated inmates lives matter | American Prison Writing Archive at Hamilton College." *American Prison Writing Archive*, [https://apw.dhinitiative.org/islandora/object/apw%3A12358371?solr\\_nav%5Bid%5D=3c61ad985a86f068fd99&solr\\_nav%5Bpage%5D=1&solr\\_nav%5Boffset%5D=18Ω](https://apw.dhinitiative.org/islandora/object/apw%3A12358371?solr_nav%5Bid%5D=3c61ad985a86f068fd99&solr_nav%5Bpage%5D=1&solr_nav%5Boffset%5D=18Ω)
- Hays, Jack. "The Coronavirus and Black Lives Matter in Iowa Prisons | American Prison Writing Archive at Hamilton College." *American Prison Writing Archive*. [apw.dhinitiative.org/islandora/object/apw%3A12360370?solr\\_nav%5Bid%5D=619da04d5e5a7849cf76&solr\\_nav%5Bpage%5D=0&solr\\_nav%5Boffset%5D=6](https://apw.dhinitiative.org/islandora/object/apw%3A12360370?solr_nav%5Bid%5D=619da04d5e5a7849cf76&solr_nav%5Bpage%5D=0&solr_nav%5Boffset%5D=6).
- Jaye, Lola. "Why Race Matters When It Comes to Mental Health." *BBC*, 12 Aug. 2020. [www.bbc.com/future/article/20200804-black-lives-matter-protests-race-mental-health-therapy](https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20200804-black-lives-matter-protests-race-mental-health-therapy).
- JHTL. "More Than Just A Hashtag: The Influence of Social Media on the Societal Change of the Black Lives Matter Movement." Black Lives Matter Series, Blog, 25 Sep. 2020, <https://sites.suffolk.edu/jhtl/2020/09/25/more-than-just-a-hashtag-the-influence-of-social-media-on-the-societal-change-of-the-black-lives-matter-movement/>
- LaVeist, Thomas A., Mindy Fullilove, and Robert Fullilove. "400 Years of Inequality Since Jamestown of 1619." *American Journal of Public Health*, vol. 109, no. 1, 2019, pp. 83-84. doi: 10.2105/AJPH.2018.304824
- Leach, Colin Wayne, and Aerielle M. Allen. "The Social Psychology of the Black Lives Matter Meme and Movement." *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, vol. 26, no. 6, 15 Nov. 2017, pp. 543–547. doi: 10.1177/0963721417719319.
- Marable, Karen Good. "Remembering Sandra Bland's Death in the Place I Call Home." *New Yorker*, July 13, 2016, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/remembering-sandra-blands-death-in-the-place-i-call-home>
- Morris, Aldon. "From Civil Rights to Black Lives Matter." *Scientific American*, 3 February 2021. <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/from-civil-rights-to-black-lives-matter1/>
- O., Anna. "Justice for James Scurlock, killed by Omaha racist during George Floyd protest." *Change.org*, 31 May 2020. <https://www.change.org/p/demand-justice-for-james-scurlock-killed-by-omaha-racist-during-george-floyd-protest?redirect=false>
- Parker, Kim, Juliana Menasce Horowitz, and Monica Anderson. "Amid Protests, Majorities Across Racial and Ethnic Groups Express Support for the Black Lives Matter Movement." *PEW Research Center*, 12 June 2020. <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2020/06/12/amid-protests-majorities-across-racial-and-ethnic-groups-express-support-for-the-black-lives-matter-movement/>

- Ray, Aakash. "Protesting Racism: A First Person Perspective." *The Michigan Daily*, 9 June 2020. <https://www.michigandaily.com/mic/protesting-racism-first-person-perspective/>
- "Say Their Names List 2021." *Say Their Names*, 20 April 2021. <https://sayevery.name/>
- Shah, Dhruvi, et al. "George Floyd Death: The Man Who Sheltered 80 US Protesters." *BBC News*, uploaded by BBC News, 3 June 2020. [www.bbc.com/news/av/world-us-canada-52896871](http://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-us-canada-52896871).
- Shaka Senghor. *Writing My Wrongs : Life, Death, and Redemption in an American Prison*. New York, Convergent Books, 2017.
- Simonetti, Isabella. "Why These First-Time Black Lives Matter Protesters Showed Up." *Vox*, 2 July 2020. [www.vox.com/first-person/2020/7/2/21306987/black-lives-matter-protests-george-floyd-protesters-first-time](http://www.vox.com/first-person/2020/7/2/21306987/black-lives-matter-protests-george-floyd-protesters-first-time).
- Stolberg, Sheryl Gay. "'Pandemic Within a Pandemic': Coronavirus and Police Brutality Roil Black Communities." *New York Times*, June 7, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/07/us/politics/blacks-coronavirus-police-brutality.html>
- van Zomeren, Martijn, et al. "Protesters as 'Passionate Economists.'" *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, vol. 16, no. 2, 12 Jan. 2012, pp. 180–199. doi: 10.1177/1088868311430835.
- Vedantam, Shankar. "Researchers Examine The Psychology Of Protest Movements." *NPR*, 18 April 2017. [www.npr.org/2017/04/18/524473948/researchers-examine-the-psychology-of-protest-movements](http://www.npr.org/2017/04/18/524473948/researchers-examine-the-psychology-of-protest-movements).
- Waldman, Ayelet, and Robin Levi. *Inside This Place, Not of It - Narratives from Women's Prisons*. Verso Books, 2017.
- Wouters, Ruud. "Persuasive Power of Protest." *Social Forces*, vol. 98, no. 1, 2019, pp. 403-426. doi: 10.1093/sf/soy110.