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Reflections on Ben Okri, Goenawan Mohamad, and the 2020 Global Uprisings

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It has been over a year since George Floyd was murdered by a Minneapolis police officer, who knelt on Floyd's neck for more than nine minutes, ignoring Floyd's repeated statements—twenty-seven in all—that he could not breathe, and the pleas of several bystanders to cease Floyd's torture and asphyxiation. One of them, Darnella Frazier, then 17 years old, recorded the event on her smartphone and posted it to social media. Her actions ignited a global protest movement under the banner of Black Lives Matter, demanding justice for George Floyd and other victims of police violence. The video also refuted the Minneapolis Police Department's initial account of Floyd's death that attempted to cover up its officers' use of deadly force. Frazier and other bystanders later testified at Derek Chauvin's trial of their horror and shame at not being able to help Floyd. Their testimony, and the unimpeachable video evidence, helped seal Chauvin's conviction by the State of Minnesota. On June 25, 2021, Chauvin was sentenced to twenty-two years and six months in prison. He now faces federal charges for violating the civil rights of Floyd.

A year to the day after she watched Floyd die, Ms. Frazier issued a statement posted to social media.¹ She told of seeing a murder “right in front of my eyes, a few feet away.” She didn't know George Floyd, but she knew that his life mattered. “I knew that he was in pain. I knew that he was another Black man in danger with no power.” The incident changed her. “It made me realize how dangerous it is to be Black in America.” She posed fundamental questions. Why are Black people in America, and the world over, “looked at as thugs, animals, and criminals Why are Black people the only ones viewed this way when every race has some type of wrongdoing? None of us are to judge. We are all human.”²

Frazier's video helped gain a measure of justice for Floyd's family. In June 2021, Frazier was awarded a Pulitzer Prize, a special citation, for her history-making act of citizen journalism. Her brave and selfless act came at a fearful cost. She described the trauma and disruption of having to leave because her home was no longer safe, evidently because of threats. She could not sleep without seeing in her mind the image of Floyd, lifeless on the ground. Her family "hopped from hotel to hotel because we didn't have a home." The sight of a police car led to panic and anxiety attacks. She felt unable to trust anyone "because a lot of people are evil with bad intentions. I hold that weight." How many others have borne a similar burden, and yet refused to be silenced? Frazier joined a litany of women and men thrust into activism and public testimony by anti-Black violence: Ida B. Wells, Mamie Till Mobley, Betty Jean Owens, Myrlie Evers-Williams, Fannie Lou Hamer, Valerie Castile, Sybrina Fulton, Tiffany Crutcher. Philonise Floyd. And many more.

For Frazier, honoring George Floyd was an act of defiance. Floyd "was a loved one, someone's son, someone's father, someone's brother, and someone's friend. We the people won't take the blame, you won't keep pointing fingers at us as if it's our fault, as if we are criminals. I don't think people understand how serious death is, that person is never coming back." "We the people," she said, reject the racism that normalizes police violence against Black men, women, and children. We the people, she said, refusing the deadly equation of Americanness with whiteness. Frazier's elemental sense of justice was the same impulse behind the founding of the global Black Lives Matter movement and that drove millions worldwide into the streets during a deadly pandemic. "These officers shouldn't get to decide if someone gets to live or not. It's time these officers start getting held accountable. Murdering people and abusing your power while doing it is not doing your job." In plain language, Frazier states the obvious, a message sadly beyond the comprehension of millions of her fellow citizens. "It shouldn't have to take people to actually go through something to understand it's not ok. It's called having a heart and understanding right from wrong."³

Frazier could have been speaking of the death on March 13, 2020 of Breonna Taylor, slain by Louisville police officers while in her bed in a mistaken no-knock raid of her apartment. Frazier's remarks could have also applied to three white vigilantes charged with the slaying of Ahmaud Arbery, hunted down and shot while unarmed and jogging near his home in Brunswick, Georgia, on February 23.⁴ Frazier also could have been referring to the deadly January 6th attempted coup at the Capitol, and the vicious attacks by rioters on police officers, some of them women and men of color subjected to racist vitriol. Frazier's words were damning for the leaders and legislators of the Republican Party who blocked a bipartisan commission to investigate the events of January 6, evidently unable to understand right from wrong even after having been terrorized by the mob.

In the United States, according to a study by National Public Radio, police officers shot and killed at least one hundred and thirty-five unarmed Black men and women since 2015.⁵ At least seventy-five percent of the officers were white.⁶ In 2019,

police officers in the US killed one thousand ninety-nine people—the most in any wealthy democracy in both raw numbers and per capita by far, according to the Prison Policy Initiative.⁷ Only a small number of officers each year are charged with a crime, however, and it is rare that there are convictions of police on murder charges. And while the year 2020 had more officers who died while on duty than average, as in most years, the majority of those deaths occurred during traffic incidents.⁸

The global Black Lives Matter uprisings against police violence prompted by Floyd's murder were connected to a longer history of transnational Black struggles. As the essays by Ben Okri and Goenawan Mohamad suggest, the civil rights and Black Power movements from the 1950s to the 1970s were not confined to US terrain; they were part of a global conjuncture. The struggle to end legal segregation in the US South occurred alongside two other major post-1945 historical processes: The Cold War struggle pitting the United States against the Soviet Union; and decolonization, the emergence of new African and Asian nations from European colonial rule.⁹ The global racial justice protests reflect the legacies and continuing harms of US racism and colonialism. The Black Lives Matter protests that surged across the US highlighted the unfinished business of the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s; not only the systemic racism of the failure to hold police officers accountable for extrajudicial killings, but also the scourge of poverty and economic inequality. As Goenawan suggests, violent white police and paramilitaries are the shock troops for a Republican Party and unrestrained capitalism hostile to multiracial democracy. Goenawan does not refer specifically to pro-democracy movements, but several within recent months have faced ruthless repression by authoritarian police states, in Myanmar, Belarus, Nigeria, and Colombia, to name but a few.

Although the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991 and earlier Soviet reforms had ended the Cold War by 1988, its successor, Russia, and its leader, the former KGB operative Vladimir Putin, are leading a frontal assault on Western liberal democracies. Putin's task is made easier by the illiberal racist and colonial cultures of Western liberal democracies. Less than a lifetime since the era of decolonization, the descendants of African and Asian former colonial subjects, and their allies in Britain, France, Belgium, Germany, and other former colonial powers, are demanding a reckoning with the historical and ongoing harms of colonialism, racism, violence, and discrimination. Since the late twentieth century, activists in European capitals, and in the Caribbean and throughout Africa, have sought policies of historical redress, including reparations for historical crimes against humanity that include the transatlantic trade in enslaved Africans, slavery, genocide, and colonialism.¹⁰ In the Pacific region, anticolonial and antinuclear activists protested France's resumption in 1995 of its underground nuclear tests in Mururoa, following years of atmospheric and underground tests in its colonial Polynesian atolls that had turned the region into a nuclear waste dump. Local residents of the atolls joined a militant international campaign, including a peace flotilla sponsored by the New Zealand government and Greenpeace.¹¹

This history of antiracist, anticolonial struggle provided the foundation for the massive, prolonged uprisings of 2020, involving more than two thousand demonstrations worldwide and some twenty-six million people, arguably the largest protest movement in history. Those democratic struggles of the latter half of the twentieth century shaped the outlook of Nigerian novelist and poet Ben Okri and the Indonesian writer and editor Goenawan Mohamad and their respective generations.

Within two weeks of George Floyd's murder, solidarity protests spread to fifty countries. Many of the protests decried local problems of racially motivated police violence, which many linked to histories of colonial racism and violence. Tens of thousands marched in protests in London and other UK cities, in Paris and throughout France, and in Berlin, Madrid, and Rome. In Belgium, protesters demanded the removal of street names and public squares named after King Leopold II, who presided over colonial atrocities in the Congo so barbaric that they resulted in an international protest movement in the early twentieth century. In the country's capital, Brussels, and in other cities, protesters burned and defaced statues of Leopold. Ethiopian Israelis protested their disproportionate arrest and the June 2019 killing of Solomon Teka, a teenager shot by an off-duty police officer. In Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, and Haifa, protesters demanded justice for Floyd and for Iyad Halek, a Palestinian man with autism killed by Israeli police on May 30. In Bethlehem, protesters chanted, "Black Lives Matter, Palestinian Lives Matter." In Australia, tens of thousands of demonstrators in Melbourne, Sydney, and Canberra decried the mistreatment of Indigenous Australians, subjected to disproportionate arrest and incarceration. Since 1991, four hundred and thirty-four Indigenous people in that country have died in police custody. Protesters in Jakarta denounced color prejudices in Indonesia and state violence against people from the province of Papua. In Bangkok, protesters scrawled "I can't breathe" over placards of Wanchalearm Satsaksit, a pro-democracy activist who fled to Cambodia following the 2014 military coup in Thailand and who had just been abducted by gunmen in Phenom Penh on June 4. Marchers carried pictures of Floyd at a demonstration in Istanbul against police brutality.

In Kenya, where police had recently killed fifteen people on the pretext of enforcing Covid restrictions, a protester, Juliet Wanjira, told a journalist that "the poor people of Mathare [a neighborhood in Nairobi] stand in solidarity with the poor people in America. We want them to know that this struggle is one."¹² Nigerians also protested Floyd's death and police brutality in that country, including the death of Tina Ezekwe, aged 17, mortally wounded on May 26 in Lagos when two police officers inexplicably fired into a crowd. In 2020, the globalization of Black freedom struggles, in the US and abroad, was much in evidence.

Deep Histories of the 2020 Uprisings

As protests spread from the intersection of East 38th Street and Chicago Avenue in Minneapolis, where Floyd was killed, to far-flung cities across six continents, commen-

tators attempted to make sense of the moment. Was there precedent for such a massive revolt instantaneously spanning the globe? Some referenced the global protests in 1968 in the US, Mexico, and Western Europe. The writer Socrates Mbamalu, based in Lagos, suggested perhaps a more apt precedent: the anticolonial protests in US cities and global capitals, including New York, Chicago, Moscow, Belgrade, and London following the assassination of Patrice Lumumba, the prime minister of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, mere months after that nation's independence from Belgium.¹³

The underlying conditions for the global uprisings were long in the making, including the emigration of Black, South Asian, North African, and West African colonial subjects to imperial metropolises to address labor shortages after World War II, only to face racism, discrimination, and exclusion. The more immediate context was the international organizing of the US-based Movement for Black Lives since 2014, which laid crucial groundwork in the US and abroad for the 2020 demonstrations. The movement began as a hashtag following the 2013 acquittal of George Zimmerman in the shooting death of Trayvon Martin, an unarmed Black teenager, in Sanford, Florida. Martin's death was a tipping point for Black youth and activists frustrated by the incongruity between police killings of unarmed African American men and women and the progress signaled by the election of the first Black president. Black activists coined the slogan "Black Lives Matter" to protest continuing violations of the human rights of Americans of African descent, and to shatter the illusion of postracialism. Linking their protests to past struggles, writers and activists compared Martin's killing to the lynching of Emmett Till, the 14-year-old Black Chicago teenager tortured and shot by white vigilantes in Mississippi in 1955, an event widely viewed as a catalyst for the modern civil rights movement.

In the wake of Martin's death, the Movement for Black Lives became the overarching framework for preexisting and ongoing local Black community mobilizations seeking justice for the deaths of Black people at the hands of police over many years. Activists were painfully aware that the names of many victims of police violence were soon forgotten; that is, if they ever came to the public's attention at all. This had been going on for decades, with the indifference of white-controlled media outlets aiding and abetting the inaction and cover-ups of police departments.¹⁴ BLM protesters chanted that the world say and remember their names, including those of Black women victims of police violence. Before Trayvon, there was Rekia Boyd, aged 22, killed in 2012 by an off-duty Chicago police detective who was acquitted in 2015. Before Boyd, there had been many victims of police violence whose deaths had sparked local protests. There was Eula Love, a 39-year-old widow shot to death on her front lawn by two Los Angeles police officers in 1979. Amadou Diallo, an unarmed 21-year-old from Guinea, West Africa, was gunned down by NYPD plainclothes officers in 1999. That same year, Robert Russ, a student athlete at Northwestern University, also unarmed, was killed by a Chicago police officer during a traffic stop. There was Oscar Grant, also

unarmed, killed by police in Oakland on New Year's Day in 2009. There were many others.

The initial wave of Black Lives Matter mobilizations brought to light a range of abuses by police, including sexual harassment and assault, in addition to incidents of deadly force. Grassroots efforts by activists to obtain justice for victims of police violence, investigations by journalists, and eventually, by the Obama Justice Department, documented patterns and practices of discriminatory arrests, fines, coerced confessions, and unreasonable use of deadly force. Unceasing pressure by activists resulted in the rare convictions of officers for gross misconduct.¹⁵ Protests, particularly in Ferguson, Missouri, following the shooting death of Michael Brown, aged 18 and unarmed, by police officer Darren Wilson, exposed the militarization of police departments, their use of armored vehicles, weapons, and other equipment originally intended for combat troops in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, donated to police departments by US armed forces. Numerous journalistic images of police outfitted with military-grade weapons and riot gear confronting peaceful protesters suggested links between domestic US institutional racism and foreign wars of empire. Such images from US protests appearing in world press coverage offered a mirror image of sorts for local movements protesting state violence in London, Glasgow, Paris, Rio de Janeiro, Johannesburg, and elsewhere.

Demonstrators in the US and abroad in 2020 often referenced longer histories of oppression, including the Atlantic slave trade, colonialism, apartheid, and Jim Crow segregation. Black Lives Matter protests in the US pushed for such structural reforms as the BREATHE Act, proposed federal legislation that would reallocate federal funding from policing and incarceration to social services that would strengthen the health and safety of local communities. Activists and advocacy groups also sought to strike down the US legal doctrine of qualified immunity that allows police to escape accountability for sundry violations of the rights of citizens. At the same time, protests throughout the Western world highlighted the blood-soaked record of the global color line, coalescing around demands for the official repudiation of the continuing legacies of racial oppression, enslavement, segregation, and empire. In the US, monuments to enslavers, proslavery Confederate military and political leaders, and such violent white supremacists as Nathan Bedford Forrest once again became flashpoints of debate. Around the world, protesters targeted public monuments, including statues of historical figures associated with crimes against humanity. On June 13, in Bristol, young Britons tore down the bronze statue of Edward Colston, a notorious seventeenth-century slave trader honored by some as a benefactor of the town. After removing the statue from its pedestal, protesters tossed it into a harbor. Throughout the US South, protests and a resurgence of public outcry hastened the removal of monuments to Confederate soldiers and white supremacists. Many protesters, such as those who occupied the grounds of the statue of Confederate general Robert E. Lee, in Richmond, Virginia, festooning it with antiracist art, graffiti, placards, and an artist's spotlight projection of George Floyd's visage, drew a direct connection between the continuing

veneration of such historical figures, representative men of white supremacy, and ongoing police violence against Black people. Floyd's death revitalized longstanding efforts by activists to remove monuments to the Confederacy. Activists in the postcolonies of Europe made similar arguments, linking current problems of racial discrimination to their origins in the violence and dehumanization of colonial conquest and subjugation. In Britain, a reckoning with the legacies of British imperialism and racism regained momentum. On June 9, demonstrators at Oxford University called for the removal of a statue of Cecil Rhodes, reviving the Rhodes Must Fall campaign, initiated in South Africa, and part of the wave of Black Lives Matter protests in 2014. Oxford's governing board agreed to remove the statue of the mining industrialist who ruled Britain's Cape Colony in what is now South Africa, and whose riches, built upon forced labor policies justified by white supremacy, funded the university's prized Rhodes scholarships. The familiar US cycle of antiracist mobilization and white supremacist backlash reasserted itself, this time globally. Prime Minister Boris Johnson's government passed a law requiring planning permission to remove historical statues and monuments, ensuring Rhodes's statue will not be removed, despite the sordid history it represents.¹⁶

Reflecting the impact of colonialism in producing national cultures and publics steeped in anti-Blackness, the racist dehumanization of Black peoples under colonialism migrated along with Black, African, and Asian immigrants from the periphery to metropolitan centers. Black diaspora communities in Britain, France, and Germany mobilized in response to local problems of racism, unemployment, and police violence. Since the late 1970s, Paris and its suburbs had seen outbreaks of civil unrest following police violence against North African, Arab, and West African youth, as recently as 2017. At protests in cities throughout France, Floyd's death was linked to the 2016 death of Adama Traoré, a 24-year-old Black man who died of asphyxiation while in police custody.¹⁷

Similarly, Black immigrant communities in Britain have been subjected to violence and harassment by racist police and gangs. The anti-immigrant racism of Britain's far right taught white workers an argot of epithets as Black and Asian emigrants flocked to England after the war. In 1981, high unemployment and the surveillance of Black youth by white police erupted in riots in Brixton, as young Black men, joined by whites, hurled missiles at officers and set fire to police vehicles and local businesses. Though an official inquiry acknowledged the root causes of the disturbances in racial discrimination and police misconduct, these problems were allowed to fester. In 1991, the Institute of Race Relations, a London-based antiracist think tank, published *Deadly Silence*, a study documenting deaths of Black people while in police custody.¹⁸ Relying almost wholly on Black press sources, the book told the stories of the lives of victims and their untimely deaths within an analysis of racial disparities in housing and employment, while also analyzing the lethal effects of discrimination in police stations, mental hospitals, and prisons. Declaring "[o]ne death is a death too many," A. Sivanandan, lead author of the study, included a roll call of seventy-five

recorded deaths of Afro-Caribbean, West African, and South Asian men in custody between 1969 and 1991, only one of which led to a prosecution of police officers.¹⁹ In 1993, the national scandal that followed the murder of Black teenager Stephen Lawrence in London by a gang of white youths dragged on for years with each new disclosure of evidence of a Metropolitan Police cover-up and its refusal to bring to justice those suspected in the attack. In 2011, the death of Mark Duggan, a Black man shot by police officers, touched off rioting throughout London.

In Berlin, fifteen thousand protesters observed a moment of silence for the nine minutes Chauvin kept his knee on George Floyd's neck. Rallies in solidarity with the Black Lives Matter protests in the US took place in nine other cities across the country. As in Britain and France, these protests focused on police brutality and discrimination against racial minorities. A 2017 UN human rights panel concluded that racial profiling of Afro-Germans was reinforced by institutional racism and anti-Black stereotypes. The report stated that "the repeated denial that racial profiling exists in Germany by police authorities" and the lack of an independent government body for adjudicating complaints "fosters impunity."²⁰ Aminata Touré, a Green Party state legislator, noted that while Germany had confronted the history of the Nazi era and the Holocaust, there was scant attention to the nation's African colonial past, particularly Germany's role in the genocide of the Herero and Nama peoples by colonial military forces in 1904. "A lot of anti-Black racism was created at this time," Touré said.²¹ She referenced recent deaths of Black people by police and neo-Nazi attacks. Oury Jalloh, an asylum seeker from Sierra Leone, was burned to death while in police custody in Dessau in 2005.²²

The Movement for Black Lives

In the United States, the Black Lives Matter movement transformed the public conversation in the US about police violence. BLM linked the crisis of oppressive policing to longstanding racial inequities in health, housing, employment, and income. The movement's spokespersons also contested media narratives that effectively put on trial Black victims of police and vigilante violence. Activists informed US audiences of racial profiling in policing and the criminal-legal system, including mass incarceration; felon disenfranchisement; disproportionate stops, searches, and arrests; solitary confinement; harsher sentencing; prosecutorial misconduct; racial disparities in the imposition of the death penalty; and so on. Black Lives Matter activists staged nonviolent direct-action protests that recalled the civil rights mobilizations of the 1960s. At the same time, the movement's decentralized structure and active involvement of Black queer and trans activists broke from the civil rights movement's emphasis on charismatic male leadership. And the Movement for Black Lives jettisoned the earlier movement's defensive preoccupation with moral respectability, insisting on the sanctity of the lives of Black poor, queer, and transgender people, and persons with disabilities. Through the organizing of the Movement for Black Lives, many white

Americans, once resistant to seeing a pattern of Black deaths and perhaps susceptible to the pernicious diversion of “all lives matter,” had their eyes opened to racial disparities in policing. After George Floyd’s murder, they, too, took to the streets with fellow citizens, young and old, of all backgrounds, in major cities and provincial towns across the US.

To be sure, the globalization of US antiracist protests predated BLM. As Brenda Gayle Plummer and others have argued, African American civil rights activists viewed the United Nations as a vital forum for internationalizing US struggles for civil and human rights since its inception.²³ The United Nations World Conference Against Racism in Durban, South Africa, in 2001 occasioned a global reckoning on past and present manifestations of racial oppression and was fiercely opposed by the US State Department. Opponents of capital punishment have for some time agitated across national boundaries against well-documented racial disparities in the US criminal–legal system. A notable example was the international campaign to halt the execution of Troy Davis, uniting US civil rights and international human rights organizations and world leaders, including Archbishop Desmond Tutu, former US president Jimmy Carter, and Pope Benedict XVI. In 2011, Davis, who was African American, was executed by the state of Georgia for the 1989 killing of a white police officer, despite doubts about his guilt based on police coercion and recanted testimony.²⁴ From the start, BLM encouraged the formation of international chapters wherever Black people lived in the diaspora (and Africa) and were suffering from disproportionate state violence and deaths while in custody.²⁵ Outrage at Floyd’s death revived these local traditions of struggle in several nations, including in the US, sending tens of thousands into the streets despite the pandemic.

In a powerful column in *The Guardian*, the Nigerian writer Ben Okri suggested that the global outpouring of outrage and demonstrations was a reaction to Floyd’s repeated use of the phrase, “I can’t breathe.”²⁶ With cities and towns across the world at a standstill, save for the wail of ambulances, and health care workers overwhelmed by Covid-19 infections, the universal threat of the virus’s attack on the respiratory system reminded us of our mortality. In this context, Okri hoped that the video of Floyd’s ordeal triggered a sense of empathy among those less likely to be brutalized by police. Okri reminded us that “I can’t breathe” were also the dying words of Eric Garner, choked to death by New York City police officers in 2014 for a nonviolent offense as petty as Floyd’s alleged passing of a counterfeit \$20 bill (In May 2021, three Tacoma, Washington police officers were charged with homicide over a year after the March 2020 death in custody of Manuel Ellis, aged 33. The officers had ignored his dying plea, “Can’t breathe, sir!”).

Noting the multiracial “crossover protest on a universal scale,” Okri hoped that the pandemic made otherwise indifferent whites more likely to understand and empathize with the plight of Black people. From the immediate threat of the virus to the worsening climate crisis, such an epiphany might lead them to link the racist assault on Black people’s lives with the bodily distress of gasping for breath. “I can’t breathe,”

Okri proposed, might provide “a new language to express the fundamental clarity of what happens when people are demonized, excluded, deprived, oppressed, and killed because of the colour of their skin.”²⁷

Okri’s reflections appeared at the peak of the pandemic’s initial wave but still early in the summer of Black Lives Matter protests, a juncture at which many commentators viewed the multiracial character and global reach of the demonstrations as cause for optimism. A boiling point had been reached, it was said, with the cluster of deaths, Floyd, Taylor, Arbery, Tony McDade, killed by police in Tallahassee two days after Floyd’s death. This time, it would be different, they said.²⁸ Protesters waved “I can’t breathe” placards in the US and jammed public squares and thoroughfares in European metropolitan centers, and outside US embassies in Britain, Spain, France, Mexico, Jamaica, and Ireland. RiseUp4Justice, an activism platform set up in response to Floyd’s murder, held a livestreamed event with demonstrators in Zimbabwe, Senegal, South Africa, Syria, and Palestine, whose organizing paid tribute to George Floyd while publicizing their local demands for justice.²⁹

Okri notes that others have recognized the potential power of the slogan “I can’t breathe.” The phrase became a rallying cry in December of 2014, invoked at Black Lives Matter protests following a Manhattan grand jury’s refusal to bring charges against Daniel Pantaleo, the NYPD police officer who killed Eric Garner with a chokehold. Filmed by a bystander, the widely circulated video of Garner’s death, as Pantaleo ignored Garner’s repeated pleas that he couldn’t breathe, sparked global outrage. In the end, however much sympathy there was for Garner, there was not enough outrage at the cruel and needless killing, at least not on the grand jury that declined to bring homicide charges against Pantaleo, nor toward police leadership that permitted the use of supposedly banned chokeholds, in effect incentivizing serial offenders on the force. The groundswell of protests at Garner’s death and Pantaleo’s exoneration eventually subsided, as had usually occurred following the death of “legions,” as Okri put it, of Black victims of police violence, leaving only bereaved family members to continue the lonely pursuit of justice. No doubt police union leaders and apologists for the status quo rely on the public “moving on” from demanding justice and systemic reforms, as outrage fades, and most of us return to the distractions of mass consumer culture and social media.

Before most Americans and the world moved on in 2015, something extraordinary happened. Scores of professional, collegiate, and scholastic athletes, many, though not all African American, wore the slogan on their warmup clothing. NFL quarterback Colin Kaepernick’s gesture of protest, kneeling during the national anthem, made him a target of furious protests. Other athletes emulated his gesture and continue to do so. The authoritarian nationalist prime minister of Hungary, Viktor Orbán, denounced the practice during the 2020 Euro championship when footballers of the Irish national team kneeled in an antiracist protest before a match in Budapest. Orbán was pandering to the rampant racist abuse of Black and African footballers by bigoted European supporters. During the mid-2010s, the protest gesture of taking a

knee drew the ire of right-wing demagogues and sports fans who loathe the mixing of sport and politics, and who evidently believe Black people are not entitled to constitutional protection of their right to free speech. When NBA superstar LeBron James was excoriated for wearing a t-shirt with the words, “I can’t breathe,” President Barack Obama praised him for “raising consciousness.”³⁰

The linguist Ben Zimmer noted that the use of the phrase by “thousands” at a protest “is an intense act of empathy and solidarity.” The empathy is seen in the rhetorical tribute of adopting the persona of Garner by uttering the dying man’s pleas. Changing “I” to “We can’t breathe,” effects a shift from mourning Garner to imagining the solidarity of social action, in which breathing becomes metaphorical, referring to sickness in the body politic. At a New York demonstration, marchers bore signs that read, “Justice Can’t Breathe,” and “Our Democracy Can’t Breathe.”³¹

Okri interprets the universal resonance of the phrase for a world shaken by the pandemic. The confinement of the Covid shutdown, and the suspension of public mass consumer entertainment pastimes perhaps allowed for reflection on the systemic forces that devalued Floyd’s and other Black lives. More importantly, the widespread suffering and vulnerability caused by the plague arguably brought a humbling sense of the fragility of life to those with relative privilege (though in the US and the UK, the poor, essential workers, and people of color experienced infection and death at disproportionately higher rates; India and Brazil, countries beset with incompetent autocratic regimes, are currently responsible for twenty-three percent of the global death tally, though their official tallies are likely undercounts). This unaccustomed sense of vulnerability among the privileged, Okri suggested, might foster an identification with the social predicament of racialized groups. Okri’s *Guardian* commentary is exploring the question of how meaningful change occurs, through the unique interface of social institutions, the invisible biological realm of viral diseases, and the body.

In the US context, activism has brought about change. In less than a decade, the organizing and consciousness-raising of Black Lives Matter effected a shift in US public opinion on racism and policing. More white Americans, particularly younger whites, recognized systemic racism as an underlying cause of police misconduct toward Black people.³² Okri seems to have been inspired by the multiracial and international scope of the protests, informing his analogy between the threat to Black lives posed by police violence and racism writ large, and the terror of struggling to breathe, our shared vulnerability to Covid-19 and its variants. As Covid ravaged the bodies of millions, forcing many of us to contemplate our mortality and that of others, including loved ones, Okri seeks to awaken in his readers an empathy rooted in their own vulnerability, suffering, and perhaps grief. From their own sense of mortality might arise an identification with Black people’s quotidian terror of arbitrary death or injury at the hands of police officers.

That seems plausible, for some. For others, their hearts hardened by the dangerous campaign of hatred, fear, and dehumanization sowed by far-right media

and politicians, the limits of empathy are painfully clear. For the violent white supremacist, who projects their own propensity for mayhem onto their stereotyped notion of the Black, the fear of Black people, their empowerment, and the perceived loss of white dominance is greater than their own fear of death. For people of goodwill, “I can’t breathe” resonates as a cry of pain and rage. As for empathy, it is a transitory emotion that fades, or is shouted down by the mobilization of shameless right-wing and racist propaganda. It is an old problem, as old as the United States.

The Republican Party has embraced antidemocratic policies rooted in white supremacist fearmongering. Wealthy and powerful conservatives are petrified at the increasing support for the Movement for Black Lives among younger white Americans, who are adopting more liberal views on racism, police violence, and economic justice. Republican Party officials and their donors are alarmed at the strength of the African American electorate, as well as the impactful participation of Indigenous US citizens, as evidenced in Democratic Party victories in Georgia and Arizona. That fear of multiracial democracy, fueling the false narrative of a stolen election, led to the violent sacking of the Capitol and Trump’s attempted coup. The antiquarian racism seen in the attempted “Anglo-Saxon caucus” among far-right Republicans in Congress, wallowing in the noxious view of African Americans as non-citizens and thus illegitimate voters, epitomizes the descent into white supremacy, autocracy, and extremist Christian nationalism by the Republican Party. Republican-authored laws seeking to wrest autocratic control of education by criminalizing the teaching of race in US history are a craven response to the ways that the global reckoning on racism in 2020 has altered the US political landscape. Such illiberal, unconstitutional measures to criminalize speech and thought are motivated by anxieties and fears beyond the reach of Okri’s humane appeal for moral introspection and antiracist empathy.

Racializing the Pandemic

Soon after the initial wave of global protests, appeals for racial reconciliation of the sort provided by Okri and others met with ferocious assault by the actions and rhetoric of the US far-right. Former president Trump and his followers weaponized lies, racial and religious bigotry, disinformation, and conspiracy theories against science, facts, and truth. Despite a pandemic of a life-threatening illness, in which for reasonable people, a desire for self-preservation might be expected to prevail, the far-right media ecosystem unleashed a contagion of mass psychosis in the US. As Trump downplayed the severity of the virus, and as the pandemic spiraled out of control in the US, would he pay a political cost among his most ardent followers for his incompetence and flagrant lack of concern for human suffering? Then, sometime in early April, news organizations began reporting that African Americans and Hispanic Americans, disproportionately poor, many with chronic health problems and limited access to health care, and concentrated in high-risk essential factory and service jobs, faced higher rates of infection and death from the virus. Referencing these social

vulnerabilities, *New York Times* columnist Charles Blow called the virus a “racial time bomb.”³³

Almost immediately, Republican governors in Florida, Georgia, and Texas, other GOP elected officials, and militias stepped up their defiance of public health guidance of social distancing and mask-mandates, at times seeking to overrule the safety restrictions instituted by Democratic mayors of major cities with substantial populations of people of color in their states.³⁴ Outraged by Black Lives Matter protests and seeking to change the subject from the pandemic, on June 1, Trump, who had been monitoring the peaceful protests from his White House bunker, emerged to orchestrate a military takeover of the streets near the White House, with police in riot gear, some on horseback, using excessive force, helicopters, rubber bullets, and tear gas to intimidate and clear the area of protesters (many of them young whites), all to stage a neofascist propaganda photo of Trump holding a Bible aloft in front of a church. By October, even as numerous White House staffers, Secret Service agents, and Trump himself contracted the virus, the result of the former president’s defiance against common sense safety precautions of mask-wearing and social distancing, the cult of personality binding Trump to his followers held fast.

It is common knowledge that former president Trump and other GOP officials politicized the pandemic response. I would contend that they *racialized* it as well. As the pandemic ravaged people of color in St. Louis, Milwaukee, New Orleans, Detroit, and elsewhere, but also, as Black Lives Matter protests continued nationwide, armed far-right militia members, part of a largely white male mob, invaded the state capitol building in Lansing, Michigan, seeking to intimidate legislators and attacking the state’s Democratic governor, Gretchen Whitmer, for her public health restrictions. These extremist warriors for white patriarchy seemed to believe that rural whites like themselves were immune to the virus. One suspects that their demands for “liberation” from sensible public health safeguards implied a genocidal unconcern for the lives of at-risk Black and Latino peoples. Some of those militia members later faced federal conspiracy charges for a plot to kidnap and assassinate Whitmer. Toxic masculinity and misogyny, as well as white identity extremism, animated the attacks on Whitmer and Michigan’s Secretary of State, Jocelyn Benson. A mob of armed, unruly protesters massed outside Benson’s home in December of 2020, part of an organized pro-Trump effort to override Biden’s victory in key swing states by intimidating and threatening Republican and Democratic Party officials responsible for administering state elections. The intimidation of state election officials has become a political strategy for the Republican Party.³⁵

Without rehashing the Trump administration’s calamitous response to the pandemic, a spiritual death was evident in the selfishness of the antimask protesters, and among those resorting to threats and intimidation in pursuit of partisan political ends. Trump’s cynical lie that the election was stolen from him has radicalized millions already susceptible to a paranoid worldview of white supremacy, toxic masculinity, and worship of violence. There would be no reasoning with hard-core Trump sup-

porters, no empathy to be found among these women and men, armed to the teeth, intoxicated by right-wing media propaganda, and conspiracy theories reminiscent of the Nazi-era demonization of Jews and political opponents as mortal enemies. The state and vigilante violence normalized in the US by decades of police killings of Black people, equally routine mass shootings, a spike in hate crimes against Blacks and Latinos in 2018, and recently, Asian Americans, and the hostility to the democratic process engendered by Republican officials who support the defeated incumbent's autocratic designs, all came home to roost on January 6, 2021, as hundreds of pro-Trump seditionists took part in the criminal invasion and looting of the Capitol, attacking police officers charged with protecting the safety of legislators and their staff members. During the attempted coup, extensively documented by the rioters themselves on social media, many of them declared that they were doing Trump's bidding in attempting to stop the certification of the election results. The arrival of National Guard troops to restore order was mysteriously delayed for hours, while armed insurgents with violent intentions hunted elected officials, some of whom escaped with minutes to spare. Trump was impeached a second time, for inciting the insurrection to overthrow the duly elected government. He was banned from major social media companies, having used them to incite the violent melee in which five people were killed. Numerous observers compared the lenient treatment of the mob by some members of the Capitol Police with law enforcement's mass arrests and use of excessive, militarized force toward Black Lives Matter protesters and journalists.

Trump's attempt at an authoritarian coup was unsuccessful. Yet fearful of crossing Trump's radicalized supporters, Republican officials shamelessly aligned themselves with domestic terrorism by opposing a bipartisan investigation that would identify those responsible for it. The party of insurrection, rather than peacefully accept its defeat as part of the democratic process, seeks the demise of American multiracial democracy. Some of its members are bent on glorifying and shielding the criminals of January 6.

The encroachment of far-right, white Christian extremism within the Republican Party, inseparable from the global tide of far-right, xenophobic, nationalist autocratic regimes and political parties, perhaps may arouse the active opposition of the majority of Americans, as was the case in the elections of 2018 and, to a lesser extent, 2020. Perhaps the lesson of Floyd's death, which epitomized the quotidian trauma and terror for African Americans, is the imperative to acknowledge the historical roots of present atrocities if a future descent into the apocalypse is to be avoided.

“Strange Fruit” in Our Time

Goenawan Mohamad writes of George Floyd's death as a lynching. The legendary Indonesian intellectual and journalist's column, which appeared in the Jakarta-based news magazine he founded, *Tempo*, reminds us that racially motivated violence has

outlasted the Jim Crow South, with rising hate crimes against Asian Americans and other racial and religious minorities, and incidents of police brutality occurring with alarming regularity. As the roll call of Black people killed by police grows, we struggle to name the phenomenon in a manner commensurate with the stark reality of living as the potential prey of a police state. Because the disproportionate extrajudicial executions of African Americans by police are seldom referred to as lynchings, it is striking that George Floyd's death leads Goenawan to reflect on the power of Billie Holiday's antilynching anthem, "Strange Fruit."³⁶

Goenawan's admiration for African American culture and music, Negro spirituals, and modern jazz, and such African American writers as Amiri Baraka, may have its origin in Goenawan's engagement with the writings of African American expatriate novelist Richard Wright. Wright visited Indonesia to cover the Bandung Conference of Non-Aligned Nations in 1955, resulting in Wright's book *The Color Curtain: A Report on the Bandung Conference*, published the following year.³⁷

Though Wright's book expressed a general support for anticolonialism, the Indonesian intellectuals who had associated with Wright believed he had overstated the color resentments of Indonesians in the nation's transition to independence from Dutch colonial rule. For his part, Goenawan never met Wright. He was only in his teens, living in Central Java, when Wright visited Jakarta and Bandung in 1955. Goenawan emerged as a prominent Indonesian journalist and writer a generation later. He did not share the views of those who believed Wright had misrepresented them. Goenawan praised Wright, who died in 1960, as a stalwart of artistic and literary independence against repressive state strictures. As Brian Russell Roberts and Keith Foulcher have written, Goenawan drew on several of Wright's books, believing them to "offer a template for understanding the purpose of politics and politicians in Indonesia."³⁸

If anyone thinks that Goenawan refers to an irrelevant past, that the anti-Black hate crimes Holiday sang of no longer occur, or that American democracy is here to stay, Goenawan is here to disabuse you of such folly.³⁹ His account of "Strange Fruit" recalls a not-so-distant past in which millions of Americans tolerated institutionalized violence. Although Goenawan does not mention democracy, he portrays the song, part of an era of African American musical and cultural vibrancy, as an occasion for democratic exchange and transformation.

During the era of segregation, lynchings were the ultimate expression of white dominance, as omnipresent as the separate and substandard railroad cars, schools, and living conditions imposed upon African Americans in the Jim Crow South. According to the Equal Justice Initiative, more than forty-four hundred lynchings were recorded between Reconstruction and World War II.⁴⁰ Mob killings were often organized spectacles attended by large crowds. A good many were planned events, advertised in newspapers. Railroad companies offered excursion rates. These public rituals of mob violence, incited by routine dehumanization of Black people in the white southern press, enlisted white communities in the duty of terrorizing Black people. The men and women who lynched, or supported the practice, sought to reassert the white

supremacist hierarchy that incessant Black striving for freedom and autonomy constantly transgressed. In countless photographs, members of lynch mobs crowded into the frame around the corpse of the victim, burned to cinders or dangling from a tree, their neck stretched. As the number of lynchings decreased from their peak in the 1890s, whites who did not participate in mob murders could consume the spectacle of lynchings in multiple ways, reading news accounts that portrayed mob bloodlust as orderly and civilized, by looking at and circulating photographs and postcards, even collecting, displaying, and viewing grisly “souvenirs” from the remains of mob victims. The historian Grace Elizabeth Hale describes how, in myriad actions, white men and women of the Jim Crow South forged a culture that normalized spectacle lynching: refraining from public condemnation of mob violence, associating with those known to have engaged in extralegal violence as if nothing had happened, mailing to a relative a postcard depicting a lynched Black person surrounded by the lynch mob.⁴¹

This moral degradation of many white Southerners (and no doubt others outside the region) had the weight of cultural authority behind it. White southern spokespersons and newspapers frequently cited the rape of white women by Black men as the justification for lynching, peddling this ruse to obscure white men’s culpability for sexual violence against Black women during the era of segregation. In truth, most Black people were lynched for violating white expectations of deference and submission. Black women and children were lynched, too. Laura Nelson and her teenage son, Laurence, were lynched in Oklahoma in 1911. A photograph shows their bodies hanging from a bridge. Woody Guthrie wrote a song based on the incident.⁴²

Black people were often lynched for laying claim to the rights and duties of citizenship. White racists did not view Black participation in foreign wars as patriotic. Viewed instead as an internal enemy, Black men in uniform inflamed white male anxieties over the protection of white womanhood. Mob violence surged following the global war of 1914–1918. Returning Black veterans were among those lynched, some while in uniform. Jim Crow–era violence was not confined to the South. The Red Summer of 1919 saw outbreaks of white mob violence against Black people in twenty-six cities nationwide, usually caused by postwar competition between Blacks and whites for scarce jobs and housing, and a rising national mood of intolerance. In Tulsa, Oklahoma, in 1921, white police joined civilians in the looting and destruction of the Greenwood district, the wealthiest African American neighborhood in the country, also known as Black Wall Street. White mobs rampaged following rumors, never substantiated, of a young Black man’s rape of a white girl. Over twelve hundred and fifty homes were burned down, leaving ten thousand people homeless. Businesses, schools, and churches, and thirty-five city blocks were destroyed. Not a single person responsible for the violence faced criminal prosecution. White civic leaders in Tulsa sought to erase the destruction of Black Wall Street from public records and memory, an effort that largely succeeded until the 1990s, when a movement of Black survivors and activists sought official recognition and reparations.⁴³

Upon their return from serving overseas in the 1935–1945 global war against fascism, Black veterans from the South confronted fascism at home, resolving to exercise their right to vote. Once again, those who fought to preserve democracy abroad were subjected to white supremacist violence along with other Black Americans. In 1946, US Army veteran Maceo Snipes was shot in the back after defying the Ku Klux Klan and casting his vote in the Georgia Democratic primary. Snipes was taken to the nearest hospital, where white medical staff denied the wounded veteran a blood transfusion because, according to macabre Jim Crow custom, there was no “black blood” stored to give to him from their segregated plasma supply. Twice victimized by his assailants and the doctors who refused to treat him, Snipes died. An all-white jury exonerated the four men who attacked Snipes, a group that included two Klan members who had also served in the war. That same year four young African Americans, two married couples, George W. Dorsey, May Murray Dorsey, Roger Malcolm, and Dorothy Malcolm, were killed by a mob in Georgia, a case that garnered national headlines and sparked antilynching protests in New York and Washington, DC. In 1946, the federal government took the unprecedented action of investigating the deaths of Black victims of white mob violence. But the FBI concluded that it had insufficient evidence to bring charges.

The pattern of Black demands for basic rights and white retaliation and terror persisted. During the modern Black freedom struggle, organizers and activists met with unrelenting state and vigilante violence, justified by the supposed threat to white women posed by Negro rapists. In 1955, 14-year-old Emmett Till of Chicago, visiting relatives in Mississippi, was abducted by a gang of whites and beaten, tortured, shot, and thrown into the river weighed down by a cotton gin fan. The men tried for Till’s death rationalized their heinous action by claiming that Till had flirted with a white woman. His mother, Mamie Till Mobley, fought the state of Mississippi to reclaim his corpse and insisted on an open-casket funeral service back in Chicago, wanting the world to witness the brutality visited upon her son. Photos of Till’s disfigured remains published in the African American-owned press were an indelible object lesson for young Black people on the savagery of Jim Crow. The poet Ernest Wakefield Stevens published “Blood on Mississippi” in his hometown newspaper, the *Cleveland Call and Post*. In words that could describe the reaction to George Floyd’s murder, he wrote, “[a]ll the world must look and shudder! / Decent people have been riled / Everywhere—of every color— / At the lynching of a child.” Little wonder that Holiday continued to record and perform “Strange Fruit” during the late 1950s.⁴⁴

Like many of the protesters, Goenawan sees the “trampling” of George Floyd as continuous with “centuries” of anti-Black violence. Caught in the act, Chauvin seemed untroubled at being recorded. We do not know what he was thinking, but still one recalls those members of lynch mobs posing for photographs during the Jim Crow era. Convinced that he would not be held accountable by a system of state-sanctioned violence, Chauvin appears to have believed that his use of deadly force was justifiable,

just as similar extrajudicial killings by police officers of Black people have been upheld by juries and the criminal–legal system.

As the practice persisted into the twenty-first century, officer-involved shootings and deaths in custody in the US, rarely resulting in criminal charges, remained commonplace, yet seldom explained. During the 1960s civil rights movement, collusion in the Jim Crow South between federal and local law enforcement and Klan vigilantes was routine. Recently, it has come to light that a significant number of violent white supremacists and members of right-wing militias and other organizations are embedded in law enforcement,⁴⁵ a problem some police departments have acknowledged with the arrests of active-duty and retired police officers involved in the January 6 insurrection, and the FBI’s announcement that violent domestic extremism poses an elevated threat to US national security.⁴⁶

White Christian extremism and opposition to multiracial democracy have found a home in the Republican Party. Comparisons of the January 6 insurrection with a lynch mob are not misplaced, given the violent behavior of armed rioters, and the placing of a gallows and noose on Capitol grounds. Hoping to enshrine autocratic white minority rule for generations, as occurred with nearly a century of Jim Crow–era disfranchisement, Republican officials seek to cling to power with more than four hundred bills restricting voting rights introduced in forty-nine states, with notorious voter suppression laws passed in the swing states of Georgia, Texas, and Florida.⁴⁷ Some of the more extreme laws, predicated on false claims of voter fraud and a feigned concern for “election integrity,” empower partisan state officials to overturn elections without any proof of fraud. If disenfranchisement of voters fails to deliver victory for Republican candidates, these provisions for voter nullification seek to ensure a thoroughly rigged, partisan electoral system.

Republican Party state legislatures have extended their attack on Black voting rights and the democratic process to culture and education, as far-right pundits excoriate antiracist public education projects such as *The New York Times’s* 1619 Project. Adopting a strategy of autocratic governments such as Poland, Hungary, and Russia to impose an official white Christian nationalist version of history, US Republican-controlled state legislatures are busily passing legislation banning the teaching of “critical race theory,” effectively making it a crime to discuss white supremacy, slavery and emancipation, and anti-immigrant nativism as central themes in US history.⁴⁸ In light of current efforts to disenfranchise and silence African Americans, it is instructive to revisit the antiracist mobilizations of the Jim Crow era, when civil rights and labor activism, the independent Black press, and even popular music, were at the forefront of Black politics.

The Sound of Revolt

“Strange Fruit” has since been recorded by many artists, but Billie Holiday will always be its definitive interpreter. First recorded by her in 1939 on the Commodore record

label, Holiday had already caused a sensation performing the song as the finale of her act at the Café Society nightclub in New York City. The club welcomed integrated audiences and, as Goenawan suggests, the venue was defined by the progressive politics of its owner, Barney Josephson. Holiday continued to perform the song right up until her death in 1959. Abel Meeropol, who wrote the poem that became the song's lyric, said that it was inspired by a photograph of two victims of a 1930 Indiana lynching, Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith, their bodies suspended above a mob estimated at five thousand, including women and children. Meeropol's sardonic lyric, including the couplet "Black bodies swinging in the Southern breeze / Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees," still resonates in the era of Black Lives Matter.

In his book on the song, David Margolick includes the recollections of those who saw Holiday perform "Strange Fruit."⁴⁹ Her mesmerizing performance revived for some Black listeners memories of violence that had affected their families. For others, it was a public corroboration of shared trauma among Black people. Holiday's art forged a community of people who could not remain silent. A young white labor organizer became an evangelist of sorts, carrying the Commodore 78 disc with him, playing it for friends and associates, then to others across Wisconsin and Missouri who had never heard anyone speak about lynching, let alone about its victims as human beings. Goenawan imagines Holiday performing the song on stage. "Her voice seemed burdened by ghosts wanting to talk." He may have been thinking of Wright's 1935 poem, "Between the World and Me," in which the speaker happens upon a lynching victim's remains, and then *becomes* the victim, narrating the brutalization visited upon them.⁵⁰

Goenawan digresses from his tributes to Holiday, Meeropol, and the American Communist Party, noteworthy for being the only American political party at that time opposed to racial segregation, to condemn the antifascist German Frankfurt School critic Theodor Adorno for his elitist diatribes against jazz and Black music. Though a perceptive critic of art and (Western classical) music, and a trenchant analyst of the mass psychopathology of fascism, Adorno was unable to hear "the expression of revolt" in jazz. Despite encountering jazz and African American music during his exile in California, Adorno failed to recognize in the blues—"in Bessie Smith's and Billie Holiday's bitter tones"—not simply misery, but the reminder that misery and its social causes must be eliminated, "that the situation must change." Goenawan's view of Adorno's constrained aesthetics and politics is rooted in the former's reverence for the Popular Front-era of leftwing and antifascist politics and culture, of which "Strange Fruit" is an iconic example.⁵¹ Meeropol (writing under the pseudonym Lewis Allan) and other writers and performers, including Paul Robeson, Huddie Ledbetter, Woody Guthrie, and so many others in film, literature, and other artistic fields, believed that artistic creativity and democratic movements for political and economic justice went hand in hand. For Goenawan, Adorno, a man ostensibly of the left, seems to stand in for the reactionary political forces that blacklisted Robeson, drove Wright and other

Black writers into exile, and detained and incarcerated such Black radical activists as Claudia Jones and C. L. R. James.

Goenawan's critique of Adorno may also signal a larger indictment of the inability of some white leftists and activists to respect the autonomy of Black struggles, an old tension that resurfaced in the protests of summer 2020. Goenawan understood this phenomenon, having written elsewhere about Richard Wright's clashes with white party officials in "I Tried to Be a Communist."⁵² Goenawan praised 1940s bebop as a form of cultural rebellion against swing music, which epitomized the standardization of the culture industry. Ironically, given his critique of Adorno, Goenawan's analytical perspective aligns with the Frankfurt School's view of the crass manipulations of the culture industry, an approach which also informed the pathbreaking Black music criticism of Amiri Baraka. Baraka interpreted modern jazz as its Black creators' resistance to the commercial expropriations of Black music by the white-dominated music industry. Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, Mary Lou Williams, Thelonious Monk, and others had constructed out of blues a harmonically complex modern music that was not so easily copied and commodified.⁵³ Goenawan sometimes can be a bit dogmatic, belittling Louis Armstrong for his "happy, nice tunes." Not only was Armstrong an unparalleled genius from the slums of New Orleans without whose innovations jazz would be unimaginable, he was also rebellious in his own way.⁵⁴ Holiday credited Armstrong and Bessie Smith, another genius organic intellectual from Chattanooga, as the two main artistic influences in developing her own style.⁵⁵

Goenawan senses that his enthusiasm for jazz, his nostalgia for a vibrant left internationalism, are no longer widely shared. "Who listens? Who remembers?" He believes jazz has been domesticated, co-opted by an omnivorous American capitalism. For Goenawan, the murder of George Floyd indicts a racist, authoritarian US political order that normalizes state and paramilitary violence. "The Ku Klux Klan, formerly the angry voice outside, has now transformed into the face of politicians, police, city planners, and various parts of the establishment that tacitly perpetuate the alienation of 'niggers.'" Floyd's death has opened our eyes and ears to this analysis of the global proportions of state repression, as seen in the brutal crackdowns of police and military forces against pro-democracy protesters in the US and abroad.

A Time to Call Things by Their Name

In December 2016, amid calls from some quarters in the media for more empathetic reporting on Trump voters, the Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie attributed Donald Trump's improbable victory to pervasive narratives of racism and misogyny in American political life.⁵⁶ Adichie saw Trump's election as potentially extinguishing the "poetry" and promise of American freedom. The target of Adichie's searing analysis was not Trump, but the silences, evasions, and faulty premises that hold sway in American political and journalistic discourse. Bypassing Trump's lies, Adichie condemned the fictions and mystifications infesting our language. She sought to reclaim the narrative

against “the dark populism sweeping the West.”⁵⁷ Huge swaths of print journalism and television cable news failed to heed Adichie’s warnings, their judgment and ethics compromised by profit-seeking and the hubris and naivete of American exceptionalism.

The US media’s performance over the next four years did not rise to Adichie’s challenge “to educate and inform. ... To make clear choices about what really matters.” During the 2016 campaign, too many US journalists seemed eager to normalize Trump and disparage Hillary Clinton, prizing morally obtuse journalistic notions of “both sides” objectivity over democratic and human values. Even as the administration rolled out its cruel white nationalist policies, the press shrunk from analyzing the ultimate endgame of the administration’s cascade of lies and demagoguery—including constant attacks on the press—its neofascist authoritarianism. As Darnella Frazier implored us to do a year after Floyd’s death, Adichie had demanded that we “resist the slightest extension in the boundaries of what is right and just.”⁵⁸ To be sure, by the summer of 2020, mainstream corporate media pushed back against the deceit and disinformation that characterized the official and far-right media responses to Covid-19, the Black Lives Matter uprisings across the US, and the upcoming election. By then, however, the far-right media ecosystem, including social media platforms, had radicalized a disaffected segment of the US electorate who continue to prefer a corrupt, authoritarian demagogue to a stable, competent leader pursuing an ambitious social democratic legislative agenda aimed at improving the lives of the neediest Americans.

To Adichie, the outcome of the 2016 election meant that it was time to speak blunt Black feminist truths, to condemn toxic racism and sexism, and the nativist association of Americanness with white identity. “Now is the time to call things what they actually are, because language can illuminate truth as much as it can obfuscate it. Now is the time to forge new words. ‘Alt-right’ is benign. ‘White-supremacist right’ is more accurate.”⁵⁹ Mainstream media organizations fed into the “overheated, out-sized hostility” Hillary Clinton’s campaign faced, channeling the sexism of negative “mainstream attitudes toward women’s ambition.”⁶⁰ Indeed, corporate media’s quest for ratings and profits favored the Trump campaign by broadcasting his rallies, reprehensible spectacles of neofascist glorification of bigotry, misogyny, and violence.

Like Okri, Adichie called for empathy. But she viewed calls for sympathetic treatment of Trump supporters as misguided: “The responsibility to forge unity belongs not to the denigrated but to the denigrators. The premise for empathy has to be equal humanity; it is an injustice to demand that the maligned identify with those who question their humanity.” As she was writing this, white nationalists and neo-Nazis were publicly hailing Trump and Hitler, possibly informing Adichie’s warning against a timidity prevalent in US academic and political discourse about certain historical analogies. “Now is not the time,” Adichie warned, “to tiptoe around historical references. Recalling Nazism is not extreme; it is the astute response of those who know that history gives both context and warning.”⁶¹ Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez

(D-NY) caused a firestorm when using the term “concentration camps” to refer to the detention facilities used in the policy of separating migrant families and children at the US-Mexico border.⁶² The appropriateness of her analogy was confirmed by the howls of politicians and pundits who supported the inhumane policy and sought to change the subject by attacking Ocasio-Cortez. Adichie perhaps would not have been surprised by the ivory tower rejections of the term “fascism” as inappropriate for describing the actions of the Trump administration and its supporters, which persisted even after his election-eve directives to white nationalist paramilitary groups “to stand by.” Hindsight was hardly necessary to call things by their proper name.⁶³ The violence of the January 6 attempted coup was foretold by the deadly neo-Nazi, white supremacist rioting in Charlottesville in August 2017.

Adichie called for journalists to become more skeptical, to take seriously the centrality of racism and white identity politics in the story of Trump’s rise. Her words anticipated the handwringing by liberals and leftists who decried “identity politics” as African Americans’ unfounded preoccupation with race and racism, and “wokeness,” as a distraction from the “real” struggle between capital and labor.⁶⁴ Adichie’s indictment of US amnesia and the mystifications of racism and misogyny across the political spectrum concluded with an appeal to the hopeful possibilities of “alternative forms” to dark, far-right populism. “Bernie Sanders’s message did not scapegoat the vulnerable.” The progressive populism of Obama’s first election was marked by “remarkable inclusiveness.” It was now time “to counter lies with facts ... while also proclaiming the greater truths: of our equal humanity, of decency, of compassion.” To Adichie, such sentiments were “obvious,” but “[e]very precious ideal must be reiterated, every obvious argument made, because an ugly idea left unchallenged begins to turn the color of normal.”⁶⁵ Adichie’s words were flashes of lightning that anticipated the storms and destruction that have come to pass: a surge in hate crimes and domestic violent extremism, family separations at the border, six hundred thousand Americans and counting dead from Covid, and a democratic process under parliamentary and paramilitary siege.

Though unmentioned by Adichie, Black Lives Matter was just such an obvious statement. As slogan and movement, BLM made a much-needed rebuttal to the “postracial” triumphalism of domestic US politics, which celebrated symbolic Black political and cultural representation as a diversion from the police state conditions and economic insecurity imposed on poor and marginalized Black and Latino communities subjected to neoliberal governance. Far-right white nationalists and Republican officials alike attacked the movement because it exposed and confronted American society’s persistent racial and social inequalities. As a historical echo of the slogan Black Power, adopted by Black activists during the late 1960s to highlight the limits of color-blind US racial liberalism, Black Lives Matter emphasized the necessity for systemic change and Black political and economic empowerment. It is striking that Black Lives Matter, like Black Power, emerging from local and national US struggles against injustice, helped galvanize global freedom movements. Black aspirations for

multiracial US democracy hold potentially universal appeal, not only to peoples of African descent worldwide, but to many white Americans and Europeans of goodwill who view themselves as products of imperial and colonial histories of racism.

Black Lives Matter has made history in the US by grounding universal humanism in Black subjectivity and experience. Throughout Europe, particularly in postcolonial England and France, universalist doctrines have served as a cudgel against racialized groups and religious communities, fueling a nativism that views multiculturalism and antiracist movements as portents of national decline. Perhaps its defiant rejection of national ideologies of universalism and nonracialism explains the appeal of Black Lives Matter in such countries as France, England, Brazil, and elsewhere. Right- (and left-) wing elite proponents of universalism in these countries may regard BLM as an unwelcome American export. From the standpoint of local antiracist movements in these and other countries, BLM offers a transnational, decolonial challenge to universalism. As a global language of liberation, BLM insists on the primacy of intersectional approaches to Black struggles as part and parcel of struggles for economic justice. The US movement's inclusive vision of peaceful protest and multiracial American democracy inspires solidarity between ongoing local and global decolonizing struggles for human freedom and planetary security. In short, Black Lives Matter raises a fundamental challenge to Western white supremacy, confronting past and present historical crimes against humanity inflicted upon peoples of African descent and Africans across many nations.

Transnationalizing the Struggle against White Supremacy

On June 17, 2020, Philonise Floyd testified by video link before the United Nations Human Rights Council, in support of a resolution by African member nations to set up an independent commission of inquiry to investigate the deaths of African Americans while in police custody.⁶⁶ The United States was absent from the council's urgent debate on racism in Geneva convened by African member nations in response to a call by more than six hundred human rights groups, its delegation withdrawn earlier by the Trump administration. Floyd made an impassioned appeal to diplomats and Michelle Bachelet, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and former president of Chile. "The way you saw my brother tortured and murdered on camera is the way that Black people are treated by police in America." As worldwide mass protests were underway, Floyd, like African American activists before him, appealed for international support. "You in the United Nations are our brothers and sisters' keepers in America, and you have the power to help us get justice for my brother George Floyd. I am asking you to help him. I am asking you to help me. I am asking you to help us—Black people in America."⁶⁷

Two days after the sentencing of Derek Chauvin, the Human Rights Council issued the annual report of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights. Commissioned after Floyd's death, and conceived as a follow-up to the Durban

Declaration from the 2001 Durban Conference on Racism, the report, “Promotion and Protection of the Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms of Africans and Peoples of African Descent against Excessive Force and Other Human Rights Violations by Law Enforcement Officers,” was explicitly framed by the murder of George Floyd and the subsequent global protests of racially motivated police violence.⁶⁸

The report called on the leaders and legal systems of Western nations with Black and African populations to adopt a “transformative agenda” to dismantle systemic racism, and to end impunity, holding accountable perpetrators of racist behavior, violence, and hate crimes. The report analyzed the deaths of Black peoples at the hands of police as a global phenomenon, involving several nations and legal systems, noting “striking similarities” in anti-Black racial profiling in the criminal legal systems of different nations. Bachelet called for nations to listen to and engage people of African descent, including women and youth, ensuring their participation at every level in ending systemic racism in policing, from law enforcement to policy-making processes, and to protect their rights to peaceful assembly and protest. Accordingly, the preparation of the report was aided by publicly available research, as well as contributions from more than three hundred academics, law practitioners, business, civil society, and human rights organizations, and representatives of advocacy organizations and equity groups. Family members of the victims of fatal encounters with police were also consulted. The report also linked contemporary forms of racism, dehumanization, and exclusion to legacies of racial oppression, including enslavement, the transatlantic slave trade in enslaved Africans, and colonialism, which were sources of false narratives of white supremacy, anti-Black stereotypes, and the presumption of guilt against Black peoples that all too often result in violations of human rights by police. Bachelet called on nations to “make amends” for “centuries of violence and discrimination” through a range of initiatives seeking redress, including, but not limited to, financial reparations. As part of such “truth-telling” processes, the report called for reimagining public spaces with respect to the commemoration “of the contributions of and harms against people of African descent and ensuring that legacies of oppression, including enslavement and colonialism are not glorified.”⁶⁹ In short, the report endorsed and codified the multifaceted demands of the global protests of 2020.

The report analyzed one hundred and ninety incidents of police-related fatalities of Black peoples worldwide, ninety-eight per cent of them occurring in Europe, Latin America, and North America over the last ten years. In more than eighty-five percent of those cases, one of three factors was decisive: the policing of minor offenses, traffic stops, and searches, as in the cases of George Floyd (United States), Adama Traoré (France), and Luana Barbosa dos Reis Santos (Brazil); the use of police officers as first responders in mental health crises, as in the case of Kevin Clarke (United Kingdom); and the resort to special police operations, often undertaken as antidrug or antigang operations, as in the cases of Breonna Taylor (United States), Janner García Palomino (Colombia), and João Pedro Mattos Pinto (Brazil).

There can be no doubt that the Bachelet report, in its attentiveness to the victims of racially motivated police violence, and calling for transformative action and redress, has ratified the work of the Black Lives Matter movement and its precursors. The United Nations affirmed its support for antiracist movements in the US, Europe, and Latin America. It defended as legitimate the work of actors fighting for racial justice and their rights to freedom of expression and assembly. The Bachelet report provides a resource for local, regional, national, and global antiracist movements to mine local histories of resistance and to contest local cultural traditions of racism, while internationalizing their struggles, forging solidarities and alliances.

The global uprisings of 2020 have raised broad awareness of repressed US and Western histories of racism. Unnerved by the exposure and repudiation of systemic racism, Republican-controlled state governments seek to criminalize honest and open classroom discussions of racism, past and present. This from a delusional far-right that seeks to ban the teaching of “critical race theory,” ostensibly to protect children, while at the same time opposing mask-mandates by school districts, placing their children in harm’s way from the Delta variant of Covid. The very notion that their children must be protected from histories of US racism and colonialism is rooted in a profound unconsciousness of their own racism and neosegregationist values, supercharged by fear, ignorance, and shame.

Shame must be avoided at all costs for the preservation of a secure white (supremacist) identity unburdened by the past, a precious heritage to pass on to white children. The problem is that the past is damning. White supremacy was dominant, preached and practiced by pro-segregation politicians, religious leaders, and newspaper editors and enshrined by the civic leaders, who erected statues of colonizers and Confederate generals in public squares. The idolatrous faith of white supremacy and anti-Black hatred flattered economically oppressed whites as it waged psychological warfare against Black peoples. Its ugliness was revealed once again to the world in the gruesome spectacle of George Floyd’s murder. That event initiated a new phase of mobilization, this time globally, for racial justice. Floyd’s death shattered the racial innocence and naivete of many whites. Those whites (and members of other social groups) joined a nonviolent, Black-led movement in which police violence became the central issue in determining the fate of multiracial democracy. The Movement for Black Lives, though decidedly not aligned with the Democratic Party, is essentially a key part of the US pro-democracy project. The Republican Party, with its far-right apologists for white supremacy and violence by police and extremists, hopes to achieve autocratic minority rule and oligarchic state capture through voter suppression and exploiting a US political system with such anti-majoritarian vulnerabilities as the Electoral College, the Senate, and the Supreme Court.

White Americans need not be ashamed of their history. No doubt many whites were nauseated by horrific things said and done in the name of white supremacy. Many whites took part in Black-led political struggles against racial oppression, from the abolitionists to the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, to the Movement for

Black Lives. In 2020, many whites spoke out and marched against the likes of Derek Chauvin, who was unabashed at being photographed at the scene of a crime of racial terror. White Americans of goodwill, increasingly mindful of the history of struggles for expanding US citizenship and democracy, should not be surprised, nor complacent, in the realization that Republican elected officials, including the partisan conservative majority on the US Supreme Court, seek to reinstate a new national regime of white supremacy, combined with an attack on women's and LGBTQ rights, after what appears to be a half-century interregnum of multiracial democracy achieved by the social movements of the 1960s.

The world watches the Republican Party's ongoing attempts to legitimize the violent insurrection on January 6, providing cover for white supremacists' depraved sense of the righteousness of domestic terrorism and political violence. The global far-right reaches out in solidarity to its US counterpart in white Christian nationalism. In the meantime, US laws that attempt to silence past struggles against racism seem motivated by the fear that children and youth will manifest that elemental moral sense and humanity that Darnella Frazier spoke of. George Floyd, and the shocking manner of his death, will be remembered as the catalyst of a global pro-democracy movement. His memory and the events of 2020 will continue to illuminate the racial atrocities of the past and inspire future mobilizations and struggles in the US and abroad against systemic racism and police violations of human rights.

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