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George Floyd Postmortem Protest as a Popular Attack against a Metanarrative of “Dominating”

A Literature Review by Samba Camara, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

El-Hajj Malik Shabazz, widely known as Malcolm X, once said, “there will ultimately be a clash between the oppressed and those that do the oppressing. I believe that there will be a clash between those who want freedom, justice and equality for everyone and those who want to continue the systems of exploitation.” The sweeping demonstrations in the wake of George Floyd’s brutal murder by Minneapolis officer, Derek Chauvin, attest to the veracity of Shabazz’s statement. The protest movement that erupted on the fatal day of May 25th was multiracial, and it charged a heavy attack on a centuries-old metanarrative of White supremacy. Over the past three weeks, many protest slogans were reiterated among large protest coalitions urging for serious action against racist policing: “I CAN’T BREATHE,” “POLICE MUST PROTECT NOT KILL,” “HANDS UP DON’T SHOOT,” and “SILENCE IS VIOLENCE.” These slogans bring an American history of anti-Black brutality in the spotlight. From the 1965 beating and fatal shooting of Civil Rights activist Jimmie Lee Jackson to the recent shooting of Breonna Taylor (March 13, 2020), the fatal chokeholds of Eric Garner (July 17, 2014), Javier Ambler (March 28, 2019), Manuel Ellis (March 3, 2020), George Floyd, and anything in between, Black America has endured a history of police violence gone unpunished, as most prosecutions against police end in non-indictment. What we have seen with George Floyd’s death, however, stood to challenge the status quo. The bystander video recorded by courageous teenage girl, Darnella Frazier, is alarming. It shows George Floyd dying under the knee of Chauvin while pleading, “I can’t breathe.” These were the same words that Garner, Ambler and Ellis were reportedly heard uttering, begging for their lives before they died in police custody, respectively, in 2014, 2019, and 2020. Many more died in police custody unheard; and perhaps they too had pleaded, “I can’t breathe.” George Floyd falls in the long list of black Americans killed by police in sheer violation of human rights and law (Beer, 2020). But his voice, though weakened by Chauvin’s knee, resounded around the world, carried by social media.

As protest spread, the movement seized Floyd’s painful death as a historic moment to reclaim long-awaited justice. For the first time, police have openly spoken against and condemned the racist crimes of their colleagues. In some US cities, officers took a knee in solidarity with protesters. Confederate monuments have been fallen and several are marked to come off (Jess Bidgood et al., 2020). In Bristol, UK, the statue of a 17th-century slave trader was toppled by anti-racist protesters, while in London another was removed (CBS News 2020; BBC 2020). HBO Max has removed 1939 film *Gone with the Wind* off stream (BBC 2020). *Little Britain* was taken out from BBC iPlayer, Netflix and BritBox for their racist scenes. Merriam-Webster revised its definition of “racism.” And so on. These symbolic actions are powerful. They constitute critical steps towards unraveling the history of anti-Black racism that blood-stained Euro-American foundation for centuries.

In the US, it is a white supremacist metanarrative that comes under serious attack – not just from the black victims; but from white Americans and others as well. But why do such symbolic attacks on this metanarrative matter? To be sure, narratives – any narrative – matter, because they define the way a people perceive themselves and others. Narratives matter for

they shape people, and people define the world. Chauvin's blatant misconduct leading to the brutal murder of Floyd is couched in the spirit of white supremacy. In the latter, the black male body, in particular, is perceived as naturally violent, dangerous, and 'not-quite-human;' therefore, justifying the resort to brutal force to tame and control it. From slavery to colonization and to segregation, this metanarrative has served to rationalize and normalize the inhumane treatment of black people by whites. Fundamentally racist, the metanarrative was finely wrought in the Euro-American discourse of modernity, beginning from the Enlightenment period. Obviously, this metanarrative is not an end in itself. Its purpose lies in a destructive will to "DOMINATE," not just today's US streets, but the 'Other' entirely. Historically, fields like biology, law, religion, and popular culture were put to work to weave and erect a white supremacist metanarrative of civilizational progress wherein the black phenotype is ranked last in the ladder.

Already in the 18th century, the science of the so-called Enlightenment had theorized and justified human inequalities by inventing the notion of "race," which became central in the Eurocentric ranking and hierarchizing of humans. The idea of 'human races' is no more than a mere imperialist fiction for it does not hold on a biological truth. Enlightenment science took 'human variations' erroneously for 'biological human races' (blacks, whites, etc.). In *The Race Myth*, biologist Joseph Graves (2005) explains that all human variations – say, for instance, the physical differences between a French Gaul and a Senegalese Wolof person – are the result of only less than 5% of their genetic makeups. Meaning, the 'White' Gaul and the 'Black' Wolof have over 95% of their genetic maps in common. The US Library of Medicine records that, in fact, 99% of our 3 billion DNA bases are the same in all people. Graves (2005) adds that several prior scientific conditions must be met for there to be *many* biological human races. One of them is that the genetic distance between the so-called 'human races' would have to be significantly greater than the genetic distance found within each human population. This isn't our case because human populations ("blacks," "whites," etc.) have an average genetic distance of about 2% among them, while the genetic variability within a population (say, blacks) is greater. Therefore, the reasonable conclusion to make is there is no such thing as *several* biological human races. There is only one biological human race to which we all belong.

What is race then, if not a biological fact? It is a sociohistorical construct, formed through the deployment of an imperialist artillery of symbols. Said to be of a race different than that of humans (the 'whites'), the black subject is portrayed as the villain primitive, the ugly, the backward, in short, the enemy of humanity to be controlled and policed by all means and used at will. Erected on the fiction of race, Western thought structures itself around dichotomies, imposing upon the world what Achille Mbembe (2017) calls the fantasy of 'whiteness' as the signifier of privilege against 'blackness' as its opposite. In the science of this obscurity, Dutch anatomist Petrus Camper (1722-1789) could come up with his facial angles suggesting the "African moor" as the missing link between the Asian man and the orangutan in the chain of beings. In early 19th century, French naturalist Georges Cuvier (1832-1832) could gaze into the body of South African Khoi Khoi woman Sara Baartman and describe her genitalia as animalistic in front of members of the French Académie des sciences (Maseko, 1998; Mitchell, 2020). Upon Baartman's questionable death in Paris in 1815, Cuvier hastened to acquire her body, remove and store her brain in a glass, cut out and preserve her genitals to further investigate her supposed animality.

The scientific racism wielded on Baartman became the bedrock of European misrepresentations of Black sexuality and personhood. "Not-quite-human" became an epithet anticipated on biased studies of the Black subject. Through the 16th and 18th centuries, this racist metanarrative had made it acceptable to whites to commodify black bodies. In 1776, the racist dichotomy of the European Enlightenment shaped the paradoxical notion of liberty among some of the pro-slavery fathers who believed Blacks were naturally slaves and only

good for providing labor. In Africa, this metanarrative had made it normal for European powers to dispossess Africans of their land, lives, and labor. It made it possible for White Americans to conduct lynchings as cultural spectacle. White supremacy is what underpins the racist myth of the Black male assailant. A myth that grounded the lynching of at least 2,732 blacks during the lynching epidemics of the 1880s-1910s (Du Bois, 198). In 1955, two white males mutilated the body of 14-year-old Emmett Till, accused of “wolf-whistling” adult white woman Carolyn Bryant (b.1934) (Tyson, 2017). Six decades later, Bryant would recant her testimony and admit that Till had never threatened or harassed her. In 1915 alone, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) recorded 80 lynchings of Black people and over half of them were based on pure suspicion, futile allegation, or petty charges; just as Floyd’s death in 2020 resulted from an argument over an alleged \$20 counterfeit bill. White supremacy drove the legal racism that plagued freedmen’s lives during the Reconstruction and Post-Reconstruction periods. Until the day God decided to bless Blacks in America with a soul like Thurgood Marshall (1908-1993), African Americans had undergone outrageous legal racism and ostracism.

In the realm of American popular culture, nowhere is the nurturing of white supremacist metanarrative more dangerous than in D.W Griffith’s 1915 film, *Birth of a Nation*. Adapted from the 1905 novel of Thomas Dixon Jr (1864-1946), *The Klansman*, the silent epic renders a racist story of the American Civil War. It portrays (Black) freedmen as obsessed with intermarriage, indulging in legally sanctioned excesses, and vengeful violence mainly to coerce White women into sexual relations. The film depicts Southern whites forming the Ku Klux Klan to defend themselves against such abominations and to protect ‘Aryan purity’ and romanticized antebellum South. *Birth of a Nation* was heavily politicized, especially by a supremacist agenda. Endorsed by President Woodrow Wilson (1856-1924), Dixon’s classmate at John Hopkins, the movie was screened in the White House on the 50th anniversary of the Civil War. This presidential credit was nothing short of a blessing on the revival of the Klan and its agenda of anti-black violence. The film’s narrative of racist violence was woven in its subtle staging of Black male character Gus, played by black-faced White actor Walter Long. A freshly emancipated Black, Gus is scripted as a sexual brute, abusive of his new freedom, lusting for innocent White woman Flora. In a peak scene, Gus chases recklessly after Flora. Desperate, she runs to escape away, but falls off a cliff and dies. Flora’s tragic death is one scene where the film’s racist fantasy becomes dangerous. By fantasizing a violence that white supremacists have long projected on the Black body, the film urges White Southerners to rally the Klan as it launches a campaign to exterminate ‘Black brutes’. White fantasy becomes reality as its racist flames justify death.

Griffith’s Gus was not a random occurrence. It was purposefully fetched in White America’s deep taste for Post-Reconstruction minstrelsy. Gus is a perfect rendering of the caricatural minstrel character, ‘Buck.’ The Buck, the Coon, Uncle Tom, the Tragic Mulatto, and the Mammy form the pantheon of five stock minstrel characters that shaped Black misrepresentation in US silent cinema, early talking film, and contemporary American popular media. To this day, cartoons, ads, TV shows, and Hollywood movies continue tapping on minstrel characterization both explicitly and implicitly. Depending on the epoch or the region, Ronald Jackson II (2006) and Howard and Jackson II (2013) show how this caricatural discourse is replete with the same racist dichotomy as in the Enlightenment discourse. It scripts the Black subject as exotic/strange, violent, incompetent/uneducated, hypersexual, exploitable, and innately incapacitated. This fantasized Black subject is counterpoised to an idealized white subject constructed as normal, non-violent, rational, knowledgeable, sexually in-control, and intellectually high-functioning. Unfortunately, these false dichotomies continue to define our real lives as they constitute the underlying measure of how we are viewed, judged, and policed today.

To cut it short, Chauvin's brutality against Floyd is larger than act of "police misconduct." It is the physical manifestation of a white supremacist metanarrative in residual form. It follows a genealogy of racist violence to which Whites have subjected Blacks for centuries. Chauvin's action, like many of its kind, is embedded in the psyche of a deeply racist Euro-American metanarrative.

Now, what should we do in the face of this persistent systemic racism? There is a ton of things, and everyone has a role to play. But it is crucial, first of all, that we deconstruct and dismantle the metanarrative of white supremacy, which has subtly undergirded psychological and physical racism in US history. This can be done using the same artillery of symbols that had been used creating it: science, religion, art, popular culture; in addition to contemporary media and education. One need not produce 'White supremacism upside down' or profess a discourse of anti-White Black supremacism in classrooms, media, or pop culture to overturn the status quo. Instead, we need a humanized engagement with these. This calls for an inclusive approach and serious attempt at removing lingering racist bias. There is hope, given that the counter-narrative to white supremacism has already unleashed itself. Floyd's murder spewed out large multiracial coalitions of protestors who set in motion several important legal and political actions. Protestors removed Confederate statues; and they challenged police, local authorities, and the highest institutions of this country in the name of equity and human rights. This, however, must not solely be temporary action, thrust by immediate emotion. Our struggle must be definite and focused by keeping in mind that we must always move forward with humanism.

Secondly, the American gun problem remain an urgent issue. It is more urgent when "American police shoot, kill and imprison more people than other developed countries" (Picheta & Petterson, 2020). This calls for structural reform in police codes and police culture. It may be true that "Guns don't kill people; people kill people" (Johnson, 2020). But many guns in many wrong hands cause more death. Several police shootings allege that their victim was assumed armed. Police 'fear,' whether genuine or not, increases fatality among civilians. Therefore, cutting down on gun possession for both police and civilians will certainly reduce murder. To change police culture means mending the relationship of hostility between police and policed communities. At the local level, police must change its public image by ensuring, first, that its demographics reflects those of their community. In 2010 Ferguson, MO, where unarmed 18-year old Michael Brown was shot and killed, the population was "67 percent black, but just 3 out of its 53 police officers are Black"(Williams, 2014). This is one among many instances of Black under-representation. More guns and more police on the streets will not provide safety until policed communities are able to see police officers as 'protectors' not 'killers.'

Thirdly, accountability must be weighed seriously if we are to dismantle the underlying supremacist metanarrative. Accountability measures the responsibility of every American citizen in the outcome of our political action or inaction. "Silence is violence" just as non-action cautions the oppressor's action. In Ava DuVernay's historical drama, *Selma*, she portrays this idea of accountability in the context of the 1965 killing of Jimmie Lee Jackson by Alabama state trooper James Bonard Fowler. Placed in the mouth of actor David Oyelowo who plays Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., the powerful monologue goes:

"Who murdered Jimmie Lee Jackson?... We know a state trooper acting under the orders of George Wallace pointed the gun and pulled the trigger. But how many fingers were on that trigger? ... Every white lawmaker who abuses the law to terrorize, every white politician who feeds on hatred and prejudice, every white preacher who preaches the Bible and stays silent before his white congregation. Who murdered Jimmie Lee Jackson? Every Negro man and woman who stands by

without joining in this fight as their brothers and sisters are humiliated, brutalized and ripped from this earth.”

Finally, equity must replace ‘White privilege.’ Observing contemporary American society, we can comprehend White privilege as the set of unearned and illegitimate favors, opportunities, and advantages that come as the benefit of ‘being white.’ White privilege equates the underprivilege of non-Whites. White privilege exists just like ‘male privilege’ in patriarchal societies and ‘aristocratic-class privilege’ in caste societies. It becomes the synonym of *de facto* unequal opportunity. It causes unequal distribution of national wealth and hijacks public resources and services to the greater advantage of only Whites. White privilege is a fact of American history as wrought in a white supremacist metanarrative. It is also a status quo granting Whites a significantly greater social acceptability than non-Whites. There may as well be some Whites arguing, “I have no privilege?” But the truth is they still own it as a ‘skin right.’ One thing American policing has taught us is ‘being Black is a ‘crime,’ let alone ‘driving while Black.’ The privilege of whiteness is what makes ‘blackness’ a curse. For committing the same crimes, Black Americans get tougher sentences than their White counterparts (The Sentencing Project, 2018). This has caused a historical overrepresentation of Blacks in US prison population (Federal Bureau of Prisons, 2020). White privilege is why a Georgia cop could say to a white driver, “Remember we only kill Black people” (CNN, 2020). It explains why Black teenagers get shot and killed by police for “playing cop” with toy guns or when stopped on car traffic. While “gun-toting” White adult protesters (against COVID-19 shutdown) are simply arrested (BBC, 2020). Ghettoization, redlining, and ‘financial profiling’ still suffocate Black lives in the name of White privilege.

So, does the White-privilege status quo matter? Yes, it does; because it grounds subtle structural inequity and leads into the current condition of Black in America. Therefore, to end racist brutality such as Chauvin’s on Floyd, it takes serious action among White American citizens as a whole; both protest and something larger. It necessitates relinquishing oneself from unearned privilege. To end anti-Black racism, it takes sincere humanism and love for one another. Genuine love, active love, will empty one’s unjustifiable hatred of humanity. In *Black Skin, White Mask*, Frantz Fanon (1952/2008) notes, “that true love, real love” is “wishing for others what one postulates for oneself when this postulate integrates the permanent values of human reality.” This love, he adds, “requires the mobilization of psychological agencies liberated from unconscious tensions” (p.25).

In sum, Chauvin’s brutal murder of George Floyd is not an isolated act of racist hatred. It results from a White supremacist genealogy of violence, whose physical residues we are still witnessing. This supremacism was upheld by fantasies constructed around a supremacist metanarrative of vilifying, over-powering, and dominating the Other. Love and humanized action will demolish such metanarratives, including the one that’s been choke-holding African Americans for over four centuries now.

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