

George Floyd: Race, Injustice and Hope
A Personal Reflection, Dr R. David Muir, Humanities

The last time the BAME staff network met, the global pandemic was the main topic on the agenda. Its disproportionate impact on BAME communities in the UK and the US was discussed. Staff also shared how Covid-19 and the lockdown was affecting them, their families and our students. Two members of staff shared the sad news of the death of members in their immediate family; there were also sharing of poems and inspirational verses. Like many others, I was concerned about Covid-19, the persistence of health inequalities by the disproportionate numbers of BAME health and care professionals who have died; and equally important was the realization that the number of BAME deaths was a marker, a function of wider racial inequality. After taking other factors into consideration, the figures then, as now,¹ show that Covid-19's impact on BAME communities is merely disclosing realities we were already too well aware of, even before Theresa May's Race Disparity Audit: namely, the persistence of racial inequality and its replication across other socio-economic indices. Langston Hughes' poem was uppermost in my thoughts at the time and I shared this with the group.

In his *A Dream Deferred*, the poet captures the great disappointment, the constitutional and cultural contradiction, and illusion of the American Dream for the African:

What happens to a dream deferred?
Does it dry up
Like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore
And then run?
Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over
like a syrupy sweet?
Maybe it just sags
like a heavy load.
Or does it explode?

But we are here today not only because of Covid-19 continues to affect all of us in one way or another, but also because of the death of George Floyd in the US. It is that that I want to address now. I want to structure my short reflection around three things. Firstly, what we witnessed on that fateful day that George Floyd lost his life; secondly, what it has inspired; and, finally, how we can respond.

On Monday 25 May, George Floyd lost his life as a white police officer kept his knee on his neck, asphyxiating him, strangling him, choking the life out of another black body. Thanks to the near universal technology, ownership and use of the mobile phone and its democratic distribution and dissemination of messages and images through social media, the world saw the public and brutal murder, execution, assassination of an unarmed black man by a law enforcement officer in Minneapolis, Minnesota. He was unarmed; he was not resisting arrest;

¹ See Public Health England, *Covid-19: review of disparities in risks and outcomes*, 2 June 2020.

he was compliant. Thanks to this new form of citizen's journalism and reportage we witnessed the meaning of America; a sign and symbol of what it is, has been and continues to be for many African Americans.

The African American philosopher and cultural critic, Cornel West, would argue that what we saw is far from exceptional in America: it's normal, black bodies have had the life sucked out of them from the day they arrived in the so-called 'New World' whether by extracted labour through chattel slavery, post-Reconstruction Jim Crow laws, practices or public lynching.² If I were to ask my friend, the late Professor James Henry Cone, he would respond in his inimitable high pitched voice: 'David, this was a public lynching on the streets of Minneapolis – extrajudicial punishment sanctioned by centuries of dehumanization of black bodies.' Doubtless James would point me to what he argued in one of his latest books about the cultural politics of the lynching tree: namely, that it is 'the most potent symbol of the trouble nobody knows that blacks have seen but do not talk about because of the pain of remembering'.³

But let us not be naïve. The defence of ignorance is infantile. What we saw in the death of George Floyd was neither episodic nor singular; it's institutional structural, perpetual. African Americans have known through their long night of slavery, dehumanization,⁴ racial discrimination and death, the experiential, psychological and existential meaning of '*I Can't breathe*.' The white officer's knee on George Floyd's neck is a visual reminder, a picture and a metaphor that will be etched on our memory for generations to come. It will be one that African Americans (and other diaspora communities) will be unwise to forget. They know all too well how Uncle Sam has kept his knee on their neck for decades, for centuries, strangling their humanity, dignity, hopes, dreams, aspirations. Depriving them of the breath of equal opportunity and justice. Killing them.

And what has it inspired here and globally? In the last couple of weeks, I've been speaking with government officials and doing a series of BBC interviews about both Covid-19 and the Death of George Floyd. (Breathing and the lack of breath is the uncanny reality that links the two.) The question I am often asked is, "What has the death of a black man in the US got to do with us here in the UK, surely things are not that bad here?" Whether out of provocation or ignorance, my answer is what was said by Dr Martin Luther King, Jr., more eloquently than I could put it. This American prophet, preacher and public theologian reminds us: "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere." The tragic death of George Floyd has inspired a global insurrection of solidarity, sympathy, and common decency in the face of a brutal and brazen murder of another black man. If you have blood in your veins and you know the free and divine gift of breath, you cannot watch what happened to George Floyd and remain unmoved. Indeed, on white American commentator writing for a predominantly white

² See Gordon S. Wood, *The Empire of Liberty: A History of the Early Republic, 1789-1815*, Oxford, Oxford University Press: 2009. Wood makes the same argument made by the great Caribbean scholar Eric Williams (*Capitalism & Slavery*) about the extracted labour of the African in the prosperity of Europe and America. Wood says: "The prosperity of the European colonies in the New World depended upon the labour of these millions of African slaves and their enslaved descendants (p.509)."

³ James Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, Maryknoll, New York, Orbis Books: 2011, p.3.

⁴ Winthrop D. Jordan, *White Over Black: American Attitudes Towards the Negro: 1550-1812*, Baltimore, Maryland, Penguin Books: 1969.

Christian audience puts it thus: “If you are not angry and feel deep sadness in this moment, it may be time for a soul check.”⁵

Along with protests, demonstrations and marches, the death of George Floyd has inspired more debate about race and racism in Britain. This is neither the time nor the place to explore this and what we do about statues and monuments to figures of oppression, slavery, and injustice like Edward Colston that we saw in Bristol over the weekend. However one decides to answer the perennial question as to whether Britain is a ‘racist country’; or whether Stormzy’s response of ‘yes, one hundred percent’ means it’s a 100% racist or merely affirming in the positive that ‘racism’ still exists in the UK could be a good essay question. Whether one listens to David Olusoga, Ben Okri, Nesrine Malik, or the editorial of this week’s *Economist*, one cannot help but to see the ubiquity of racial injustice in both the UK and the US.

From my experience of working in the criminal justice system and as a special adviser to a number of Home secretaries and Police ministers, I can say that the UK is *a less racist place* than it used to be decades ago, or when I was growing up. Of course, we no longer have signs saying: “No Irish, No Blacks, No Dogs” and we no longer see virulent racist campaigning like the one my parents witnessed in Smethwick by the Conservative parliamentary candidate, Peter Griffith, with the slogan: “If you want a nigger for a neighbour, vote Labour”, or Teddy Boys going “Paki-bashing” and “Nigger-hunting”.

Thankfully, those days are behind us, but racism and White supremacy still kills and poison the body politic; racism find ways of reconstituting itself, morphing in other guises, cultural politics, practices, and iconography.

Of course, Britain is not America; we have a different history and experience but are subject to the same defective anthropology that stops us from reaching our full potential, that stops us from breathing fully and flourishing in all our institutions. The comparisons with the US will continue to be interesting and instructive. Many of our experiences will be similar. There is no place for complacency or historical amnesia; racism is indifferent to geographical boundaries.

We remember Eric Garner (repeated ‘I can’t breathe twelve time before he was killed in New York City by the police); we remember Michael Brown who was shot by the police in Ferguson, Missouri); we remember Breonna Taylor, the medical technician shot in her own house by the police); we remember Ahmaud Arbery (the young black jogger shot by the police because he was jogging in the wrong neighbourhood). The list goes on. But in my own borough, the Royal Borough of Greenwich, I know what racism and White supremacy looks like. I remember the young Asian school boy, Rohit Duggal, who was murdered by racist thugs in July 1992; I remember Stephen Lawrence who was also brutally murdered by white youths the following year; I remember Cherry Groce (shot by the police in September 1985) and Joy Gardner: Joy lost her life in August 1993 at the hands of immigration officers who placed 13-foot length of adhesive tape around her head and mouth. Unable to breathe she collapsed and suffered brain damage. A young woman asphyxiated, having the breath of life taken from her by state

⁵ John Kingston, *Christianity Today*, 4th June 2020.

officials. I knew her Mother Myrna well, she went to our church; her life was never the same again after she lost her beloved daughter.

This too is our history. This too is our shared British history. It is not America, but David Olusoga is right when he says that, like America, we too are disfigured by deep and pervasive racism; and that as a society, we too have to look in the mirror of our history.

I think it was Mordechai Vanunu the Jewish scientist who said: "To know is to be responsible." That's the challenge that we all face in times of controversy and crisis. How will we respond to injustice in our institutions and in society? The Vice Chancellor's statement on Black Lives Matter and the death of George Floyd and Professor Marilyn's leadership in bringing us together set the tone for our conversation and discussion, affirming the university's long tradition of standing up for social justice and its commitment to equality and antiracism. Our students and staff have been impacted by the death; many are traumatized, feeling the cadence of desolation.

Some of us feel (and certainly hope) that the death of George Floyd will be a defining moment in American history and race relations; it is a turning point, a tipping point. It has inspired interracial and intergenerational protests on both sides of the Atlantic. The name of George Floyd will be memorialized. Individuals and institutions will remember his name as they reflect and respond to racial injustice and other challenges they face. 'I can't breathe', as Ben Okri says, will become the 'mantra of oppression' globally.⁶

Let me conclude by saying that I'm hopeful about the future and the actions we will take together as we respond to injustice wherever we find it. I for one will re-double my efforts and courage to fight injustice wherever I confront it. On Tuesday, the family laid George Floyd to rest in Houston, believing that that in the presence of the One who gives breath and life has breathed on him again. His breath has been restored. I am perpetually challenged by the great North African Doctors of the Church. "Hope", says St Augustine, "has two beautiful daughters; their names are Anger and Courage. Anger at the way things are, and Courage to see that they do not remain as they are." Lord help us all to breathe and remember that this gift comes from you.

Dr R. David Muir, June 2020

⁶ Ben Okri, *The Guardian*, Monday 8 June, 2020