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**MAKING A WAY OUT OF NO WAY:
MAINTAINING DEMOCRATIC MOMENTUM THROUGH
COVID-19, POLICE BRUTALITY, AND SYSTEMIC RACISM**

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Send address changes to:

Harvard Kennedy School Journal of African American Policy

79 JFK Street #16

Cambridge, MA 02138

Or by e-mail to hjaap@hks.harvard.edu.

STAFF

CO-EDITOR-IN-CHIEF, HILLARY ANDERSON

Hillary Anderson is a second year MPP candidate at the Harvard Kennedy School. Before graduate school, she worked in political data and analytics for local, state, and federal campaigns. Hillary is a fellow at the Center for Public Leadership. She is dedicated to creating a more peaceful and just society and ending anti-Black racism.

CO-EDITOR-IN-CHIEF, MICAH BURBANKS-IVEY

Micah Burbanks-Ivey is a J.D. candidate at Harvard Law School. Prior to graduate school, Micah served as a federal government consultant and labor economist where he advocated for economic policies that would create economic stability and mobility for low-income Americans. Micah has spent significant time working within Congress and the federal government advocating for and advancing policies beneficial to Black Americans.

EDITOR, DURVA TRIVEDI

Durva Trivedi is a concurrent MPP-JD candidate focused on technology, law, and policy. Before grad school, she worked on tech & society issues at The Rockefeller Foundation. Durva hopes to work in public service and on creating a more just future throughout her career.

EDITOR, ANTHONY SACCO

Anthony is a student at Harvard Kennedy School as well as Penn Law. Prior to graduate school, he was a research analyst for the Joint Committee on Revenue in the Massachusetts legislature. He is very passionate about policing, criminal procedure, and Fourth Amendment law, as well as progressive health and tax policy.

EDITOR, DAMARCUS BELL

Damarcus Bell is a Master in Public Policy candidate at the Harvard Kennedy School and a Center for Public Leadership Fellow for Serving African-American Communities. Over the past decade, Damarcus has led a career as an education leader and entertainment producer, always intent on celebrating the joy, brilliance, and thriving of the Black experience. Through his work at the Kennedy School and beyond, Damarcus intends to shift the metrics and deficit perceptions that too often constrain the Black condition in order to bring about the necessary reimagining of our world and the yet untold Black possibility within it.

EDITOR, CHANITA COULTER

Chanita Coulter is the Co-Founder & CEO of Reflective Pages and an award-winning, well-respected educator. Chanita received her B.A from NC A&T State University, master's degree from Boston College in Social Work, and is currently a graduate student at Harvard University. Chanita is a focused writer and storyteller. With over a decade of experience in education, she can inspire a wide variety of audiences, including professionals, university scholars, elementary students on various subjects including, but not limited to, ethics, bilingualism, and multi-cultural literature. Chanita's work and passion for social justice and education reform are the driving forces of her work and are further grounded in a commitment to equity for all.

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MARTHA FOLEY, Publisher

RICHARD PARKER, Faculty Advisor

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AMANDA GUTIERREZ, Layout Designer

DOUGLAS ELMENDORF, Dean of the John F. Kennedy School of Government

DEBRA ISAACSON, Senior Associate Dean for Degree Programs and Student Affairs

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MAKING A WAY OUT OF NO WAY: MAINTAINING DEMOCRATIC MOMENTUM THROUGH COVID-19, POLICE BRUTALITY, AND SYSTEMIC RACISM

In his 1844 essay and memoir on abolition, *Narrative of the Life of Fredrick Douglass, an American Slave*, Fredrick Douglass described the spirituals sung by enslaved Africans as “tones, loud, long and deep, breathing prayer and complaint of souls boiling over with the bitterest anguish. Every tone was a testimony against slavery, and a prayer to God for deliverance from chains.” Yet, while these “negro spirituals” categorized and harmonized the painful nature of their existence and the institutional oppression of slavery, within their chords and melodies were testaments to their resilient spirit. From their rhythmic accounts of suffering, enslaved Africans hid messages of hope, messages of overcoming the bonds of oppression, and guides on how to escape to an existence free from persecution. Enslaved Africans’ spiritual songcraft would go on to influence every major form of modern American music, from jazz to rock, to the heartfelt anthems of blues, to the guttural storytelling of country. From their pain and oppression came hope.

The asynchronous melody of 2020 can only be harmonized by the bitter anguish of an innocent man, pleading for liberation and the deliverance from police violence. As George Floyd pled for his life he repeated “I can’t breathe” over 20 times, each time met with the same hatred, contempt, and banal apathy characterizing the Black experience. This wasn’t the first time this plea was met with apathetic ears. In 2014, these were Eric Garner’s last words, “I can’t breathe,” as another police officer choked him to death for being *accused* of a nonviolent misdemeanor.

Like the negro spirituals of old, Floyd and Garner’s dying words of bitter anguish became the rallying cries for the deliverance from American systemic oppression. “I can’t breathe” was chanted by millions of people around the world amid the global reckoning of systemic racism spurred by Floyd, Garner, Breonna Taylor, and countless other Black Americans’ police-induced martyrdom. In over 2,000 cities, in every single state, Floyd’s death sparked protests from diverse coalitions organized by young, Black organizers determined to memorialize this painful moment with systemic political change. As the world tuned-in, many came to the inevitable conclusion that from the depths of George Floyd’s suffering and despair, there was hope. Hope that Floyd’s martyrdom would be a lasting testimony against oppression, and a breathing prayer for systemic reform that might one-day permeate every American institution.

While America’s eyes were opened to the fatal consequences of police brutality, Black Americans dealt with another systemic inequity resulting in the loss of a disproportionate number of Black lives. The coronavirus pandemic exacerbated the inequities not only in the American medical system, but in the deadly externalities of poverty. As the governors enacted statewide shutdowns, many Black people were left by the wayside, unable to socially distance because their jobs were deemed essential, and unable to gain timely access to quality healthcare due to decades of systematic defunding of public health infrastructure and a healthcare system where

individual income determines the quality of care. Moreover, while many socially distanced and remained in their homes, incarcerated Americans had no protection from the coronavirus. Although Black people represent only 13 percent of US residents, we make up a disproportionate 40 percent of the more than 2.3 million people held in confinement. The result was an extreme imbalance in the fatalities caused by the coronavirus pandemic, where Black Americans made up an approximate 60 percent of all casualties.

The activism inspired by Floyd and galvanized by Black organizers did not stop at the streets it culminated in a historic revival of voter activism and sweeping democratic momentum. Organizers, particularly Black women, launched voter registration programs, strategized, went door-to-door in Black communities, and advocated for people to make their voices heard on the streets and in the ballot box. What resulted was a historic demonstration of Black political power. In Georgia, Black voters propelled the state into a democratic majority, electing President Biden and overcoming decades of Republican control. While conservative pundits denounced the outcome as unprecedented and impliedly unrepeatably, Black voters proved that the democratic activism was not a onetime occasion, as they elected both Democratic candidates in the Georgia senate run-offs. The momentous tides of the Black voting bloc was not limited to Georgia Black voters placed their thumbs on the electoral scale in Pennsylvania, Michigan, Wisconsin, Nevada and Arizona. What began in tragedy became a movement.

The twenty-eighth volume of the *Harvard Journal of African American Policy* (HJAAP) will tell an alternate narrative to the historical account of 2020. While it was indeed a year wrought with unbridled racism, public health disparities, and police brutality, it was also an awakening of the American public to the fatal consequences of systemic racial inequality long ignored by popular political discourse. While African Americans experienced disproportionate health and economic

disruption, Black community leaders and activists led coalitions of millions of people to the streets and the ballot box to protest systemic injustice and demand permanent changes. The 2020-21 volume will take a deep dive into the systemic racism, processes, and institutions that have harmful effects on Black lives. It will demonstrate how the anguish of Floyd, Garner, and the thousands of Black lives lost because of inequity have motivated Black scholars and activists to question the institutional status quo that has too long been the driving force of oppression. Importantly, it will demonstrate that through it all, we have hope. Hope that the democratic momentum created from tragedy will carry on for years to come.

In “Dignity as the Bedrock for Workplace Transformation,” Aida Mariam recommends a reformulation of the diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) model that currently serves as the main approach through which companies attempt to create more inclusive environments.

In “How Systemic Racism in the School System Suffocates Black Children’s Success,” Kaiya Pearl uses a personal narrative to discuss her realization of the systemically racist education system that causes young Black children to lose their voice and how biased academic programs can teach false revisionist history.

In “The Federal Reserve Has a Role To Play in Closing the Racial Wealth Gap,” Althea Pieters discusses how the Federal Reserve can utilize traditional and creative methods to address the widening racial wealth gap that exists in America.

In “Between Life & Death: Black Liminal Improvisation and Policy Pathways to Abolition” Damarcus Bell explores the tragic events of 2020 and how they can propel us to envision a better life for tomorrow through abolition.

In “Looking Inside: Portraits of Women Serving Life Sentences,” Sara Bennett puts a face to some of the more than 200,000 people in the United States that are serving life sentences. She gives 5 of these incarcerated

individuals an opportunity to discuss how the coronavirus pandemic has effected them mentally, physically, and emotionally.

In “Birth of Becky: White Women Upholding White Supremacy,” Dexter Moore articulates the explicit connection between white dominance, democratic power, and the weaponization of white supremacy. He also discusses the effect that these factors have on violence against Black men and women.

In “Count Us Not by the Color of Our Skin,” D’Seante Parks provides a valuable opportunity for Harvard University to address systemic racism through its data collection practices and how Harvard Kennedy School can foster better representation of Black students.

In “An Open Letter from Heaven,” Michael Higginbotham shares a heartfelt letter from Heaven about the racist rhetoric of Donald Trump and how the former President’s silence in the face of racial oppression

disproportionately harmed people of color.

In “Broadcasting Our Voices,” Hillary Anderson interviews Nijeria Boone and Jadah Cunningham who started *The Black Girl Politics Podcast* after working as field organizers during the 2020 presidential and Senate runoff elections.

In “A Call for Vaccine Equity,” Cassandra Duchan Saucedo and Durva Trivedi explore the racial inequities embedded in the distribution of the vaccine for COVID-19.

In “Capitol Rioters Have Not Lost Control,” Morgan Pratt discusses the attempted coup at the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021 and argues that Capitol Police’s sympathy toward and involvement in white supremacy are contributing factors to the attack. Pratt urges us not to embrace new anti-terrorism laws, but instead hold those who instigated this violence accountable and confront white supremacy.

Micah Burbanks-Ivey is a J.D. candidate at Harvard Law School. Prior to graduate school, Micah served as a federal government consultant and labor economist where he advocated for economic policies that would create economic stability and mobility for low-income Americans. Micah has spent significant time working within Congress and the federal government advocating for and advancing policies beneficial to Black Americans.

Hillary Anderson is a Masters in Public Policy student at the Harvard Kennedy School. Before graduate school, she worked in political data and analytics for local, state, and federal campaigns. Hillary is a fellow at the Center for Public Leadership. She is dedicated to creating a more peaceful and just society and ending anti-Black racism.

DIGNITY AS THE BEDROCK FOR WORKPLACE TRANSFORMATION

By Aida Miriam

In today's workplace, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) has become the key approach for how companies attempt to create more inclusive environments. "DEI." Seems like you're covering all the bases for making a welcoming workspace, right? Yet DEI, which by design is a superficial approach, can reinforce patterns that oppress Black and other Indigenous employees and leave all employees without the proper tools to dismantle oppressive structures within their organization. It has become clear that the "D" that we need is not diversity but the foundation for building healthy work environments: dignity.

Dignity is one of the most precious, universal, and well understood concepts across cultures. In the context of studying the lack of trust and accountability between employees and executives, scholar Donna Hicks applies a definition of dignity as one's inherent worthiness. The brilliant Black women of the Combahee River Collective articulated in their famous statement that their anti-oppressive work was built from the cornerstone that "Black women are inherently valuable, that our liberation is a necessity not as an adjunct to somebody else's but because of our need as human persons for autonomy." For Black and other Indigenous people, dignity is the actionable affirmation of a person's inviolable and sacred personhood. Although the importance of dignity is clear in a range of contexts, as a dominant framework, DEI has captured the imagination of well-meaning employees and employers alike, leaving dignity largely overshadowed and neglected.

Assaults to dignity and hope, known as dignity violations, are incessant, cumulative, and can cause serious harm to Black and other Indigenous employees. First, these violations enable employees who benefit from White dominant culture to preserve their comfort. In other words, these violations maintain the status quo, meanwhile Black and Indigenous employees are at best encouraged to minimize or mislabel these violations, and at worst, coerced into assimilating and disregarding these violations. A great example of this is the language used when a well-intentioned non-Black person casually asks to touch a Black employee's natural hair without their permission. The term "microaggression" doesn't fully convey the serious dignity violation that action is. Not only does this offensive act violate the Black person's dignity, but if the Black person expresses offense, they are labeled sensitive or angry.

Second, dignity violations that go unaddressed absolve employees who benefit from Whiteness of responsibility for the emotional and psychological labor of the impact of their decisions. Case in point, when Black people express their emotions or the violation they experienced, the reaction of the non-Black person is one of deflection, or more predictably, one of having "good intentions". A refusal to address the violation and its impact is a complete avoidance of responsibility and labor to repair harm.

Finally, dignity violations often illustrate the constant doubt and scrutiny that Black and other Indigenous employees face from non-Black employees, with the underlying

assumption of their deficiency as compared to their White peers. This often appears as micromanaging, formal

and informal practices of gaslighting, and denial of experiences, all of which amount to an undermining of one's dignity.

The uncompromising stance that every person has value, in particular those who are least valued in society, is necessary for a dignity-centered approach. Vigilantly protecting dignity is the antidote to dehumanization. Taking responsibility creates the fertile ground of creating psychological safety in relationships and the workplace. Instead of DEI, let's start telling the truth and working toward dignity affirmation. Black and other Indigenous cultures posit that dignity is not only an individual characteristic or right but is a concept that implicates our most important relationships, including family, community, workplace, and nation. Dignity is essential to resolving conflict, and organizations who are committed to building equitable environments should make sure dignity is at the forefront of their efforts.

COUNT US NOT BY THE COLOR OF OUR SKIN BUT BY THE CONTENT OF OUR CULTURES: A CALL FOR HARVARD TO UPDATE RACIST DATA COLLECTION PRACTICES

By D'Seanté Parks

Out of approximately 240 incoming masters in public policy students last year at the Harvard Kennedy School, only four were African American—descendants of African slaves in America. If we were the only qualified African American applicants, it is a direct consequence of the domestic policies that the United States has inflicted upon our communities throughout this country's history. If there were others, it is a glaring illustration of the racism that reverberates through the institution, which is still reaping the benefits of profits from slave labor.

Institutions like Harvard continue to use systems that were born from colonial practices that reward a select few “elites” from a given oppressed community. There are two sorts of oppressed communities to consider in the context of Harvard Kennedy School (HKS), a global community nestled in Cambridge, Massachusetts. There is the macro oppression that deems countries with majority Black or Brown citizens as economically and intellectually inferior and the micro oppression enacted on Black and Brown individuals domestically, that includes an array of injustices from lack of access to education, nutrition, and healthcare, to state-sanctioned terrorism.

One way that HKS could foster better representation of Black students is by simply counting us accurately through data collection. Currently, there is one option for all Black students to indicate ethnicity: Black/African American. In reality, there is immense diversity in Black communities throughout the world. Africa has more than 50 countries and 3,000 tribes on the

continent—each with distinct cultures. Furthermore, there are diverse Black communities throughout the Caribbean, Latin America and North America. To count every Black student the same—with only the Black/African American option to indicate ethnicity—is to only note the color of our skin and not the content of our cultures. We bring to the school rich, distinct cultures that include diversity of language, religion, music, food, pedagogy and tradition.

A more accurate metric for data collection would be to count descendants of African slaves in America, Black students coming directly from Africa or who have parents that did so, Black students from Latin America, and Black students from the Caribbean separately. Much like in the United States, and in large part due to consequences of the same slave trade, Black communities are the most marginalized in many countries throughout Latin America, so the standard recruitment of students from those regions, without also considering ethnic and cultural makeup, perpetuates the cycle of admitting privileged individuals throughout the world. Naturally, individuals with greater access to resources and opportunities would appear to be stronger applicants for programs like those offered at Harvard.

In September, Dean Elmendorf said in an email to the HKS community, “In particular, we need to do more to overcome anti-Black racism and other systemic injustices, here at the Kennedy School and in the world.” If he truly means that, he and his colleagues should take the immediate action to update data collection procedures for the admissions

process. This is a simple way to have an immediate and substantial impact on the community. This could be done before the next round of admissions.

The outcome would look like a more diverse student body with a more accurate representation of Black students. It would ignite more diverse classroom conversations and foster an HKS network that might begin to address the inequalities facing Black nations and Black people. Black students are not alone in this dilemma inflicted on us by norms of White supremacy, which HKS perpetuates. Many Asian students have made a similar plea, so I encourage the administration to engage all minority student groups in a conversation about how we self-identify, and how that can be better reflected in the ethnicity options in the school's data collection.

A CALL FOR VACCINE EQUITY

By Cassandra Duchan Saucedo and Durva Trivedi

This article originally ran in the Harvard Kennedy School Progressive Policy Review on 4 February 2021.

Cassandra is a concurrent MPP-MBA candidate. Currently, she is on the HKS Equity Coalition Coordinating Team, co-chairs the Latinx Caucus and the Progressive Caucus, and is COO for the Black Policy Conference. During and after her time in school, she plans to pursue a career economically fortifying Black and Brown communities.

Durva is a concurrent JD-MPP candidate and is interested in issues of data and technology policy, ethics, equity, and justice. Prior to graduate school, she worked on innovation, digital government, data science for good, and DEI at The Rockefeller Foundation.

There is light at the end of the tunnel. It's darkest just before dawn. Hope is en route in a truck. The rhetoric surrounding the COVID-19 vaccine has been optimistic, suggesting that it will end the pandemic and bring the US back to “normal.” Indeed, the only ethical and rapid means to achieve herd immunity will be through a mass vaccination campaign reaching those most vulnerable and those most likely to spread the virus. Yet, given the Trump administration’s misguidance—or non-guidance—to states about an equitable vaccine distribution, we are already seeing a process that will systematically favor those with access and resources.

The failures of the US healthcare system are neither new nor surprising. We have seen time and time again how people who are not well-off cishet White men receive worse treatment, not just from health and hospital systems but also the pharmaceutical industry.^{1,2} The toxic combination of these entities and the federal government’s mismanagement of vaccine distribution creates justified vaccine hesitancy within marginalized communities. These powerful institutions must do more to

earn these communities’ trust.

Such trust should be formed outside of crisis moments through a genuine confrontation of past wrongs, apologies, and reparations. Medicine and the US government have long benefited from medical abuse on Black, Indigenous, and Brown bodies, and the medical community has yet to tangibly atone for its wrongdoings. The Indian Health Service’s forced sterilization of American Indian women, the Public Health Service’s neglect of Black syphilis patients, and Harvard professors’ birth control experimentation on Puerto Rican women all occurred in the last 100 years.^{3,4,5} These memories can not and should not fade from the affected communities until the institutions right their wrongs. Following this atonement, both entities should work to do genuine community engagement and work that centers BIPOC people’s health concerns instead of leaving them as an afterthought.

Certainly, vaccine hesitancy is one major contributor to the inequitable vaccine distribution across racial groups. Another critical factor to consider is the baked-in inequity of

the vaccine distribution process itself. The federal government relies heavily on states for distribution allocation, and states in turn allow counties and healthcare providers to use their own discretion in determining the vaccination process. These organizations often lack the resources to plan for an equitable distribution within their expected delivery timelines. Understandably, most want to inoculate as many individuals as possible and may not have the time or talent to strategically embed health equity principles. The lack of an equity-focused strategy is evident in the disproportionate vaccination rates of White, wealthy individuals, even in low-income Black and Latinx neighborhoods.⁶

The structural health inequities pervading the US healthcare system have been all the more apparent during the pandemic. COVID-19 case and death counts, in data disaggregated by race and ethnicity, show clearly and tragically how disproportionately harmful this pandemic has been for BIPOC Americans. Moreover, survey data has confirmed for months that vaccine hesitancy is highest among the demographics most severely burdened by disease and loss.⁷

As we turn our attention to the newly inaugurated Biden-Harris administration, following strong campaign promises of expedited vaccine rollout efforts—during the deadliest stretch of the pandemic so far and with over 400,000 Americans lost already—we need to disaggregate and analyze vaccination data by race, gender, and ethnicity. Currently, the data provided by states’ health departments and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention is incomplete, not standardized, and, in some cases, missing. Despite the COVID-19 pandemic disproportionately hurting communities of color, most states are not reporting the race and ethnicity breakdowns of vaccination recipients.⁸

This information could help us better understand who is getting the vaccine and who is being left out. We must ask:

- * When eligibility depends on occupation and age, which genders, racial groups, tribes, etc. are served vs excluded?

- * If communications drive vaccine acceptance, does public health education reach every community, regardless of ability, primary language, immigration status, internet connectivity, and wealth?
- * How can the vaccine prioritization system be made more just, in light of historical inequality and minority communities’ justified mistrust in government?

Now, as communities most vulnerable to COVID-19 stand to gain a shot at survival through safe and effective vaccination, most states’ health systems have not even published statistics about early vaccine recipients’ race, gender, and ethnicities. The lack of this information only further complicates the challenges of equitable distribution. Too many families have lost loved ones who represent so much more than a data point. In the face of this immeasurable grief, calling again for disaggregated data may seem insufficient. However, as a matter of health justice, we need these data to triage equitably.

Confronting historical injustice and applying lessons from it should be paramount to the Biden-Harris vaccination plan. As of November 30, 2020 (the last time the CDC updated its comparative demographic data), Native Americans and Alaska Natives have experienced four times the hospitalizations and 2.6 times the deaths experienced by White, non-Latinx Americans.⁹ The Trump administration and those complicit in its inaction are responsible for the current widespread deaths in Indigenous communities in the US. Tribal leaders—those who uphold tribal traditions and languages—are being killed by the virus at disproportionately high rates. The disproportionately high death rates pose an existential threat to the tribes that should not be viewed in a vacuum; the US’s historical attempts and successes to exterminate native communities should inform how the nation approaches native healthcare today.¹⁰ In this crisis, native communities should be at the forefront of planning, primarily because many are located in hard-to-reach areas—often because of forced relocation by the US government.¹¹ While the Trump administration is responsible for

past intentional inaction, the Biden-Harris administration is now responsible and accountable if nothing is done.

Similarly, the Trump administration and those complicit are responsible for the disproportionately high infection and death rates within Black, Latinx, and Asian communities. Each community experienced 2.8, 2.8, and 1.1 times, respectively, the White, non-Latinx communities' mortality rates.¹² The US government has had such data for months before the vaccination campaign, yet failed to account for such impacts within their vaccine distribution planning. Moreover, vaccine hesitancy within these communities has existed for decades. While the US engaged in Operation Warp Speed, the CDC should have engaged communities with historic vaccine hesitancy to prevent the vaccine inequities we see now.

Many of us are not surprised by the pandemic's disproportionate effect on communities that tend to be subject to racism by the health community and centuries of economic exclusion. Simply because this is the norm does not mean we should accept it. Any return to "normal" would mean continued acceptance of a profoundly discriminatory health-care system, through which BIPOC people are subjected to systemic discrimination that pervades the entire system and creates worse outcomes and shorter life expectancies. Our government does not lack financial resources to ameliorate these inequities; it merely lacks the will and the talent to do so. The executive branch's early willful ignorance and delayed action against the virus told the entire country they cared more about saving face than saving lives. Mike Pence's appointment to the COVID Task Force in light of his exacerbation of Indiana's 2015 HIV outbreak—demonstrating his indifference toward marginalized communities' health—signaled to many that this administration was prepared to mishandle this virus.¹³ The vaccination efforts were just another demonstration of our government's collective inaction in implementing effective public health policies, especially those that would proactively serve BIPOC communities.

Most of us only interact with hospitals and healthcare systems when we're feeling low, in some way. Whether the vaccine rollout and continued COVID-19 response make those lows lower or help America recover with dignity depends critically on equity and fairness. Structural inequity, when sharpened into focus by a global pandemic, means that while the wealthy live on in peaceful isolation, at the margins, too many Indigenous tribal leaders, Black mothers, immunocompromised essential workers, and people who are so much more than just data points fall sick. Entirely too many have already died, and the question remains, is the government willing to finally prioritize these communities and ensure those facing the highest risk are protected?

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CAPITOL RIOTERS HAVE NOT LOST CONTROL

By Morgan Pratt

The events of 6 January 2021 were extremely disturbing. A mob of White supremacists, egged on by President Trump and dozens of Republican lawmakers, stormed Congress and multiple state capitals in a coordinated attempt to overturn the election results.^{1 2} But the real danger of this event lies in our response to it—many of the emerging narratives about the event will not prepare us to deal with future events like this. Particularly dangerous are suggestions to increase funding for Capitol Police, pass a new domestic anti-terrorism bill, or heal the divide with bipartisanship and unity.^{3 4 5} With more pro-Trump actions planned before Joe Biden's inauguration, it is crucial we address the real shortcomings of Capitol Police: their sympathy towards and involvement in White supremacy.⁶

First, let us tackle the narrative that the coup attempt got as far as it did because there were not enough police and that they need more funding to prevent future attacks. Washington, DC is the most policed metro area in the country.⁷ The Capitol Police alone, with a staff of 2,300, has a budget of \$460 million—nearly half what DC spends on public education.⁸ Further, police at the event were seen opening gates to let the mob in, directed rioters to Chuck Schumer's office, denied backup from the National Guard six times, posed for selfies, and even participated in the riot on their day off.^{9 10 11 12 13}

Police have a long history of sympathy toward and involvement in White supremacy.¹⁴ Policing in the United States South started as slave patrols, only later expanding

to include protection of private property.¹⁵ From there, police functioned to return fugitive slaves in the North, enforce Jim Crow and segregation, suppress the Civil Rights movement, infiltrate and dismantle social justice organizations, and disproportionately arrest and murder people of color.^{16 17 18 19} Indeed, this ideology has changed little up to the present, with widespread infiltration of the police force by White supremacist groups and up to 84 percent of police officers supporting President Trump.^{20 21} This ideological alignment is evident through the contrast in brutality with which police handled the almost exclusively peaceful George Floyd civil rights protests and their reactionary, often armed White supremacist counterprotests.²²

In short, it is very difficult for police to see the types of people who stormed the Capitol as enemies or criminals. Increasing Capitol Police funding does not address the root of the problem and will only increase the contact police have with oppressed groups, contact that is often harmful.²³ To better secure our capital we need to investigate and dismantle the ties between state security forces and White supremacy.

Second, let us unpack the idea that these were terrorists and that what we need is a new domestic anti-terrorism bill. Many have pointed out that the term terrorism has racialized origins intended to reinforce the domination of people of color; expanding the usage of this term to include White supremacist violence is unhelpful at best and seriously harmful at worst.^{24 25} We already have a word to describe people who enact violence in the

name of White supremacy: Nazis. Many who were present explicitly identified this way.²⁶ Plus, one could argue these rioters were not acting against the interests of the state, as terrorism implies, but rather trying to preserve it, since they were acting at the behest of the president and elected officials.

Further, using this event to pass another domestic anti-terrorism bill, as Biden suggested the day after the coup attempt, is problematic because this would expand and deepen domestic surveillance.²⁷ As mentioned earlier, the government has a long history of using domestic surveillance to crush social justice movements. Government surveillance and intelligence agencies also frequently target and exploit minority groups; many of the anti-ISIS cases prosecuted in the United States were concocted, facilitated, and funded by the FBI to entrap young Black men, many of whom were mentally ill and were coached on a violent interpretation of Islam by the FBI itself.^{28 29 30} Previous anti-terrorism measures criminalized tens of thousands of innocent people in America, mostly Muslims.³¹ This on top of the troubling implications more surveillance has on the constant erosion of everyone's privacy.

Expanding and deepening the national security apparatus will not neutralize the threat of White supremacist violence but instead hand it to the state. What we need to do instead is target and dismantle White supremacist organizations while critically reconfiguring the role government agencies have in this process.

Finally, we need to stop conflating accountability with the cries for bipartisanship from disgraced members of the Republican party.³² Almost 150 of them—including two-thirds of all House Republicans—voted to discredit the election results after the coup attempt, the culmination of a years-long process of

sowing doubt in elections that Democrats win. To call for unity without accountability is to bring these anti-democratic behaviors into the fold, to legitimize them.³³ Nothing could be more dangerous. Accountability means taking responsibility for the violence these anti-democratic actions provoke.

An analogous event that might shed light on our situation is the 1898 coup in Wilmington, North Carolina. Just after election day, a mob of hundreds of White supremacists, led by a congressman, killed at least 60, burned down the nation's only Black daily newspaper, forced prominent Black residents out, and overthrew the biracial local government. Instead of standing up to this violence, North Carolina conceded to it.³⁴ The event was deemed a "race riot" instigated by the Black residents, and the White rioters were cast as heroes until the 1990s.³⁵ Charles Aycock, an agitator of the riots, was elected as governor of NC just three years later on a platform of White supremacy, replacing a pro-Black Fusionist government. A building on the UNC-Chapel Hill campus was named after him until June 2020.³⁶

To overcome what started on January 6th, we need to start by naming clearly what happened and why: White supremacists stormed the Capitol because Republicans told them they could change the results of the election. They got in and largely avoided severe treatment because police sympathized with their cause and let them through. This will happen again because neither of the previous two conditions have changed.

To prevent future events like this, we need those responsible for instigating this violence to be held accountable, and we need to confront the White supremacy that lies at the roots of our nation's security agencies and police. We need to kick *all* of the rioters out of the Capitol.

Morgan is a master's in public policy candidate on a leave of absence to engage with grassroots organizing around climate change and progressive policy. Morgan has previously worked in diplomacy, refugee advocacy, and as an elementary school teacher.

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BIRTH OF BECKY: WHITE WOMEN UPHOLDING WHITE SUPREMACY

By Dexter Moore, Jr.

In *Birth of Becky: White Women Upholding White Supremacy*, Dexter Moore, Jr, a doctoral candidate at Harvard Graduate School of Education, reveals how White women and their stereotypical fragility are and have been weaponized as tools of White supremacy in America. Moore directly asks White women to recognize this contribution and complicity and work as co-conspirators for a more just future.

The myth of the strong Black woman is the other side of the coin of the myth of the beautiful dumb blonde. The White man turned the White woman into a weak-minded, weak-bodied, delicate freak, a sex pot, and placed her on a pedestal; he turned the Black woman into a strong, self-reliant Amazon and deposited her in his kitchen . . . and he turned the Black man into the Supermasculine Menial and kicked him out into the fields.

Eldridge Cleaver,
Soul on Ice

Versie Johnson, 35, of Mississippi, was shot to death in August 1947 after he fled when a White woman raised the cry of rape.

James Tolliver, 40, of Arkansas, was beaten to death in February 1948 by Patrolman Blaylock. Tolliver was trying to help a drunken [White] woman when Blaylock came up behind him and struck him on the head. He died almost instantly.

Elmore Bolling, 30, of Alabama, was shot and killed in December 1947. Clark Luckie, a White man, claimed Bolling had insulted his wife over the telephone.

We know the cautionary tale of Emmett Till: a fourteen-year-old Chicago teenager, visiting his family Mississippi, and murdered for allegedly whistling at a White woman. Till's murder served as the linchpin for the Civil Rights Movement—after his mother made his body visible in an open casket, with a single bullet wound to his head, accessible for thousands of people to view. These images were broadcast across the country and provided evidence of what many Black folks already knew—white women were protected at all costs.

The bodies of White women have long been weaponized to uphold White supremacy and inflict terror on Black women and men. Weeks after Till's death, Carolyn Bryant testified to an all-White jury that she “was just scared to death.”¹ After the acquittal of her husband and half-brother, she disappeared from public view. Bryant was 21-years-old at the time of her testimony and 72-years-old when she finally admitted her unconscionable lie. The world should have never known Emmett Till's name—not in this way.

The erasure of White women as perpetrators of violence against Black bodies is political. Throughout American history, Black women have consistently been subjected to assaults on their minds, spirits, and genitalia. Plantation masters, unauthorized militia, and everyday White men claimed ownership of Black women and girls, regardless of age. Their bodies were regarded as experimental, available, and for public use. Whereas White women were considered soft and virginal, Black women were perceived as promiscuous and hard. Though we often romanticize an American story of women's suffrage and empowerment, the truth is “the passage of the Fifteenth Amendment, the re-disenfranchisement of Black men, and the lack of support from many White women suffragists for universal suffrage situated African American women at a crossroads where some part of their identity remained unrecognized and devalued.”² Thus, Lerone

Bennett, Jr. describes the *White Woman Problem in America* as an “assault on the Negro's body and the White [wo]man's soul.”³ Simply stated, the fragility and hyper-protection of White women is, by extension, a protection of White America.

Dear White Women: Let's state the obvious—I know you *know* this.

BBQ Becky, Permit Patty, Cornerstore Caroline and all the Karens of the world—it is important for you to know your actions have a long, violent history attached to them. The quick-trigger dialing of 911 affirms your knowledge of this truth. However subconscious you may claim it to be, there have been too many instances in today's society where you have evoked the same culture of fear that existed with your ancestors of the Reconstruction. Becky was not suddenly emboldened to *cry wolf*. She was systematically trained—over generations—to identify and pinpoint the precise buttons to push to unleash terror on Black bodies.

From the lynch mobs of the nineteenth century to the police departments of the present day, the weaponizing of White women has left an indelible trail of injustice for Black Americans. Imprisoned if lucky, Black bodies have been burned, maimed, castrated, dismembered, drowned, hanged, decapitated, and executed due to Karen-initiated vigilante justice. In spite of this reality, White women (and the subject of their bodies) have largely been invisible from the everyday discourse of White supremacy and racial injustice. This effective erasure hides the direct contributions and subsequent responsibility of White women to reposition their gendered and racialized intersectional identities as co-conspirators rather than perpetrating benefactors of hegemony and White supremacy.

In her chapter on *Southern Horrors: Women and the Politics of Rape and Lynching*,⁴ scholar Crystal Feimster articulates the explicit connec-

tion between White dominance, democratic power, and White womanhood. Assaulting Black citizenship and the exercising of basic rights—from voting and pursuit of independent economic prosperity to barbecuing and birdwatching—can be unquestionably justified when connected with a by-any-means-necessary protection of White female bodies. Feimster argues that by “weaving together fears about Black political power and anxieties about miscegenation into a single design, southern Whites converted Black desires for economic and political equality into a desire for *social equality*, which they translated into a threat against White womanhood.”⁵ After the Civil War, southern Whites did what needed to be done to preserve their traditions and modes of operating. Thus, much of the racialized violence and terror that filled the Reconstruction era were to prevent the “eventual degeneration of the White race.” As is the case today, all White women, “regardless of class status, were

BBQ Becky, Permit Patty, Cornerstore Caroline and all the Karens of the world—it is important for you to know your actions have a long, violent history attached to them

worthy of protection if their alleged assailants were Black.”⁷ Sadly, it’s no surprise then to note the casual and callous disregard for Black life when White women today call the police for anything they subjectively deem disagreeable to their presence.

Monikers that mask the names of Jennifer Schulte (BBQ Becky), Teresa Klein (Cornerstore Caroline), and Amy Cooper (Central Park Karen) today, are just as dangerous. The birth of Becky did not originate with a 911 call.

The threat of rape for White supremacist culture is an active form of racial control. This extends even beyond the binary of Black bodies. At the turn of the nineteenth century, “anti-Chinese activists claimed that Chinese immigrants posed a sexual danger to the country and its citizens,” further positing that “Chinese men lured pure and innocent White women into their dens of vice and depravity.”⁸ President Donald Trump repeatedly referred to Mexican men as rapists during his 2016 election campaign. In strategically “repeating a message that had been gaining traction for decades” he evoked a “common charge that Mexicans, especially men, were innate criminals” who would destroy “all that is worthwhile in White civilization.”⁹ This dangerously inaccurate rhetoric led to Trump’s historic victory over Democratic nominee, Hillary Clinton. Unsurprisingly, White women, in spite of Trump’s documented record of misogynistic behavior, overwhelmingly voted for him, and secured their interest in upholding White supremacy, even over their own gendered interests.

In schools today, where White women make up more than 70 percent of the teaching force, Black girls and boys are disproportionately subjected to the criminalization of their own youth bodies. For Black girls specifically, the policing of their bodies and hair is another form of hegemonic dominance—white teenage girls are given the latitude to wear clothing that Black and Latina girls are not. The same can be true

for expressions of communication, agency, and emotion: loud, ghetto (Black) girls; bold, confident, and strong (White) girls. *Pushout: the criminalization of Black girls in schools* (2016) painfully articulates this unjust reality. If Black students, and their bodies, do not contort to the palatability of White feminist culture, then they subject themselves to subtle and harsh punishment. The fragility and subjective discomfort of White women contributes to discriminatory hair policies, dress codes, and over referring of Black girls for nefarious discipline codes like being *defiant*, *disruptive*, and *disrespectful*. Many school districts use these ambiguous and broad terms to discipline students at the will and discretion of a largely White female teaching force.¹⁰ According to the Black Organizing Project, which led efforts to reform the discipline code in the Oakland Unified School District:

One of the largest problems with the term willful defiance and other punitive practices that support a culture of zero-tolerance discipline is that Black students are the ones who suffer from the narrative that almost anything they do in the classroom can be considered “defiant” where teacher’s implicit bias is involved. Not surprisingly, Black boys receive the most suspensions for disruption and willful defiance.¹¹

Black men and boys (as referenced in the final point above) are disproportionately

centered in research, discourse, and policy concerning racial terror and injustice. The initial coverage of Breonna Taylor’s murder was minimal and mostly contained at the community, grassroots level. It took more than two months, and the unfortunate murder of George Floyd for #BreonnaTaylor and #SayHerName to enter the national lexicon. George Floyd’s death serving as the catalyst

for the world to know Breonna’s name is not a new reality for Black women, who scholar Treva Lindsey refers to as having third-class status. This intersectional hierarchy, encompassing race, gender, and class, “situated women, regardless of race and often class, as second-class citizens as well. Consequently, African American women occupied a political/social identity that excluded them from both White *and* male privilege.”¹² Her assertion, when analyzing Reconstruction and Jim Crow-era violence, is that Black people:

. . . experienced anti-Blackness, racial terror, and racial subjugation in gender-specific ways. Although women were victims of lynching and other forms of nonsexual violence, the predominating historical narrative of racial violence from this era pivots around the lynching of Black men . . . the lynched, brutalized, and publicly violated Black male body remains the primary historical signifier of this era of US racial terror.¹³

coverage about missing Black women led the late NPR anchor, Gwen Ifill, to coin the phrase “missing White woman syndrome” to describe the media’s exclusive focus on White women. Few mainstream media outlets cared whether a Black woman was missing or dead.¹⁴

I emphasize this point to deliver a broader one: White womanhood is so uniquely connected to the prosperity and psychological safety of America that we refuse to acknowledge its politicized weaponization. Of course, these may be read as broad strokes, unfairly and inaccurately categorizing *all* White women. The truth is, though, that ideology is real and in order for it to remain effective, it “must be constantly created and verified in social life; if it is not, it dies.”¹⁵ So when considering the White woman as a political pawn for supremacy, we must no longer ignore and erase the dangerous role of Becky—in the past and in our present day. After all, the protection of their bodies “was elevated into an institution, an extra-legal political instru-

White womanhood is so uniquely connected to the prosperity and psychological safety of America that we refuse to acknowledge its politicized weaponization.

University of Florida law professor, Michelle S. Jacobs substantiates this claim while saying the names of Taylor, Attiana Jefferson and Sandra Bland. She writes:

It is hard to educate the public about violence against Black women because it so rarely makes the news. The stories of their deaths may be newsworthy, but the fact that the victim or survivor is a Black woman can be buried. There is a long-standing problem with media coverage, or the lack thereof, of crimes committed against Black women. The lack of coverage was highlighted during the years when former prosecutor, turned media personality, Nancy Grace, reported on missing women. All of the women Grace reported about were White, and the obvious lack of

ment for terrorizing all Negroes . . . with the charge of rape, reaction sought its bestiality and to divorce from the Negroes White allies.”¹⁶

It is my sincerest hope, White women, that *you* begin to understand the historical links between the lynch mobs of 1920 and non-emergency 911 calls of 2020. The racial terror and violence, stemming from your political purity, must end. You can no longer remain unaccountable for the harm you cause through evoking the fears only you can ignite. If America is to be truly awakened, and reconciled with its damaged past, you must reveal your role from the shadows and take ownership in the creation of a more just path forward. One that does not center your conjured cries and tears, but instead centers your historic fragility and dependence on our

From the lynch mobs of the nineteenth-century to the police departments of the present day, the weaponizing of White women has left an indelible trail of injustice for Black Americans

republic to always protect you. That is a privilege no one else in America can buy.

*Nothing handed down from the past could keep race alive if we did not constantly reinvent and re-ritualize it to fit our own terrain. If race lives on today, it can do so only because we continue to create and re-create it in our social life, continue to verify it, and thus continue to need a social vocabulary that will allow us to make sense, not of what our ancestors did then, but of what we ourselves choose to do now.*¹⁷

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LOOKING INSIDE: PORTRAITS OF WOMEN SERVING LIFE SENTENCES

By Sara Bennett

More than 200,000 people in the United States are serving life sentences, a punishment that barely exists in other western countries. I’ve long believed that if judges, prosecutors, and legislators could see people convicted of serious crimes as individual human beings, they would rethink the policies that lock them away forever.

Before I photographed 20 women in New York state prisons in 2018 and 2019—all convicted of homicide—I visited them to learn about their lives. I asked each of them about themselves posed the following question: “What do you want to say to the outside

world?” (You can see the entire series and the women’s handwritten statements at lifeafterlifeinprison.com.)

Each woman is so much more than the one act that sent them to prison for life. They are all hard-working, resilient, dignified, introspective, and remorseful. They strive to live a meaningful life, to be worthy of our compassion. I wanted viewers to ask themselves, “What do we do with a redeemed life?”

For this journal, I reached out to five of those same women and asked them how the pandemic affected them. What follows are their responses.

After spending 18 years as a public defender, SARA BENNETT turned her attention to documenting women with life sentences, both inside and outside prison. Her work has been widely exhibited and featured in such publications as The New York Times, The New Yorker Photo Booth, and Variety & Rolling Stone’s “American (In)Justice.”



TRINITY, 23, outside one of the housing units at Bedford Hills Correctional Facility (2019)

Sentence: 25 years to life

Incarcerated at the age of 17 in 2012

Social distancing in prison is nearly impossible; and when COVID-19 descended upon us, the solution was to keep us locked in a cell for 22 hours a day. That's the same as being "keep locked," something I never had experienced before because I've never been in trouble. The sudden, extreme restriction caused an immediate, severely negative impact on my emotional and psychological health. I felt helpless and frankly, I'm left traumatized...

“Social distancing in prison is nearly impossible, so the solution has been to keep us locked in a cell 22 hours a day. That’s the same as being ‘keeplocked,’ something I never had experienced before because I’ve never been in trouble. The sudden, extreme restriction caused an immediate, severely negative impact on my emotional and psychological health. I feel helpless and frankly, traumatized...”



TAYLOR, 36, in the fire and safety office at Bedford Hills Correctional Facility (2018)

Sentence: 22 1/3 years to life

Incarcerated at the age of 24 in 2006

I have seen news reports and commercials urging people not to neglect their health out of fear of COVID and so I have been asking the medical staff to allow me to go out for a procedure recommended by the urologist. A procedure that will treat health complications I've been experiencing for way over a year. Unfortunately, the prison is not deeming the procedure an emergency and are only allowing emergent procedures to go out. Therefore, due to the pandemic I must suffer in pain and pray my health problems do not worsen. In hope that I cannot seek solace from my friends because we are confined to our units and isolated from each other.

“I have seen news reports and commercials urging people not to neglect their health out of fear of COVID and so I have been asking the medical staff to allow me to go out for a procedure recommended by the urologist—a procedure that will treat health complications I’ve been experiencing for way over a year. Unfortunately, the prison is not deeming the procedure an emergency and are only allowing emergent procedures to go out. Therefore, due to the pandemic I must suffer in pain and pray my health problems do not worsen. On top of that I cannot seek solace from my friends because we are confined to our units and isolated from each other.”



ASSIA, 35, in the storeroom for baby clothes at Bedford Hills Correctional Facility (2018)
Sentence: 18 years to life
Incarcerated at the age of 19 in 2003

The uncertainty of prison life has been exacerbated by the crippling effects of COVID-19. Not only were jobs, academic classes, vocational programs, and recreational activities minimized or cancelled, but visits our main connection to the world around us were terminated. For the last 15 years, I have relied on the (three times yearly) 2 days and 2 nights afforded by the Family Reunion Visiting Program to see and parent my children. This program was shut down in March of 2020. In an environment where closeness and human touch are prohibited, losing the physicality of face-to-face interactions with our children, loved ones, and friends has further driven us into a state of isolation and despair.

“The uncertainty of prison life has been exacerbated by the crippling effects of COVID-19. Not only were jobs, academic classes, vocational programs, and recreational activities minimized or cancelled, but visits—our main connection to the world around us—were terminated.

For the last 15 years, I have relied on the four-times-a-year, two days and two nights afforded by the Family Reunion Visiting Program to see and parent my children. This program was shut down in March of 2020. In an environment where closeness and human touch are prohibited, losing the physicality of face-to-face interactions with our children, loved ones, and friends has further driven us into a state of isolation and despair.”



SAHIAH, 23, in the college library at Bedford Hills Correctional Facility (2019)
Sentence: 20 years to life
Incarcerated at the age of 16 in 2011

Being in this predicament while fighting this pandemic makes me feel like I'm running out of time. It's so scary because it's like no matter how much you wash your hands, keep your mask on and social distance yourself, some way, somehow you still become positive. I see my peers die from this virus, some who I just had classes with and now they're gone. It's so sad. I can't see my family, I can barely talk to them because my time is limited. I just feel so alone. I see people being released early to go home, but because I was convicted of a violent crime it looks like they think I deserve to die in prison.

“Being in this predicament while fighting this pandemic makes me feel like I'm running out of time. It's so scary because it's like no matter how much you wash your hands, keep your mask on, and social distance yourself, some way, somehow you still become positive. I see my peers die from this virus, some who I just had classes with and now they're gone. It's so sad. I can't see my family, I can barely talk to them because my time is limited. I just feel so alone. I see people being released early to go home, but because I was convicted of a violent crime it looks like they think I deserve to die in prison.”



TIANA, 25, in the library at Bedford Hills Correctional Facility (2019)
Sentence: 15 years to life
Incarcerated at the age of 15 in 2008

Covid-19 Has Affected My Life In Such A Profound Way. The Major Effect For Me Is That I'm Not Able To Embrace My Family, Or Any Of My Loved Ones. I've Already Been Taken From Them And They Are My Sanity. They Took Away Our Visits, The Commissary Is Always Out Of Stock On Items, Supplies Are Low. Masks Aren't Given Out Regularly And They Won't Even Allow Our Family To Send Us Some. There Have Been Times When The Phones And The Kiosk (Where We Receive Mail/Emails) Have Been Down For Days And We're Disconnected From Our Family. It's Terrible How We Are Treated During This Period Of Time.

“COVID-19 has affected my life in such a profound way. The major effect for me is that I’m not able to embrace my family, or any of my loved ones. I’ve already been taken from them and they’re my sanity. They took away our visits, the commissary is always out of stock on items, supplies are low. Masks aren’t given out regularly and they won’t even allow out family to send us some. There have been times when the phones and the kiosk (where we receive email) have been down for days and we’re disconnected from our family. It’s terrible how we are treated during this period of time.”

BROADCASTING OUR VOICES: AN INTERVIEW WITH THE CREATORS OF THE BLACK GIRLS POLITICS PODCAST

By Hillary Anderson

During February 2021, I sat down with Jadah Cunningham and Nijera “Jeria” Boone, two young, Black women organizers, to interview them about their new project, the Black Girl Politics Podcast. Nijera is originally from Wisconsin and is currently a senior at the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee. Jadah grew up in Indiana and is a graduate of Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis. In the interview, both women share what inspired them to start the podcast, their experiences on the campaign trail, and their hopes for the future.

Hillary

To get started, tell me about your podcast.

Jadah

Our show is called the Black Girl Politics Podcast. We started it because we felt like we had unique perspectives to share as women of color campaign staffers. We definitely had unique experiences through the seven to nine months that we were campaigning. And obviously there were a lot of different challenges that we faced as a country throughout this year, so we thought that it would be a cool thing. We just wanted to have this conversation and offer our perspectives about what the heck is going on in the world, because we did kind of get a front row seat being working on those really important races.

Jeria

Yeah, and just piggybacking off of that, we wanted to educate people in a way without being condescending, like “listen to us and you might learn something,” instead of “Hey, sit down and listen to listen to us so you can learn this, this, and this.”

Hillary

You both have had wonderful political experience, working on the Biden-Harris campaign in Wisconsin and the senate runoff

elections in Georgia. In the midst of everything that’s been going on in the country and in your own lives, what motivated you to start this podcast?

Jeria

I think a lot of the time you rarely hear the perspectives of Black women, because we are not in high capacity in these spaces. Jadah and I were only two of maybe ten Black women on the Biden-Harris campaign in Wisconsin. Hearing from Black women on the campaign trail and being a black woman, it just really inspired us to say, “Hey, there are more black women out here doing similar work, let’s broadcast our voices.”

Jadah

And there’s so much around Georgia specifically. There’s so much emphasis on all the amazing work of Black organizers, specifically Black women organizers, but Black organizers all over the state have done there. And it felt like this perfect time as we’re just kind of sitting in an Airbnb hotel for a month trying to win these elections, to actually sit down and think through, like what is some of the stuff that we’ve experienced and are experiencing? We wanted to bring our perspectives to that and then share that with people. So that was the biggest motivation.

Hillary

Your podcast debuted at the end of 2020, the year that brought us COVID-19 and reignited the demand for civil rights. We all know that these events have disproportionately impacted Black people and Black communities. And I want to know, how did those events influence your view of politics and public policy?

Jadah

At least for me, it really showed the necessity of having people in power that actually care. People in power who actually listen and want to be and will be held accountable. We saw the pandemic mismanaged from day zero literally in this country, and that has disproportionately impacted Black people and people of color.

And also, like you mentioned, like the civil rights movement that happened over the summer it really showed, I think, this need to have leadership that is responsive and aware of the problems that we face. More than anything, it showed me at least that there's power in numbers. And I think seeing the sheer amount of people who came out to protest over the summer, like that's the energy that we have to keep up if we want any sort of meaningful change. This whole year has just shown us why it is that we have to elect people who actually have our best interests at heart.

Jeria

Yeah, for me, I think all the events in 2020 from the pandemic, to the state sanctioned murders, to the fraudulent claims about the election, it just put a magnifying glass on our government. Our current government system does not work for us and something needs to change immediately. And like Jadah said, the numbers that came out to protest, and then the highest voter turnout ever. I believe it showed me that people are willing to push to make a change.

Hillary

Jadah, you briefly mentioned the Georgia

runoff. How did that experience shape the way you think of Black political power?

Jadah

It's there. I mean, to me, it showed that we have to compete everywhere. It's a self-fulfilling prophecy, right, for all of these states who get written off as red states or blue states. We have to be fighting for every single race, like we're going to win it by a field margin. And if we do, then we actually will [win]. And I think the biggest thing about Georgia is like knowing statistically we should not have won that race. I mean, Black people don't typically vote in runoff elections. I mean, runoffs were made for Black people to not vote. And there was a lot that was unique about this cycle. But it really just showed me that, like, we have the power in our hands. It's a matter of grasping it and then having those leaders and those organizers—your Latasha Browns, your Stacey Abrams—who are willing to just genuinely grind for years, for years and years and years, with little to no reward and eventually change the face of how our democracy looks. I was really inspired by Georgia, especially coming from a red state myself. I found it extremely inspiring to think that, like the folks around the state could organize their power and actually, like, take it back.

Jeria

I think Georgia reinforced the need to listen to Black women and put Black women in [leadership] positions to mobilize Black voters. In Wisconsin, there were no Black people in leadership, maybe one or two. And as organizers, we constantly had to go back to tell them, “Hey, this isn't working, try something else,” kind of almost telling them how to do their jobs. And if you have these Black women, Black people, or people of color in leadership positions, you don't have to rely on organizers telling you this is not how you interact with people of color.

In Wisconsin, we've been a swing state for as long as I can remember. Starting in August all the way to November, every other commercial is a political commercial. There are people knocking on doors. But I wonder if

we campaigned and worked a little bit harder and had the resources to work a little bit harder in these communities of color or communities, would we also win other offices in the state assembly or state senate?

Jadah

On that note, I want to shout out this internship that Jeria and I both did called Organizing Corps 2020. The whole premise of the organization is exactly what you just talked about, that we can't just like drop organizers from any old place in the country into these communities in the last month before an election and expect them to come out in the numbers we need to win, especially when we're the historically disadvantaged side with voter suppression and everything else.

This program was created and actually Jeria and I participated in it in June, June through August of 2019. And it was kicked off in Atlanta, actually Atlanta, Georgia. And we were basically taught the fundamentals of organizing and taught how to go into these communities for which for most people I think it was like ninety seven percent of the people that were in the program actually were from the communities that they were organizing in. This program existed in seven swing states. I am optimistic because of programs like this one that are actually investing and organizing in these communities on the ground doing so in off years. It was 2019, And we were knocking doors every single weekend, calling voters every single day.

Hillary

In a recent episode of your podcast, you discuss the importance of the representation of Black women in politics, and I'm curious to know, who are some of the Black women in politics who inspire you?

Jadah

First one that comes to mind for me is Julia Carson for a lot of reasons. She's a giant here in Indianapolis. Like, obviously, everyone loves Julia Carson here. Doesn't matter who, everyone loves her. And she's also a Zeta. I'm a Zeta, so there's that connection. And

she was the first Black woman to represent the 7th Congressional District. I also worked in her grandson's [Congressman André Carson] office, so she's up there for me. And then I also found it really inspiring to see Kamala Harris, as well as Ilhan Omar, Cori Bush, and Lauren Underwood just like fighting tooth and nail at every chance they can.

Jeria

For me, it's going to sound like a cliché, Kamala Harris. Ayanna Pressley as well. I really see myself in her. I keep my hair braided all the time. When she had her twists, she made me feel very seen. And since we're talking impeachment, Stacey Plaskett.

Hillary

In your podcast, you've already covered some pretty important events. You've discussed stimulus checks, executive orders, the insurrection. Is there any event that you see on the horizon or maybe something from the past that you would like to explore more in depth on your podcast?

Jeria

Yeah, we are actually working on an episode maybe next week about the environment and health care and the way that they coincide with Black people and how they both disproportionately affect Black people, but specifically Black women.

Jadah

We want to branch out into topics like that, but also, we're just trying to expand our horizons and what it is we're doing. We've started planning a panel where we'll talk about Black women in organizing and their experiences. We want to keep people up to date on what's going on with the Biden Harris administration and just keep folks in the know.

Hillary

Last question—and since it's Black History Month, I feel like there's no better way to end this interview than with this question—what do you love most about being Black?

Jeria

Soul food. Our people were literally given scraps and for them to make what they made out of those scraps, like they really did something with that.

Hillary

Absolutely. What's your favorite dish?

Jeria

Fried catfish, mac and cheese, and yams. And your yams and mac and cheese got to touch a little bit.

Hillary

Where's the best fried catfish in Wisconsin?

Jeria

My nana's kitchen [*laughs*].

The Black Girls Politics Podcast is available on Spotify, Apple Podcasts, and most major podcast streaming services. You can also visit their Instagram @bgppod.

Jadah

I would just quote Beyoncé and just say so much damn swag. Like everything. Like the fact that we can make joy out of anything, the fact that we can make food out of anything, the fact that we can make music or art or anything. I like all of these different experiences that have led this community to being what it is as it exists today. It's like even though obviously it's not perfect and there's still a lot of issues like within our community, it's crazy to me that people of one group of people could face so much throughout an entire history and still be here, living life, smiling, laughing, having kids and getting married and doing all that sort of stuff that we saw people doing, even during slavery. So, I think that sort of stuff is just like passed down. It's in the blood. That's the best part to me.

SAVING AMERICA'S RACIAL SOUL: AN OPEN LETTER FROM HEAVEN TO DONALD TRUMP

by Michael Higginbotham

Michael Higginbotham shares a copy of a letter he received, sent from Heaven to Donald Trump, shortly after Trump's term of office expired. The letter was sent by his uncle, former federal judge and Harvard professor A. Leon Higginbotham, Jr.

20 January 2021,

Dear Mr. Trump:

I rarely write letters that are published for the public to read. In fact, of the thousands of correspondences penned during my career, only two prior to this have been published in journals. The first was sent to Justice Clarence Thomas twenty-eight years ago, shortly after his contentious confirmation as the 106th Justice of the United States Supreme Court, and only the Court's second Black nominee. This letter generated a good degree of controversy.

As the longest-serving Black federal judge at that time, I wrote that letter with the hope that reminding Justice Thomas of the great legacy of Justice Thurgood Marshall might encourage him to follow Justice Marshall's admirable path. As the first Black to serve on the Supreme Court, Justice Marshall's defense of minorities, the poor, women, the disabled, and the powerless was unsurpassed. My apprehensions about Justice Thomas have proved to be well-founded and my words do not appear to have had much influence. Yet, I have no regrets about writing or publishing the letter, for I believe it sparked valuable public discourse . . .

Mr. Trump, our paths did not cross during my lifetime, despite my serving on the Board of Directors of your alma mater, the University of Pennsylvania, during the 1970s and 1980s. Your name, however, comes up often these days in Heaven, particularly in

connection with the upcoming presidential election. But for now, let me share that I am deeply concerned both about the direction of the country with respect to racial equality, and, even more importantly, your rhetoric and policies embracing White supremacy.

You claim not to be racist yet so much of your approach demonstrates a lack of concern to prevent racially discriminatory treatment. Many statements made during your first presidential campaign suggested a rollback of traditional civil rights protections. Your rhetoric was reminiscent of many past politicians known for using racial code words . . .

I had sincerely hoped that you would have abandoned such an abhorrent approach. But with your first term as President almost complete without any directional change and appearing to resort to more racist rhetoric each day as we get closer to the presidential election, I felt compelled to share my thoughts in the hope that it might spark constructive public debate, motivate many Americans to participate in the political process, and, most importantly, to vote on November 3. It is in this spirit that I now write.

Saving America's Racial Soul

The writing of this letter began in February 2016, when you announced your run for president and used racial rhetoric in your first speech. On 25 May 2020, I decided that I would complete the letter and send it once

you had completed your term of office. May 25 was a critical day for me because it was on that day that Americans and the world watched George Floyd call for his mother and utter his last words, “I can’t breathe,” for eight minutes and forty-nine seconds as a police officer held his knee on Mr. Floyd’s neck.¹ As protests over Mr. Floyd’s death continued for weeks, the feeling that a racial moment of truth was facing the country was most apparent to me. I could not remain silent, even from Heaven.

You began your first presidential campaign with the slogan “Make America Great Again.” This implied going back in time to a period when racial minorities were separated in housing, discriminated against in employment, and lynched with impunity. Many wondered exactly what that would entail, particularly with respect to issues impacting racial equality. Since your election as president, Americans have witnessed your attempts at restricting Muslim immigration, embracing White nationalists, making the Supreme Court more conservative, reinventing civil war and segregation history, dividing families and incarcerating children seeking asylum at the Southern border, and spouting divisive language when another unarmed Black male, Jacob Blake, was shot by a police officer and paralyzed. Candidly, Mr. President, I seriously wonder about your definition of greatness and whether it includes living up to the promise of the Declaration of Independence’s self-evident truth that “all men are created equal.” If making America great again includes protecting Black lives, you need to say that clearly and unequivocally. Your actions, thus far, suggest it does not.

During the primary campaign of 2016, you were asked by a reporter whether you would disavow the support of former Ku Klux Klan leader David Duke and other White supremacist leaders and groups in general; you sidestepped the question saying, “I know nothing about David Duke. I know nothing about White supremacists.”² As criticism to your response mounted, you

said you did disavow Duke and blamed your earlier noncommittal statement on a “bad earpiece.” Because of the equipment malfunction, you said, “I could hardly hear what he’s saying.”³

For American voters, what really should have mattered was not what you could or could not hear during a television interview, but what David Duke heard by listening to you. Duke explained that he supported you for president because he believed that you were a leader who would “break-up Jewish dominated lobbies” and “ensure that White-Americans preserve and promote their heritage and interests.”⁴

Why did Duke feel so certain that you shared his hate-filled vision of America? Because so much of your appeal was, and continues to be, based on racial code words and turning back the clock on civil rights progress since World War II.

Speaking to a predominantly White crowd in Dimondale, Michigan in August 2016, you asked African Americans: “What do you have to lose by trying something new” like me. “You’re living in poverty,” you said. “Your schools are no good, you have no jobs, 58 percent of your youth are unemployed. What the hell do you have to lose?”⁵

After almost four years of your presidency, the short answer is stark: The African American community stands to lose much of the progress made in the last 50 years. If you are reelected in 2020 and continue your “promises made, promises kept” approach, the serious problems of equity and inclusion that racial and religious minorities still face will calcify or worsen.

Even the way you posed your “what do you have to lose” question revealed your deep lack of understanding. You seemed to view African Americans as an undifferentiated group: “You’re living in poverty,” you said.⁶ In reality, of course, some of us are living in poverty, some are working our way up the economic ladder, some are comfortably middle class and others are enjoying economic prosperity. Similarly, some of our schools are indeed “no good,” but others range from good to excellent. We are, Mr. President, a diverse

community that has overcome tremendous racial barriers through hard work, perseverance and unending hope to get where we are today.

Your tendency to characterize African Americans in a negative light and to see African Americans as nothing but a group of “others,” was demonstrated long before you started firing people on “The Apprentice.” Early in your professional real estate career, you had to settle a racial discrimination lawsuit brought by the Justice Department on behalf of Black and Latino potential renters of Trump-owned properties. Testimony in depositions indicated wide-spread, deliberate practices designed to keep out minority renters.

Prior to running for office, you were a leader of the “birther movement,” proclaiming that President Obama was likely born in Africa rather than the United States and challenging the legitimacy of his presidency by suggesting he was ineligible to serve. You failed to repudiate a similar charge made in 2020 against another Black politician, Vice-Presidential candidate Kamala Harris.

On the general election campaign trail, you made it clear you opposed same-day voter registration and supported voter ID laws, to, you said, prevent illegal immigrants from voting and citizens from voting multiple times. Despite the evidence that such voter fraud is rare, statistics confirm the disproportionate impact of these positions on access to the ballot for Black voters.

You, Mr. Trump, seem to have difficulty recognizing racial discrimination in any of its forms, whether it comes in the form of men in white sheets and hoods on horseback at night with guns and torches or as facially neutral regulations like voter ID laws disproportionately impact racial minorities. Both are harmful to equal opportunity.

During my almost 50-year professional career, I wrote two books and over 50 articles on how the American Legal Process was used to create and embrace notions of racial inferiority. I was one of the first scholars to demonstrate the connection between present-day racial discrimination and past cases

such as *Dred Scott v. Sandford*, where the Supreme Court reasoned that Blacks “had no rights which the White man was bound to respect.”⁷

Over the last few years, you have expressed positions on incidents and persons in American history impacting racial equality such as the Civil War, Andrew Jackson, and black-face/minstrel shows, which demonstrate not only inaccurate facts and incomplete scenarios, but, most significantly, a failure to understand the connection between past racism and present inequality.

Mr. Trump, the simple truth is that you have a long history of racial animus. If being a racist was disqualifying for service in high political office, you would have been prevented from running for president in 2020. Your approach to issues of racial inequity has not reduced or alleviated such problems but rather, in many cases, it has increased disparities and exacerbated conflict. While there are many other equally important issues that President Biden must consider—especially in this time of pandemic and economic collapse—protecting the poor, the powerless, racial and religious minorities, and others that this pandemic has frightfully shown are disproportionately harmed by the socioeconomic inequities is more critical than ever because of your failure to do so.

As I watched you depart Washington DC on the morning of January 20 from my vantage point in Heaven, I could not help feeling a great sense of relief knowing that you would no longer be responsible as President of the United States for enforcing the laws of equality or setting rules relating to individual rights. As you so often clearly demonstrated, your silence in the face of racial oppression, and your embrace of policies, practices, and laws that disproportionately harmed people of color, has significantly turned the clock back on racial progress. Yet today I am reminded of the slave preacher who in 1865, upon hearing the Emancipation Proclamation read for the first time, responded: “Lord, we ain’t what we ought to be; we ain’t what we want to be; we ain’t what we gonna be,

but thank God, we ain't what we was." I, like many Americans today, am thankful that the Trump presidency is over so that, as a nation, "we ain't what we was."

Sincerely,

A. Leon Higginbotham, Jr.

Chief Judge (Retired)

United States Court of Appeals
for the Third Circuit

Professor (Emeritus)

John F. Kennedy School of
Government at Harvard
University

Current resident of Heaven

1. Evan Hill et al., "How George Floyd Was Killed in Police Custody," *New York Times*, 1 June 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/31/us/george-floyd-investigation.html>.

2. Glenn Kessler, "Donald Trump and David Duke: For the Record," *Washington Post*, 15 August 2018, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/fact-checker/wp/2016/03/01/donald-trump-and-david-duke-for-the-record/>.

3. *Ibid.*

4. *Ibid.*

5. Tom LoBianco, "Trump Pitches Black Voters: 'What the Hell Do You Have to Lose?'" *Cable News Network*, 20 August 2016, <https://www.cnn.com/2016/08/19/politics/donald-trump-african-american-voters/index.html>.

6. LoBianco, "Trump Pitches Black Voters: 'What the Hell Do You Have to Lose?'"

7. *Scott v. Sandford*, 60 US 393 (1857).

THE FEDERAL RESERVE HAS A ROLE TO PLAY IN CLOSING THE RACIAL WEALTH GAP

By Althea Pieters

Althea Pieters is a lead policy analyst at the board of governors of the Federal Reserve System and is a candidate for a masters in public administration at the Harvard Kennedy School of Government

Caught in the destructive path of the storm surge of the pandemic, the murder of George Floyd, and the COVID-19-induced financial crisis, the Federal Reserve in an unprecedented move publicly commented on racism in America.¹ Chair Powell noted the Federal Reserve serves the entire nation, including communities "grappling with and expressing themselves on issues of racial equality . . . racism has no place in the Federal Reserve or in society." His comments, and the Federal Reserve's sponsored event on "Racism and the Economy," caught me by surprise. Racism seemed an unlikely topic for the Federal Reserve given the institution's longstanding tradition of scripted monetary policy statements and apolitical posture.

Moreover, the Biden Administration wants the Federal Reserve to do more to address economic inequality. Beyond "feel-good" speeches, what can the Federal Reserve do to address racism and the contemporary racial wealth gap which dates back to slavery, cotton, Jim Crow, and state-sanctioned racial exclusion?² The Federal Reserve must look beyond its mandate of containing inflation and maximizing employment to address America's chronic economic inequality. It must target persistent racial gaps in jobs and debias discriminatory policies in the financial sector.

The 2019 Survey of Consumer Finances reported the average Black household has \$850,000 less in net worth than the average

White household.³ This massive wealth gap in large part reflects the effects of intergenerational wealth transfers, homeownership, and differences in average income earned between Blacks and Whites.^{4,5}

The notion that anyone who want a job can get one is fundamental to fostering more equitable outcomes. Critics suggest the Federal Reserve's monetary policy adds to this wealth gap and hurt Black Americans by being too restrictive. The Federal Reserve achieves its mandate by primarily adjusting the short-term interest rate, which influence the cost at which households spend and businesses invest, and in-part make hiring decisions. Prior to August 2020, the Federal Reserve considered the economy to be at maximum-employment if the national unemployment rate was around 4.4 to 6 percent.⁶ At full employment, Black Americans unemployment rate typically double Whites, and exceed the national jobless rate. Higher unemployment and underemployment among Blacks restrict their access to the housing market and increase their vulnerability to losing their homes.

The Federal Reserve cannot base its monetary policies by targeting specific groups. However, it can adapt a more accommodative monetary policy that offers flexibility in determining how long interest rates should be kept low, to foster greater employment while balancing this against an inflation target of 2 percent. The August 2020 Longer-Run Goal and Monetary Policy Strategy explicitly

recognizes that maximum employment cannot be a fixed target.⁷ The Federal Reserve will instead find full employment experientially by focusing on wages and prices.⁸ This policy change alone will not reduce the racial wealth gap.

The Federal Reserve should collaborate with State and Federal bank regulators to encourage the formation of more minority banks. Supporting Black communities' access to credit and making banking deserts bankable would be a step in the right direction. The FDIC estimates 16.9 percent of Black households were unbanked in 2017.⁹ Increasing banking access could save many Black individuals up to \$40,000 over their lives.¹⁰

The Federal Reserve should regulate payday lenders and enhance supervision of banks to eliminate discriminatory lending practices. Black households, especially those with low to moderate incomes, often rely on entities such as payday lenders, and are more susceptible to be victims of predatory and other fringe lending activities.¹¹ Congress should expand the Federal Reserve's mandate to regulate such nonbank activities. The modality with which the Federal Reserve regulate these entities should be balance against State Banking Authorities' regulatory and supervisory activities.

The Federal Reserve should work with the Federal Financial Institutions Examination Council and State Appraisers regulators to ensure rigorous compliance with the "Uniform Standards of Professional Appraisal Practice" and enforce severe consequences for violations. Homeownership remains the most significant way through which Americans accumulate wealth. Discriminatory housing practices have impacted wealth accumulation among Black households, including undervaluing and stripping the equity from their homes.^{12, 13}

The racial wealth gap has barely moved since the Civil Rights Movements began more than 60 years ago. The Federal Reserve must move to eliminate discrimination in the banking and housing markets and maintain flexibility in reaching maximum employment decisions. Equally, the Biden administration

must look beyond the Federal Reserve and adopt a broader antiracism blueprint including reparation and targeted programs such as baby bonds that would help Black families build wealth.

The views expressed are those of the writer and do not reflect the Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System or the Federal Reserve System.

1. "Fed Chair Powell: No Place for Racism in Our Society | C-SPAN.Org," accessed 14 May 2021, <https://www.c-span.org/video/?c4887191/fed-chair-powell-place-racism-society>.

2. Lynnise E Phillips Pantin, "The Wealth Gap and the Racial Disparities in the Startup Ecosystem," *Saint Louis University Law Journal* 62, (n.d.): 43.

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HOW SYSTEMIC RACISM IN THE SCHOOL SYSTEM SUFFOCATES BLACK CHILDREN'S SUCCESS

By Kaiya Pearl

In "How Systemic Racism in the School System Suffocates Black Children's Success," Kaiya Pearl, a high school junior from Oregon City, Oregon, describes her experiences with institutional racism growing up as a mixed-race young woman in overwhelmingly White schools. She reveals how differential treatment by school officials made her feel silenced, isolated, and undervalued. She calls for an increased awareness of racial disparities in the classroom and greater efforts by school officials to make sure that students of color have a voice and feel safe and supported.

The toughest lesson I have had to learn throughout my seventeen years of life, I learned at school. However, these lessons were not academic, and they were only taught to Black children. I was taught how the school system is set up to disadvantage Black children—impressionable people like myself, who do not know any better than to believe the lies they are told.

"A classroom should be more than just a nice place to learn for students; it should also be a safe place to heal and a healthy place to grow."¹ My whole life, school has always been a place that felt threatening. Nothing about it ever made me want to return, or even be there in the first place. Growing up in a predominantly White city outside of Portland, Oregon, I rarely saw people who looked like me. Soon I realized that my teachers did not look like me either. I immediately started to feel alone and secluded. I now understand that these elementary education experiences hindered my identity formation and who I believed I could become. The messages I received at school created in me a sense of self-doubt and rejection that I would carry with me throughout my education.

I got into a Spanish immersion elementary school through a lottery, and my mother's wish was that it would be a more diverse

environment than the other schools I could attend. Unfortunately, this school was not very diverse. Neither was the school district. Only 2 percent of the students and 1 percent of the teachers are Black/African American, Hispanic/Latinx students are only 19 percent of the student population and 5 percent of the teachers, and White students make up 61 percent of the students and 89 percent of the teacher population.² With Black students being such a small minority, it felt like the "diversity" being described at this school was only White and Hispanic/Latinx kids. They separated themselves into their exclusive groups even at the age of five. There was no place for people like me.

I found myself wondering, what did this advertised "diversity" really mean to school administrators? It could not have been actual diversity because, as the data show, there was not much diversity at all. I and the few other Black kids who attended were not being represented. We were singled out for being different by the staff and even students from the other ethnic groups. While not everyone was White, the school environment pitted us against each other, and it became a battle of oppression, creating what felt like a competition of who had it worse. School staff did an excellent job with language representation

for the Spanish-speaking community and representation of Hispanic/Latinx culture; however, they never put their efforts into multi-cultural community-building to make all children feel seen.

In this negative educational environment, I could never accept my identity as a mixed-race child. I was never taught what that meant or the importance of it. My school friends were a group of five White girls, each with two parents and a “perfect” household, who made me feel awful about having divorced parents. They also made me believe that because of my race and life experiences, I would always be deprived of a life as good as theirs. I tried to hide every aspect of my life, even my skin color. In my eyes, and most likely theirs, I was not “good enough” for the other people around me. This continued throughout the six years I attended that school, as my White peers and their “progressive” parents blamed

sort of thing is ‘normal.’” I would cry at night thinking about how unlucky I was to have the skin I had and how if I just looked more like my mom, things would have been simpler. I did not understand that I was not alone in this struggle because I never had anyone else around me who had gone through what I was going through.

I suppressed every emotion I had because even in a place full of people who considered themselves liberal, racists surrounded me. They were the worst kind of racists, the ones who deny their racism and who believe that as long as they are not *saying* it, they can *think* it or *act* on it. During my three years at this middle school, multiple staff members and teachers took actions that reflected their bias and abuse of power. For example, in seventh grade I was in an advanced math class. The teacher was well-liked by other students and always praised them for their work.

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me for every typical childhood spat we had and treated me like a “problem.” I did not have words for how this made me feel, but the feeling of being out of place and rejected was already there.

Once I went into middle school, I started to see more Black kids who were fed in from the other elementary schools or were pushed into my school from outer districts. At first, I was thrilled because I thought I would finally have friends who could relate to my life and how I felt about things. This turned out not to be the case. I was either “too White” for the Black kids or “too Black” for the White kids. I began denying my own identity. I straightened my hair every day of the week. I tried to make myself sound like the other girls I spent time with. I dealt with every macro- and microaggression that they forced into my young and impressionable brain. I was taught that I just had to “deal with it because this

They refused to help me when I struggled to understand the material but would go out of their way to talk with and give answers to the White students. I missed a final exam when I had a stomach bug, and this teacher told me I “should have thought about that beforehand.” In eighth grade, I was on a relay team for track and field that was competing for a spot in the State Meet. We were an excellent group, and I never missed a practice. During this time, my grandfather was in hospice and became deathly ill. On a day when my family thought he would be passing away and wanted everyone to be together, I went to this coach in person during school to inform her of the situation. She told me that it was “too bad” and kicked me from our relay team. I was then replaced by a White girl who had just missed four consecutive practices. This behavior by the teachers should have been of major concern to the school administrators.

I continued to experience events where it was clear I was facing a consequence or being unheard by my White teachers due to the color of my skin. The former principal of this school dismissed many events that were brought to her attention and refused to have serious conversations with or make any corrections for her staff members in response to their behavior.

I was a kid who suffered through in silence, because I was afraid of what would happen if I spoke up. I survived by becoming an “internalizer”: a Black child who tries to blend in with the crowd by not showing who they truly are and by suppressing their thoughts and feelings. Some Black children do this unintentionally; others do it intentionally to survive. I went above and beyond in my schoolwork to compensate for the fact that I am Black. My teachers valued my work a little more and picked on me less because I kept quiet when I could have said a lot. Since I did not have a community of other girls who looked like me, I did not realize that I was not alone in feeling silenced. “The bodies, identities, attitude, thoughts, feelings, and emotions of Black girls are continuously policed within dominant and Black culture alike.”³ I was made to believe that I needed to police myself to gain the approval of the White teachers and students or, at the very least, not to attract negative attention to myself and my differences. I experienced firsthand how our educational system is set up so that a Black child cannot be successful unless they are unarguably extraordinary.

Young Black students who “externalize,” or engage in disruptive behavior and act out, are perceived to be angry. They choose to show who they are, what they think, and how they feel. They are less likely to try to blend in. Whether Black students externalize or internalize, biased teachers tend to see them as aggressive “problem” children. Wright,⁴ citing data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study (Kindergarten Class of 1998-1999), looked at both Black and White teachers’ evaluations of student behaviors and found that Black students’ perceived externalizing problems improved

significantly when the student was moved from a White teacher’s classroom to a Black teacher’s classroom. He also found that same-race teachers often rated those students higher than the different-race teachers in their evaluations. In most cases, this bias among teachers leads to children of color being suspended or expelled more frequently than their White counterparts, which requires them to have to work much harder than their peers. Children of color cannot receive the same education when they are most worried about being disciplined or removed from class⁵ just for typical child behavior.

We are taught that American history is just that: history. And we are told that what we are taught is true. We are told that racism ended when slavery did, which is far from the truth. The truth is that schools were *forced* to allow Black children to be enrolled. They did not choose this. Black people were seen as inferior and less intelligent. They were never treated as equals by most White people. One study found that White teachers of Black students admonished those students for misbehavior two to four times as frequently as teachers who were the same race as their students.⁶ White teachers were also more likely to have highly charged interactions with Black students, instead of private conversations. Those same Black students who experienced this performed worse than

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they had in the previous school year. Black teachers were more likely to praise Black students’ abilities than White teachers. These positive interactions were correlated with higher achievement for these Black students. Throughout history, it has been a challenge for Black youth to receive equal and fair education because their teachers are not as likely to help them when they may need it the most.

Hiring teachers who have biases and underlying racist thought patterns reinforces the idea that these are normal and okay. With White teachers averaging 89 percent of the teaching population in my district, I never had teachers who heard or understood me, and so I never felt the connection and support that I needed in school.

As much as my experience was tainted by racism and lack of representation around me, there were also some teachers who got it just right. They listened, asked the right questions, encouraged me, saw me for all of who I am. That mattered. Whatever the challenge, the barriers teachers have to cross, or the self-educating they have to do, they must look for the strengths in all children and focus on those to help children believe in themselves. It is important that we discuss systemic racism. Educators must also begin to make schools safe places for *all* children to develop, grow, learn, and thrive—not just survive. Teachers cannot continue to see only the students who are extraordinary, who go above and beyond just to *be* seen. All children deserve to be acknowledged for who they are and what they have had to navigate.

Black children must be shown that they are seen, heard, and valued for who they are. They need to know that their fight and efforts were not for nothing. Black children show up time and time again, through all the adversities they face. The school system cannot continue to take advantage of and try to control these children. Teachers are the ones who must work for this change. They need to create a safe environment where kids can freely be themselves with no fear of consequence. Those who play roles in this system have to stand up, and we students have to fight back. There needs to be an end to these patterns that are unsafe and out to get Black youth. Once every student is taught to see what they are capable of, every student will be successful.

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BETWEEN LIFE & DEATH: BLACK LIMINAL IMPROVISATION AND POLICY PATHWAYS TO ABOLITION

BY DAMARCUS BELL

Damarcus Bell is a Master in Public Policy candidate at the Harvard Kennedy School and a Center for Public Leadership Fellow for Serving African-American Communities. Over the past decade, Damarcus has led a career as an education leader and entertainment producer, always intent on celebrating the joy, brilliance, and thriving of the Black experience. Through his work at the Kennedy School and beyond, Damarcus intends to shift the metrics and deficit perceptions that too often constrain the Black condition in order to bring about the necessary reimagining of our world and the yet untold Black possibility with it.

In “Between Life & Death: Black Liminal Improvisation and Policy Pathways to Abolition” Damarcus Bell explores the tragic events of 2020 and how they can propel us to envision a better life for tomorrow through abolition.

If hindsight is 2020, then that clarified gaze is inextricably littered with Black bodies. Reverberating and ricocheting relentlessly against the global infrastructure of racial capitalism, history will never unknow the murderous imbrications of the year 2020: the COVID-19 pandemic, fatal police brutality, and a vengeful high tide of White supremacy. The deadly trifecta is similarly punctuated by stolen souls: Ahmaud, Breonna, George, Elijah, and too many who remain unnamed. Evoking the canonic public decay of Polynices at Thebes, so long as justice for these Black lives is delayed, digital timelines insist that our dead must die again and again.¹ The trauma born by consuming this daily dose of Black death is difficult to understate. But while each national tragedy presents an awful reinstantiation of the American racial state, somehow in the interstice between premature death, precious lives un-lived, and the better tomorrow that faith and justice promise—freedom dreams abound. Extending a hermeneutic of resistance to identify the tragic opportunity of 2020, we find not only hindsight but the foresight necessary to

envision the world yet to be. Out of persecution, power. From death—life.

This extemporaneous invention at the edge of tragedy and hope is the lifeblood of the Black radical tradition.² Whether transposing the terrors of chattel slavery into coded spirituals, scraps into gumbo, or church basements into HBCUs, Black people have never ceased to improvise abundant life amidst the threat of impending social death.³ Whereas the particular confluence of epidemics in 2020 is somewhat unique, the lineage of Black resistance is timeless. Our people have been refusing subjugation and organized violence since being forcibly transported to this land, indelibly dreaming up a world order in which communities are whole and all human life is precious.

The contemporary end of this historical thread is clearly evidenced by renewed calls to #DefundthePolice and wrestle more intently with the deleterious consequences of the criminal legal system. The public murder of George Floyd was indeed an incisive rupture to whatever fanciful comfort we inhabited in the off-season of American racism—a

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fervent reminder that Black life is yet gravely precarious in the hands of the state. But the movement to minimize the reach of state violence has historical precedent.⁴ Owing to the Prisoners' Rights and anti-prison movements of the 1960s, activists have argued for decades that the prison-industrial complex (PIC) must be fundamentally dismantled, citing ever expanding reliance upon the criminal legal system to contain and control political prisoners, poor people of color, and the myriad consequences of American socio-economic inequality writ large.⁵

In this contemporary moment, the death of Floyd and the #defund movement have aligned the necessary political conditions to elevate formerly peripheral rallying cries for abolition and transformative justice to the fore of national public policy discourse. Community organizations, think tanks, elected officials, and law enforcement alike are working to envision and explore reimagined approaches to public safety.⁶ Ensuring the solutions our public institutions derive truly abate the conditions that produce racialized inequality and harm requires new modes of justice making that achieve peace and thriving by distributing resources more equitably.⁷ These abolitionist policy improvisations operate in the rift between new and old systems, exchanging oppressive legal regimes and social arrangements that perpetuate violence for bold public safety strategies premised upon care, equity, and thriving. Thus, this paper seeks to profile two representative cases of transformative alternatives to incarceration, exploring the extent to which each policy intervention repairs harm, limits the footprint of the carceral state, and yield returns on investment.

Decarcerating California Prisons: The Limits of a Catalyst

First posited by legal scholar Susan Sturm and echoed in the jurisprudence of pioneering federal judge for the Northern District of California Thelton Henderson, the catalyst model of judicial activism recasts courts beyond the limited role of legal norm

elaborators and enforcers.⁸ Rather, the catalyst approach leverages the objective positionality of courts to create space for collective norm building and iterative problem solving between plaintiff and the defendant responsible for repairing harm.⁹ As we reckon with the sheer polarization that characterizes the current American political zeitgeist—particularly concerning the role of public institutions in assuring safety, racial equity, and justice for all—the catalyst model presents a viable roadmap for the judiciary as a site and arbiter of transformative social change.

Recognizing the many practical limitations of unilateral court-ordered mandates, judge Henderson marshalled strenuous, ground-level judicial oversight throughout his tenure. In a number of landmark class action rulings,¹⁰ Henderson's three-judge panel appointed third-party "special masters", corrections experts, and plaintiffs' counsel to monitor and work collaboratively with prison administrators to ensure they sufficiently shifted prison conditions in adherence with the Eighth Amendment's protection from cruel and unusual punishment.¹¹ In some respects, the catalyst model runs parallel to the tenets of transformative justice, in that the harms incurred by individuals are repurposed as a lens to see, understand, and dissolve larger structural conditions, a method where both victims and perpetrators are centered in the process of repair.

But there are also clear tensions between these two justice paradigms. The judicial and policy interventions that arose during the California decarceration movement were a mixed bag of success: the state prison population has decreased by over 20 percent since 2011 while observing no substantial increase in measures of violent crime.¹² Likewise, 70 percent of the total decrease in the state prison population in the first two years after *Brown v. Plata* is attributed to governor Jerry Brown's "Realignment" strategy, which funneled low-level offenders out of state prisons and back into local jails.¹³ There is sure efficacy in the immediate harm reduction brought on by policies that reduce overcrowding and its impact on adequate medical and mental

healthcare. However, for progress to be made more durable given the culture of resistance and "trained incapacity" exhibited by penal institutions, each of these catalyst interventions nonetheless rely on actors *within* the prison-industrial complex to sit at the driver's seat of change,¹⁴ in many ways only offering prison solutions to prison problems. Furthermore, as prison populations declined, people were simultaneously funneled into various other modes of incarceration, including in private prisons and electronic surveillance.¹⁵ Consequently, Realignment constituted a mere shuffling of the California prison crisis, not its resolution.¹⁶

The advocates of Critical Resistance argue that such "reformist reforms" do little to shift the expansive reach of the carceral state,¹⁷ and that by dedicating additional resources—indeed, over two billion dollars to local county jails in the first years of Realignment—to create "better" prison permutations, we only further entrench and legitimate logics of punishment and control,¹⁸ rather than use public dollars to grow alternative possibilities for well-being. This collective of organizers and scholar-activists urge that transformative policy must create resources and infrastructures that prevent harm, while eliminating police and prison contact and establishing processes for community accountability. To the extent that state prisons are downstream containers for the consequences of local policing and racialized socioeconomic formations, crafting policy interventions that satisfy this abolitionist mandate must too be sufficiently local and proximate to the harm in communities.

Atlanta's Promising Alternatives to Incarceration

On 28 May 2019, Mayor Keshia Lance Bottoms signed historic legislation authorizing the closure and reimagining of the Atlanta City Detention Center.¹⁹ Coupled with a progressive legislative agenda that has eliminated cash bail, as well as Task Force recommendations that reschedule various traffic, administrative, and low-level city infractions

to civil adjudication, Atlanta's public safety framework is guided by diversionary strategies that invest in people and prevent jail detention altogether—offering services, not sentences. The City of Atlanta has also operated a highly successful Policing Alternatives & Diversion Initiative (PAD) since 2017, which works in tandem with law enforcement and 311 non-emergency services to reduce the arrest and incarceration of people experiencing extreme poverty, substance abuse, and mental health crises.²⁰ The PAD program offers ongoing case management aimed at remedying the risk factors that led to interaction with law enforcement while strengthening protective factors against harm and violence by connecting vulnerable citizens to social services like housing, transportation, healthcare, and food assistance.²¹

Most recently in February of 2021, Atlanta partnered with the Vera Institute to conduct data analysis and best practice recommendations toward closing the Atlanta City Detention Center within subsequent three months.²² These recommendations outline further measures to reduce the human and economic costs of incarceration in ways that sustain public safety. Notably, Vera recommends three tangible policy shifts that can be implemented with law enforcement immediately: greater use of field-based cite and release, portable "process and release" tools for officers, and integrated sobering and stabilization services for citizens experiencing behavioral health crises.

Beyond police-driven solutions, the Vera Institute also highlights the importance of investing in a robust network of community-based organizations and crisis services throughout the city to build upon Atlanta's growing ecosystem of safety, equity, and wellness. Findings by the White House Council of Economic Advisors and Bureau of Justice Statistics show that over "over 50% of the incarcerated have mental health problems, while approximately 70% were regular drug users and 65% regularly used alcohol prior to being incarcerated."²³ Accordingly, Sharkey et al. find a negative causal relationship between the prevalence of community-based

nonprofits and violent crime: the addition of 10 community nonprofits per 100,000 residents leads to a 9 percent decline in the murder rate, a 6 percent decline in the violent crime rate, and a 4 percent decline in the property crime rate.²⁴ Notably, substance abuse and workforce development organizations are shown to have the highest impacts on violent harm reduction. These findings are in-line with Vera's long-term recommendations to the city of Atlanta, which suggest bringing to scale community-based crisis services such as the Georgia Crisis Access Line, Grady Mobile Psychiatric Unit, and PAD.

Conclusion

Judge Henderson's adaptation of the catalyst model and Mayor Bottoms' justice reform agenda present two instructive cases of Black public servants in differing levels and branches of government enacting change from where they are. Each is marked by a departure from retributive notions of justice that punish and control, to models of justice centering communal and transformative methods that seek to heal rather than harm. While realizing Black liberation from within the state is necessarily constrained by proximity to the foremost repositories of capitalist and white supremacist power, the space of transformative possibility is properly delineated by the distance between the inertia of these public institutions and the prophetic political visions of Black radicals. Thus, the emergent abolitionist improvisations of Black leaders like Henderson, Bottoms, and others are inseparable from the undercurrent of Black resistance that sets the bounds for what reimagined world orders we are able to conceive as possible. Whether the medical malfeasance of Pelican Bay, George Floyd, or George Jackson, Black martyrs continue to offer up the materials of a movement. And with the undeniable wisdom only a child could bestow, little Gianna Floyd foretold the abolitionist future many of us are still struggling to see: "Daddy changed the world." Finding potential and possibility amidst the

wreckage of existential uncertainty is the stuff of freedom. Now imagine if Black death weren't its price . . .

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