

Racial Violence, White Spaces, and Neighborhood Vulnerability

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Segregation is a cancer in the body politic that must be removed before our democratic health can be realized.

—Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

I used to be a faithful supporter of the Policeman Benevolent Association. For just a \$25 contribution, the local PBA would issue a decal with a badge-like insignia that you could affix to the driver's side backdoor window. It signaled that you were a "tax paying citizen," employed, and on the right side of the law. As a young black man, I suspected at the time that the decal also signaled that I had connections, through family or friends, to law enforcement. Which I did. My father was a parole officer in the South Bronx, and I grew up with respect for the law and the people who enforced it. But that's not why I made a point of supporting the PBA.

Getting a decal served as a talisman, distinguishing me, hopefully, from other black men that the police would pull over, providing me with some measure of protection from potential abuse. I made my first donation to the PBA when I moved to the suburbs of Yonkers in my late twenties. I continued payments into my thirties, when I joined the faculty at Yale University in New Haven, and then into my forties, when I crossed coasts to join to faculty at the University of California, Davis. Although I've been stopped dozens of times over the years, often without any clear reason, I've never been roughed up or bullied by the police. Some of my friends have not been so lucky. Back in 1995, the year I defended my doctoral dissertation, Earl G. Graves Jr.—my basketball buddy and the senior vice president for advertising and marketing at *Black Enterprise* magazine—was shaken down at New York's Penn Station. Dressed in full business attire, holding an orange juice in his hand, and stepping off a Metro-North train on an early workday morning, Graves somehow aroused the suspicions of the police. The *New York Times* reported that Graves was accosted and quickly hustled to a nearby wall by two Metro-North police officers as they "...lifted my arms in the air, relieved me of my briefcase and frisked me from top to bottom."

Growing up black in the city, you had to learn to circumvent unwelcoming (and often white) neighborhoods as well as crooked beat cops in your own neighborhood, some of whom who took their "license to kill" personally. Yet as a cocky teenager from Harlem, I used to feel like the entire city was my playground. In my mid-teens, many a time my

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Cuban-Jewish running mate and I stumbled into the wrong bar, down the wrong street, or through the wrong neighborhoods:

Howard Beach, East 68th Street, Whitestone, Alphabet City—only to be escorted or chased out by local teens. I learned firsthand how New York’s white neighborhoods stayed white.

Displays of hypermasculinity by white men were frequently expressed through neighborhood vigilant-like behavior, which was not only considered normal, but it was justified (Cazenave 2018). Eventually, I had the chance to observe this phenomenon from the safety of a courthouse. After I graduated from college, I began working as a researcher for Jay Schulman, an applied sociologist, and the founder of the National Jury Project. It was 1986, and I was helping him to select juries for the Howard Beach case. Racial tensions were high; just two years earlier an elderly and disabled black woman named Eleanor Bumpurs had been shot and killed by police officers who had shown up at her public-housing project in the Bronx to enforce an eviction. But Howard Beach was different: it was a working-class Archie Bunker-like neighborhood in Queens, New York, a neighborhood that three black men stumbled into and that has forever become linked in the public imagination with vigilante justice by white teens. A mob of white teens, armed with baseball bats, a tire iron, and a tree limb attacked the three men. One of the victims, 23-year-old Trinidadian-born Michael Griffith, was chased onto the Belt Parkway where he was run over by a speeding car. One of his companions escaped but a second was brutally pummeled with weapons (Haynes and Solovitch 2017, 162–163). According to news reports and court documents, Justice Thomas A. Demakos sentenced 17-year old British immigrant Jon Lester for Griffith’s murder, declaring that Lester showed “no remorse, no sense of guilt, no shame, no fear,”...“What kind of individual do I have before me, who, after witnessing a young black man get crushed by a car, continues his reckless conduct by savagely beating another black male with a bat (Fried 1988).” Most of the defendants in the case were ultimately acquitted of manslaughter.

Three years after the Howard Beach case, I helped select the jury for another white vigilante murder trial. This time, the victim—Yusef Hawkins—was 16. Yusef and his friends had taken the train to the Italian-American working-class community of Bensonhurst, Brooklyn, to look at a used car advertised for sale. They were surrounded and taunted by a mob of white youth, and Yusef was shot twice in the chest. People said that “hate” had killed him, but it was a broader system of institutional racism that set the wheel in motion (Carmichael and Hamilton 1967; Feagin 2006). Acts of “vigilante justice” are nothing more than justified systemic violence that has been central in controlling white spaces (Anderson 1990; Cazenave 2018, 81).

The 2012 murder of 17-year-old Trayvon Martin by vigilante George Zimmerman typifies the ways in which defended neighborhoods work. Trayvon had been visiting his father at his mostly-white gated community in Sanford, Florida. He walked to the nearby 7-Eleven and purchased a bag of Skittles and an Arizona Iced Tea. Strolling back home, Trayvon drew the attention of George Zimmerman, the neighborhood-watch captain who had been patrolling the neighborhood. After calling 911, according to Reuters, Zimmerman reported a “real suspicious guy,” and followed him, accosted him, and ultimately shot him. He was acquitted as the jury believed his claim of self-defense.

Racial violence characterized the creation of white spaces long before local and federal governments engaged in zoning and redlining practices. There is a critical connection between racial violence, residential segregation, and the construction of racial-group

interests and antagonisms; they all work to legitimate racial categorization as objective and natural (Haynes 2006, 53). Whiteness itself has been an instituted privilege. From the outset, capitalist interests and slavery have been in direct tension with, and in opposition to, democracy. Whiteness secured power and wealth, evolving from its roots in racial identity into a form of property that is protected by law. Whiteness is a right that is both historically and contemporaneously protected in American law and has been crucial to the accumulation of wealth for a unified white nation (Harris 1995; Baptist). Race categories are bounded (black/white, citizen/non-citizen) and durable because these categories make up a socially organized and enforced system of distinction (Tilly 1999, 4–5). We use race as a “social difference codes”...“that define the socially significant distinctions” between people, on which society is structured, social inequality ordered, and to which people develop feelings of belonging and these differences define the socially salient categories and cultural schema for enacting social relationships (Ridgeway 2000, 1–3).

The designation of racial categories by the State and its agents reinforced the significance of race differences in politics and in civic life. The U.S. Constitution legalized the importation of slaves until 1808 and introduced a Fugitive Slave Clause (Article IV, Section 2, Clause 3), which required escaped slaves to be treated hunted down like criminal fugitives to protect the property interests of white slave holders. In fact, scholars have located the roots of policing in the slave patrols that emerged.

But it was the Dred Scott Decision in 1857 that established second-class status for black people for generations. Chief Justice Taney not only conveyed that both free and unfree black people were not citizens, he also indicted the entire “race” as “beings of inferior order, and altogether unfit to associate with the white race, either in social or political relations.” The decision reflected the widespread agreement among whites that Negroes were categorically different from other races (Jaspin 2007, 15–23, 31). Following the end of Reconstruction, Black life was criminalized by the adoption of Black Codes instituted across the South that disenfranchised Black civic and political life. Poll Taxes and Grandfather clauses completed the disenfranchisement of the Black vote, virtually guaranteeing second-class citizenship while the formation of a rigid color line ensured white hegemony (Downs 2015). Those defined as “white” drew closure, fiercely protective of the spaces that marked their inclusion.

Between the 1890 and 1940, with “segregation” becoming a political rallying cry north and south, thousands of white Americans engaged in systemic mob violence, even resorting to firebombing to banish blacks from their towns (Jaspin 2007; Nightingale 2012, 318; Loewen 2018, 23). This legacy of racial cleansing in America created what some have termed “Sundown Towns”—because of the signs posted on their outskirts that read “Nigger, Don’t Let the Sun Go Down on You in ...”—legal ordinances and violence transformed nearly half of the counties in the nation into all-white spaces (Loewen 2018, 422). All-white “defended neighborhoods” have for the longest time engaged in civic and police violence to keep white spaces white (Anderson 1992). In *Sundown Towns: A Hidden Dimension of American Racism*, sociologist James W. Loewen identifies 184 towns, across 32 states, where “sundown” signs were openly displayed for newcomers (Loewen 2018, 104). Villages, towns, and counties also banned Chinese, Mexicans, and Native Americans, and at times, Jews, Catholics, and Mormons (Loewen 2018, vi). There are 153 documented anti-Chinese riots that occurred across the West before the turn-of-the twentieth century. By 1875, Congress had banned Chinese women from entering the United States and in 1882, Asian immigration was restricted altogether by the “Chinese Exclusion” Act.

Plessy v. Ferguson (1896) legitimated Jim Crow segregation as well as the quantification of racial membership under the premises of ‘separate but equal’. Segregation invested race categories with “content and meaning” and political substance, while fostering a collective “white” conscience that allowed millions of southern and eastern European immigrants who arrived in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to be embraced (Roediger 2007, 8–9; Loewen 2018, 99). In tandem with the violence and segregation, the criminal justice system contributed to the widely-held public perception that blacks were pre-modern, savage, and prone to criminality. This perception then bolstered efforts to drive Negroes and other non-whites out of villages and rural parts of the nation toward towns and cities (Muhammad 2019, 9; Haynes 2018, 38; Baptist 2014).

In his opus work, *Economy and Society* Max Weber recognized the intertwined relationship between the boundaries created by racial classification and political economy. Weber asserted that “nobility” is a social good, and that, in the post-Emancipation era, racial group boundaries were solidified as a way to monopolize honor and social power (Weber 1968, 386; Haynes and Hernandez 2008, 54). The participation of poor white Americans was critical to this project. In the post-Reconstruction South, the social honor of poor whites, which Weber termed “ethnic honor” was dependent upon the social declassification of blacks, that is, their stigmatization (Goffman 1986; Weber 1968, 391).

By the turn of the twentieth century, Chinatowns and African American ghettos were beginning to emerge in cities across the American landscape. The black migration towards cities and the north was observed by Atlanta School scholar George Edmund Haynes, who observed that between 1860 and 1870, the Negro population increased by 51 percent in eight Northern cities (including New York City). Between 1890 and 1900, the population of Negroes in towns and cities with at least 2500 inhabitants increased nearly one-third faster than did those in rural districts (Haynes 1913, 113). Prior to the Great Migration, crowding in segregated areas already characterized black communities north and south: According to George Haynes, “New York has its ‘San Juan Hill’ in the West Sixties, and its Harlem district of over 35,000 within about eighteen city blocks; Philadelphia has its Seventh Ward; Chicago has its State Street; Washington its North West neighborhood, and Baltimore its Druid Hill Avenue. Louisville has its Chestnut Street and its ‘Smoketown;’ Atlanta its West End and Auburn Avenue” (Haynes 113, 109).

Local police and sheriffs played a central role in maintaining white spaces and protecting the interests of homeowners (Loewen 2018, 92). But a fervent white citizenry often took the law into their own hands, meting out justice for crossing racially defined boundaries. Between 1865 and 1950, at least 6,500 blacks were lynched in the United States (<https://eji.org/reports/reconstruction-in-america-overview/>). Racial terror often occurred under the cover of night, when forty-foot high crosses were lit by hooded Knight Riders of the Klu Klux Klan. By the early 1920s, the Klan boasted tens of thousands of new members, from all corners of the United States. The town of Visalia, California in the central San Joaquin Valley, had become a Klan stronghold (Bringhurst 2000, 365).

Beginning in the late nineteenth century, the movement from the rural South to the urban North was part of a broader shift, among both whites and blacks, from agriculture toward the new industrial economies; for blacks, however, there was another factor: they were fleeing anti-Negro terrorism (Haynes and Solovitch 2017, 30–31). Cities promised refuge, a semblance of independence and autonomy, or at least a certain level of safety in numbers. Those numbers allowed for amassing political power and exerting some local control in neighborhoods. Yet many black newcomers found that they had traded one

set of barriers for another. White-on-black violence enforced a monopoly within markets and created the boundaries for a formally segregated housing market that distributed resources, allocated goods, and organized the residential community (Haynes 2006, 64; Haynes and Hernandez 2008, 65; Gotham 2000; Haynes 2018, 41).

Decades before restrictive covenants were instituted by the Federal Housing Authority, and white neighborhoods were marked as desirable for investment while Mexican and Black neighborhoods were “redlined” as undesirable, segregation had already neared completion through official and unofficial forms of white-vigilantism (Weaver 1948; Gotham 2000). Violence against blacks transformed black spaces into newly “all-white” spaces (Loewen 2018).¹

The bloodiest period of our nation’s racial history occurred in the decade surrounding World War I, as a series of pogroms erupted throughout the North and Midwest. Following the end of World War One, white GI’s returned home to discover Negro veterans developing a new-found pride in being American. White men again took to the streets to vent their rage, and Negro soldiers just home from Europe were lynched, some still wearing their uniforms (Haynes and Solovitch 2017, 41). The Red Summer of 1919 was particularly noted for its extreme dehumanizing violence against Black families, and it occurred in the middle of a flu pandemic that would kill at least 50 million worldwide, according to the CDC estimates.

In 1921, with fear of the flu subsiding, the thriving business district of Greenwood in Tulsa, Oklahoma, was targeted for destruction by white mobs. These pogroms were becoming common in America; a cursory scan of headlines from the *New York Times* historical index reveals cities and towns throughout the North, South, and Midwest: Waverly, Ohio (1884); Wilmington, North Carolina (1898); Lonoke, Arkansas (1898); New Orleans, Louisiana (1900); New York City’s San Juan Hill and Tenderloin districts (1900 and 1905); Evansville, Indiana (1903); Atlanta, Georgia (1906), and Springfield, (1908) and Chicago (1911), Illinois.

State classification by race creates what Bourdieu calls “the structure of the mind,” relegating blackness to a “spoiled identity”—a signifier of morally deficiency and dishonor (Goffman 1986). It continues to sanction state-sponsored violence against blacks as well as impunity for police officers. It is rooted in societal institutions and structures and nourished through all the privileges that come with white skin. It is stamped on our nation’s character and embedded in its founding documents, which reduced blacks to body parts (Muhammad 2019; Mills et al. 2018, 17). In order to boost representation among slave-holding states in the House of Representatives, blacks were counted as three-fifths of a person (Baptist 2014, 9). Four of the first five U.S. Presidents owned blacks (Baptist 2014, 9).

As we entered the Civil War, the continuance of these relationships made cotton king—with cotton accounting for more than half of U.S. exports—and whites wealthy. And the violent policing of black bodies was a crucial linchpin to protecting the capitalist interests and political power of white men. This white patriarchal violence persists to this day as black men are up to 3.5 times more likely than whites to be killed by law enforcement. A 2014 *ProPublica* analysis of federal data tracked 1,217 deadly police shootings between 2010 and 2012 and showed that black teens between 15 and 19 years of age were killed at a rate of 21 times their white counterparts.

Many Americans said that they felt a tide had turned in America during the summer of 2014, following the deaths of Eric Garner (July 2014), Michael Brown (August 2014), and Tamir Rice (November 2014) and the crystallization of the mantra “Hands up! Don’t

Shoot” for the next stage of the Black Live Matter Movement (Cazenave 2018, 9). They said it again when we were “sheltering at home,” and we witnessed the slow-motioning homicide of George Floyd—eight minutes and 46 seconds of raw, uncut video, a black snuff film—galvanized the nation and drew multiracial support for criminal justice reform and an end to state-sponsored violence. Once labeled radicals and extremists, Black Lives Matter has become the nation’s largest protest movement and heir apparent to the Black Freedom struggle. Recent surveys show a majority of registered voters support BLM (Taylor 2016).

Is there something different about this moment? For months now, “Say their names” has been chanted by young whites across the nation. And in my small town in Davis, California, I have observed children as young as seven writing out the names, in chalk on the sidewalks and on signs sprawled across town the names of those memorialized: Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, Lavern Cox, Ahmaud Arbery, Marsha Johnson, Sandra Bland, Trayvon Martin. As much as I am heartened by these signs, I fear we may be reliving the nadir of American racial history. The racial conversation today looks not dissimilar from that of 1920. Both periods saw the growth of intolerance towards new immigrants. In both eras, official and unofficial forms of violence targeted Blacks, and other non-whites. Both periods saw a growth in anti-Semitic violence. Both witnessed the increased prominence and mainstreaming of the Klu Klux Klan (1915) and the Alt-Right (2016), the growth of white nativism, and the racial pandering in politics. And both eras were marked by a crushing pandemic, in which marginalized, segregated communities were disproportionately impacted. And today, like yesteryear, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic leaves Black folk still sick from freedom (Downs 2018).

Much rides on the coming elections in November. But even if progressive voices take back the White House, I suspect that even the most ambitious police reforms will have limited impact by themselves.

For the foreseeable future, Black folks will continue to live in the bleakest neighborhoods, with the worst schools, the fewest resources, and the scarcest of opportunities. Unless we are fully prepared to dismantle segregation in all of its forms—and until whites are truly prepared to lose the material advantages that come with segregation—we are destined for perhaps many more “moments” of solidarity and failed national reconciliation, but no disruptive break from our ignominious violent past.

Note

¹Today, research still shows that the impact of nonwhite in-migration on anti-black bias crimes and violent bias crime remains higher in neighborhoods with more white residents than in places with few white residents (Grattet 2009, 132).

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