"I Can't Breathe"

Hatem Bazian

If viewed accurately, “I can’t breathe,” the final plea of George Floyd, is the most painful and apt summation of the colonization effects, with death, destruction, and erasure visited upon people of the Global South no matter the geography they inhabit and the immediate connection to the immigration-refugee crisis. The daily news gives the impression that what has taken place in Minneapolis, Minnesota—the killing of George Floyd by police—is an isolated event that is disconnected from history, be it domestic or international. But one can’t approach the topic of Blacks in America without beginning with Columbus’s journey across the Atlantic, which commenced multiple genocides against the Indigenous people in the New World and across the globe. Furthermore, European genocides in the New World brought about the market-driven slave trade that witnessed snatching millions of Africans from their homes, lands, and families and shipping them as commodified cargo for a trading route that lasted almost 300 years.

The Minneapolis police’s murder of George Floyd; the Israeli army’s killing of the autistic Palestinian kid, Iyad el-Hallak, in Jerusalem; and the drownings of the Syrian toddler, Alan Kurdi (Aylan Shenu), and the Salvadoran immigrant, Oscar Alberto Martínez, and his 23 month-old daughter, Angie Valeria Martínez, are all connected to the colonially constructed world that we inhabit. At first look, one is more inclined to see each event speaking to a specific context and circumstance that are too far apart to make any meaningful or straightforward connection. However, the disconnect is a direct outcome of examining unfolding events in isolation of each other. The more accurate approach is to consider all the forces and elements that coalesced to bring each one of these tragedies to the forefront, including the long colonial history, its imprint on the postcolonial horizons, immigration, refugees, racism, Islamophobia, and the disruptions of lives across the globe. George Floyd’s murder is directly linked to the construction of race, the racial state, and the genocidal aspects of colonization, and points to its seamless continuities in the postcolonial and post-civil rights movement. Interventions in postcolonial states in the Global South bring about wars, death, and the refugee crisis, while structural racism, Islamophobia, and police brutality in the Global North fill the prisons and graveyards. The colonial present regulates and governs the bodies and spaces of Blacks and people of the Global South, no matter the region they inhabit.

Notably, the murder of George Floyd ushered in an iconoclastic global moment that witnessed the tearing down, and at times the sinking in rivers and harbors, of the many symbols of “celebrated” colonizers, slave traders, and confederate figures. Statues across the world became the focal point for activists and the much-needed move to reclaim public space for social justice movements—a major development that sits at the crossroads of the colonial and postcolonial phase and becomes a stride toward rewriting history in real time, despite the continuity of systematic and systemic structural racism.

After George Floyd’s murder, the European Parliament passed a resolution (493 votes in favor, 104 against, and 67 abstained) declaring “Black Lives Matter” and the slave trade as “a crime against humanity,” which is a step in the right direction. However, the European
Parliament is more progressive than each European state’s parliament and governments, which have pursued policies that demonstrate a total disregard for Black lives and the daily death toll of African and Asian immigrants and refugees. European states must come to terms with the daily carnage on the Mediterranean, with thousands of Black and brown lives already lost at sea and those making it onto land ending up in dead-end camps that currently hold thousands of immigrants and refugees, who, for no other reason, are seeking safety and security away from wars, Western interventions, and economic destruction. Passing a resolution and declaring the slave trade “a crime against humanity” is easy, but confronting the present colonial, structural racism, Islamophobia, massive surveillance, and the erasure of Black and brown bodies across the continent would be the real test.

WHITE SUPREMACY’S COLONIAL KNEE ON THE NECK

On May 25, 2020, the world watched an 8 minute and 46 second video of Derek Chauvin, a Minneapolis police officer, murdering George Floyd, a 46 year-old Black man, while two other officers assisted in holding his body down and another kept the crowd away. Initially, the police department fired the four officers without charging any of them with a crime. It took five full days of a national rebellion with thousands of people in the streets demanding justice before Mike Freeman, the Hennepin County attorney, “announced murder and manslaughter charges against Derek Chauvin, the officer who can be seen most clearly in witness video pinning Mr. Floyd to the ground.” The murder occurred as a result of Derek Chauvin pressing his knee on George Floyd’s neck until he lost consciousness and keeping it in place “for a full minute after paramedics arrived at the scene.” The murder was captured on video, which showed George Floyd pleading for his life and saying many times, “I can’t breathe,” but to no avail:

It’s my face, man. I didn’t do nothing serious, man. Please, please, please. I can’t breathe. Please, man. Please, somebody.

Please, man, I can’t breathe. I can’t breathe, please. Man, I can’t breathe. My face. Just get up. I can’t breathe, please. I can’t breathe. . .I can’t move.


Some water or something, please. Please. I can’t breathe, officer. Don’t kill me. They’re gonna kill me, man. Come on, man. I cannot breathe. I cannot breathe.

They’re gonna kill me; they’re gonna kill me. I cannot breathe. I can’t breathe. Please, sir, please, sir, please. I can’t breathe.

While the video had sufficient evidence to arrest and charge Officer Chauvin, the mayor and city leadership did not act immediately to take the next steps to charge those responsible, which caused more legitimate, intense public anger and protest. After four full days of national and international protests and outright rebellion in over 40 US cities, the Minneapolis city's
leadership and the district attorney moved, on Friday, May 29, to arrest Officer Chauvin on a third-degree murder charge. The other three officers did not get charged or arrested until June 3, and only after the appointment of Keith Ellison, Minnesota attorney general, to prosecute and oversee the case.

Initially, the protesters’ demands focused on charging the four officers, but as police departments across the country acted upon President Trump’s incitement to dominate the streets, responding with brutality, rubber bullets, tear gas, and violence, the debate rapidly shifted to the nature of systemic and institutional racism. Critically, the problem of systemic and structural police violence and brutality against Black, Indigenous, and brown communities has been at the heart of the civil rights movement’s demands from the end of slavery to the Trump era.

Race and systematic and structural racism are the colonial legacies that are baked into policing, governing, education, the economy, entertainment, and everything else in contemporary society. “I can’t breathe” is the most fitting epistemological orientation for settler colonialism and the police placement of a real knee on the necks and lives of so many people across the globe. The knee has always been there, controlling the bodies, the space, and the oxygen intake, frequently snuffing life itself of so many human beings around the globe. The 8 minutes and 46 seconds of the video are the difference between the human endowed with the meaning contained therein and the subhuman within the colonially crafted time, space, and body.

George Floyd’s murder has all the strands of the crisis of the postcolonial world and the colonialism that shaped it. Just take a minute to consider that George Floyd is a descendant of enslaved Africans brought to this country in the hulls of ships; the owner of the store where the crime took place is a Palestinian immigrant/refugee himself, and his family is in America as a result of European and Zionist settler colonialism; the murderous officer, Derek Chauvin, is of Irish heritage, a community that was deemed inferior and only admitted into whiteness after the Civil War and the Chinese Exclusion Act; and the participating officer, Tou Thao, is a member of the Hmong Vietnamese community that arrived as refugees after the long US illegal war and intervention in Vietnam. Adding more complexity to the picture is the fact that the Minneapolis Police Department and others around the country receive training in Israel on the exact brutal methods deployed against Blacks and communities of color in America.

Derek Chauvin’s murder of George Floyd brought forth an expression of solidarity by the Irish antiracism movement, which is best expressed by the Dublin musician Imelda May in a protest poem: “You Don’t Get to Be Racist and Irish”

You don’t get to be proud of your heritage,
plights and fights for freedom
while kneeling on the neck of another!
You’re not entitled to sing songs
of heroes and martyrs
mothers and fathers who cried
as they starved in a famine
Or of brave hearted
soft spoken
poets and artists
lined up in a yard
blindfolded and bound
Waiting for Godot
and point blank to sound
We emigrated
We immigrated
We took refuge
So cannot refuse
When it’s our time
To return the favour
Land stolen
Spirits broken
Bodies crushed and swollen
unholy tokens of Christ, Nailed to a tree
(That) You hang around your neck
Like a noose of the free
Our colour pasty
Our accents thick
Hands like shovels
from mortar and bricklaying
foundation of cities
you now stand upon
Our suffering seeps from every stone
your opportunities arise from
Outstanding on the shoulders
of our forefathers and foremothers
who bore your mother's mother
Our music is for the righteous
Our joys have been earned
Well deserved and serve
to remind us to remember
More Blacks
More Dogs
More Irish
Still labelled leprechauns, Micks, Paddys, louts
we’re shouting to tell you
our land, our laws
are progressively out there
We’re in a chrysalis
state of emerging into a new
and more beautiful Eire/era
40 Shades Better
Unanimous in our rainbow vote
we’ve found our stereotypical pot of gold
and my God it’s good
So join us...’cause
You Don’t Get to Be Racist and Irish

The Irish themselves have been colonized and struggled against the British for 800 years and just recently have been able to arrive at a peace settlement in Northern Ireland. What we have in Minneapolis is an entanglement of race, settler colonialism, violence, immigration, and refugee narratives. However, if the list does not provide enough entanglements, then consider the fact that Congresswoman Ilhan Omar, who represents the district, is herself an African Somali Muslim refugee, while Minnesota Attorney General Keith Ellison, the person appointed to oversee the investigation and prosecution, is himself a Black Muslim.

If you wanted to put together a movie for a story about the long history of colonization, settler colonialism, enslavement, genocides, foreign interventions, race, racial profiling, Islamophobia, whiteness, Blackness, communities of color, systematic neglect, inner-city business dynamics, militarism, neoliberal economics, militarized police and police brutality, and foreign links to the training—all taking place in the middle of a coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic that up to this point has killed 120,000 Americans—then the killing of George Floyd brings all of these strands together in an 8 minute and 46 second opening scene.

Pouring salt into racism’s deep wounds is the basic fact that “black Americans are 3.5 times more likely to die of COVID-19 than white Americans,” which may be directly attributable to disparity in the availability of health care in Black communities, an outcome traced to compounded factors, including enslavement, Jim Crow laws, separate-but-equal segregation, never-ending disinvestment, toxic dumping, pollution, poisonous food, and police violence. Yes, many Blacks do have pre-existing health conditions, like many of their white counterparts, but the only circumstance that matters, which is a natural one and determines all other elements in life, is their Blackness. Society time and time again dismisses, ignores, and refuses to tackle a color-blindness that kills daily!

“BLACK SKIN BOY...BORN TO DIE” AND AMERICA’S OPEN CASKET

“He was a black skin boy. So, he was born to die,” goes Bob Dylan’s song, “The Death of Emmett Till.” The lyrics are as timely today with the murder of George Floyd as when they were first written and performed because Black skin remains a threat and the cause of death of far too many in the US and around the world. The song narrates the story of Emmett Till, a 14 year-old Black youngster from Chicago, who was murdered while visiting relatives in Mississippi on August 28, 1955, by two white men because, supposedly, he flirted with a white woman. At the time, Mamie, Emmett’s mother, insisted on a public funeral in Chicago with an open casket for everyone to view America’s racism and brutality that completely disfigured and mutilated the face of her beautiful boy. The motionless body was Emmett’s, but the open casket is America’s well-documented lynching history, racism, sanctioned police brutality, and erasure, structurally assigning subhumaness to Blacks. America’s soul continues to be burdened by the countless, motionless Black bodies that pile up daily in inner-city streets and alleyways and from police fomented violence. Not to leave behind the walking, living bodies
made motionless and numbed into a lifeless existence through racism: filling prisons, shattering dreams, and creating permanent modern “civilized” slavery.

Multiple academic and professionally published research papers on police violence show that racial bias is the primary cause behind the differentiated treatment accorded to Black communities. In a detailed summary of 18 national studies on police and racial bias, Kia Makarechi concluded that “taken together, the research paints a picture of a nation where a citizen’s race may well affect their experience with police—whether an encounter ends with a traffic stop, the use of police force, or a fatal shooting.” A study by professor Cody T. Ross, an anthropologist at the University of California, Davis, cited by Makarechi, found evidence of a significant bias in the killing of unarmed Black Americans relative to unarmed white Americans, in that the probability of being black, unarmed, and shot by police is about 3.49 times the probability of being white, unarmed, and shot by police on average.

What was more interesting in the study is,

there is no relationship between county-level racial bias in police shootings and crime rates (even race-specific crime rates), meaning that the racial bias observed in police shootings in this data set is not explainable as a response to local-level crime rates.

The study makes an association between police killings and the race of victims, but often people retort back with the fact that more white individuals are killed by police annually than Blacks or Latinos. Certainly, the raw numbers are correct, but it is a flawed measurement if not adjusted and balanced to population percentages. An article published by the Washington Post adjusted the police killing data to population size with “nearly 160 million more white people in America than there are black people” and constituting “roughly 62 percent of the US population but only about 49 percent of those who are killed by police officers.” On the other hand, “African Americans . . . account for 24 percent of those fatally shot and killed by the police despite being just 13 percent of the US population.” The Washington Post’s study concluded that “black Americans are 2.5 times as likely as white Americans to be shot and killed by police officers.”

In the same study, the 2015 data show that

police have shot and killed a young black man (ages 18 to 29)—such as Michael Brown in Ferguson, Mo.—175 times since January 2015; 24 of them were unarmed. Over that same period, police have shot and killed 172 young white men, 18 of whom were unarmed. Once again, while in raw numbers there were similar totals of white and black victims, blacks were killed at rates disproportionate to their percentage of the US population. Of all of the unarmed people shot and killed by police in 2015, 40 percent of them were black men, even though black men make up just 6 percent of the nation’s population.

Demagogues like Rudy Giuliani, former New York City mayor and currently Trump’s lawyer, insultingly maintain,

if you want to deal with this on the black side, you’ve got to teach your children to be respectful to the police, and you’ve got to teach your children that the real danger to them is not the police; the real danger to them, 99 out of 100 times, 9,900 out of 10,000 times, are other black kids who are going to kill them. That’s the way they’re gonna die.
This assertion of Black-on-Black violence is used to rationalize and excuse away police violence and brutality. Certainly, data show that Black-on-Black violence accounts for 90% of the murder in the Black community, but also white-on-white violence is responsible for 82% of the killing of whites. Taking this racist logic a step further, the overwhelming majority of pedophilia and serial killers come from within the white community in America, but no one frames it as a white issue or white crime; rather, as it should be, it is considered on a case-by-case basis, and no collective race guilt is assigned.

A study by Texas A&M University economist Mark Hoekstra looked at two million responses to emergency calls in two US cities, and “concluded that white officers dispatched to Black neighborhoods fired their guns five times as often as Black officers dispatched for similar calls to the same neighborhoods.” The issue is not only Black-on-Black violence, but also the implicit bias and differentiated treatment directed at Black communities, and it shows a marked difference within each neighborhood, depending on the racial background of the responding officers.

A Wall Street Journal article by Heather Mac Donald pushed the same association of crime areas and police violence by insisting that “such a concentration of criminal violence in minority communities means that officers will be disproportionately confronting armed and often resisting suspects in those communities, raising officers’ own risk of using lethal force.” Just as Giuliani pivoted to Black-on-Black violence, Donald shifts toward problematizing minority communities, thus affirming and appealing to America’s existing racial imaginary of these communities. These two assertions and other lines of argumentation are a clear example of the compounded and sophisticated type of racism. The notion of the high-crime area or threat posed by supposedly armed Blacks is used to gloss over the flimsy evidence to back these assertions.

The research shows that “the use of lethal force by police in 2015 found no correlation between the level of violent crime in an area and that area’s police killing rates.” To put it another way, 69% of African Americans killed by police in 2015 were nonviolent and unarmed, which trumps the assertion that crime or presence of arms or lethal threat was the cause of the shooting. A published study by the Center for Policing Equity, which looked at 19,000 cases of police use of force from 2010 to 2015, found that “African-Americans are far more likely than whites and other groups to be the victims of use of force by the police, even when racial disparities in crime are taken into account.”

Another important study titled, “Protecting Whiteness: White Phenotypic Racial Stereotypicality Reduces Police Use of Force,” conducted in 2016 by a team from Harvard, Portland State University, University of California, Los Angeles, and Boston University, tested the hypothesis of whether “the Whiter one appears, the more the suspect will be protected from police force.” The team’s findings were that the “police used less force with highly stereotypical Whites, and this protective effect was stronger than the effect for non-Whites.” Thus, the national debate on police violence and use of force against Blacks should be totally reframed away from association with the supposed criminal background or the high-crime area.

Existing research cited and other studies undermine claims of area association or criminal behavior, which brings us back to race as the primary differentiated factor that explains the propensity of police to frequently use lethal force when encountering Blacks. In today’s America, on average, police kill a Black man or woman every 28 hours, and on the rare occasion that charges are brought against officers, it is extremely extraordinary to have a court or jury convict the officer. The charges against the four Minneapolis police officers and other officers fired since May 25, 2020, across the country, point to possibly a new phase in confronting institutional racism, but this is still at the beginning of the road and a difficult struggle is ahead.
The policing approach to Black and brown communities has developed over centuries, and it is not only a recent problem. For sure, the epistemic framework for policing originates in the slave institution with focus on the total control of Black bodies: regulating movement within and outside the plantations and extreme legally mandated punishment to prevent rebellion and challenge to the existing order.

Policing Black communities can be traced all the way back to slave patrols in the South, which, according to Dr. Marsha Coleman-Adebayo and Kevin Berends,

*had three primary goals: (1) to chase down, apprehend, and return to their owners, escaped Africans; (2) to provide a form of organized terror to deter African armed revolts; and (3) to maintain a form of discipline for Africans who were subject to vigilante summary execution, outside of the law, if they violated any plantation rules or just ran afoul of any white person.*

After the Civil War, the slave patrols were incorporated into police departments without ever altering the basic assumptions relating to Blacks that centered on the need to control and discipline the targeted population.

The control and violent structure inside the US can be better understood if we bring colonial discourse analysis into it, contextualizing the local as a subset of, and possessing epistemic continuity with, the global. Certainly, Malcolm X in the early 1960s spoke of Black communities as constituting the “internal colonies,” which was an important and correct base of analysis on how African Americans are viewed and managed within the Global North. In the external colonies, the same mode of control and domination is instituted with the goal of driving maximum political, economic, and social benefits from it while controlling the colonized brown bodies, confining their movement and regularly using maximum violence. Thus, violence is paradigmatic in colonial structures because it is based on achieving total control toward a population that is deemed to be inferior or subhuman.

Violence is used in the same way against the colonized subject as an animal is trained to respond to the command of the trainer, who uses the whip to induce fear, then provides treats when a positive controlled response emerges from the animal. Violence in both plantation and colony is the preferred tool for inducing cooperation and bringing about total control and domination. White supremacy, a global phenomenon, normalizes violence by making it a constitutive and productive paradigm, shaping the relationship in the internal and external colonial. Blacks in the US and colonized populations epistemologically are reproduced in this colonial discourse as mere biological subhuman material that has not yet emerged out of the hulls of slave ships into servitude of the modern civilizational project, and violence is a training instrument, even if it causes death! Indeed, America's inner-cities are the epistemic hulls of the modern internal colonial slave ships navigating the oceans of unbeing and subhumaness. Today, we are focusing on George Floyd’s case, but the history of violence directed at Blacks is deeply intertwined with America’s history itself and defines the social, political, religious, and economic relationships over the past 500 years. Blacks in the New World (Indigenous communities and populations in the Global South) have been living under a violent structure since the day they were captured and transformed into a commodity to be sold and bought. If one wants to locate the present violence in America's inner-cities, then no need to go beyond a clear and unmistakable analysis of the torture, dehumanization, objectification, and commodification of tens of millions of Blacks, generation after generation until the present. The racist offers theology, pseudoscience, culture, or any other new fashionable dumbed-down, contemporary coffee-shop internet hypothesis to explain away “Black” and “colonized” violence, but never looking at the violent structure that became productive in plantations and colonies alike.
The shifting focus of George Floyd’s murder to people burning down buildings, looting, and behaving “uncivilized” on live TV is yet another dimension of the colonial and racial structure. “Riots” and “rebellions” are the voice of the voiceless; however, as a way to empty it of any context, the coverage has laser focused on burning buildings, cars, and properties, and failed to ask the important questions as to the reason behind the fires that are consuming the cities and toppling statues across the world. Could it be biological, genetic, and indicative of Blacks and colonized populations’ “savage” nature? If this is the case, then what is needed is the animal trainer with the whip to put the “savage” back in the hulls of the inner-city cage; what is needed is law and order to teach all to know their place in society. Otherwise, and if left alone, they will roam the streets and undue “civilization” itself. The response is an internal “shock and awe” and law and order to force compliance and reconstitute control at the modern inner-city plantation, for too much money and property are at risk to leave it to the subhuman and “barbarians” to determine. Law and the legal process are born out of social, political, and economic conditions. The Michael Brown verdict is an affirmation, if any is still needed, that the law is indeed blind to the structured and embedded effects of racism, and the grand jury more than anything else affirmed the epistemic foundations of America’s just-us legal system. Blackness in America is ascribed with criminal intent and even when unarmed constitutes a threat and a danger to a fully armed police officer, and in the case of George Floyd four fully armed officers. It is certain that George Floyd will not be the last to be killed by a police knee or possible hail of bullets since the conditions that make this possible have yet to be addressed, making no attempt at scratching the surface of the problem.

Disbanding, abolishing, and defunding the police are all positive calls to bring about fundamental change in the relationship with Blacks and communities of color. However, a real and sustained effort must be also undertaken to challenge the structure at an epistemic level and bring about a reconfiguration of power relations in society, education, media, and the economy that empower police brutality. Racism and white supremacy are vested in power, and no evidence points to a change in the near future.

ENDNOTES


3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.


13 Ibid.

14 Ibid.


16 Ibid.

17 Ibid.


22 Ibid.

23 Ibid.