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Introduction Project 400: Our Lived Experience

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Introduction Project 400: Our Lived Experience

Project 400: Our Lived Experience Symposium Issue

Introduction

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Guest Editor

The year 2019 marked 400 years since 20 Africans were brought by ship to Port Comfort, Virginia, in late August of 1619, heralding the advent of chattel slavery in the North American British Colonies. This brutal, inhuman institution of slavery would endure for 246 years, ending, in theory, only after the Civil War, the bloodiest conflict in American history. Afterwards followed the brief 12-year period known as “Radical Reconstruction,” in which the newly acquired citizenship rights of the formerly enslaved Blacks were upheld by the federal government. This period was succeeded by another 98 years of virulent racial violence and oppression under Jim Crow segregation, which ended with the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. It still wouldn’t be until passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act and the 1968 Fair Housing Act that African-Americans gained their full-citizenship rights in principle. Neither of the bills would have passed without the blood shed by civil rights protestors on the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma on Bloody Sunday in 1965 and that of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. who was assassinated on April 4, 1968.

This 349-year period, from 1619 when the first Africans were brought to these shores, to 1968, when their African-American descendants would, theoretically, gain their full constitutional rights as U.S. citizens, embodies 87 percent of Blacks’ 400 years in what is now the United States, which was defined by abject racial oppression. This means that it has only been in the last 52 years, within this author’s lifetime, that African-Americans have ostensibly been afforded all of the rights and freedoms that supposedly accrue from American citizenship. And, though this period of American history, which exceeds this nation’s founding, has been characterized by periods of racial progress, they have inevitably been succeeded by periods of racial retrenchment.

The United States is currently in such a historical moment, comparable to the period of emancipation and Reconstruction, which was followed by what preeminent African-American historian, Dr. Henry Louis “Skip” Gates Jr., refers to as “Redemption,”ⁱ with the reemergence of white

supremacy in the form of Jim Crow segregation. This is analogous to the present, wherein the nation had arguably realized the apex of racial progress in 2008 with the election of an African-American, Barack Obama, as the 44th president, second only to emancipation itself. This eight-year period, which some political and social pundits saw as evidence of America's status as a "post-racial" society, was followed by the election of Donald Trump, a racial demagogue and xenophobe whose presidential role model is Andrew Johnson. Johnson assumed the presidency after Abraham Lincoln's assassination; he opposed granting citizenship to the formerly enslaved blacks and facilitated the resurgence of the white supremacist power structure in the secessionist Confederate states. Similarly, Trump not only has seemingly tolerated and courted white supremacy, but also two of his key political advisors, Steve Bannon and Stephen Miller, have affiliations with extremist-right wing, white nationalist ideologies and organizations. His presidency witnessed the growth of white-nationalism in America, as exemplified by the Unite the Right Rally in Charlottesville, Virginia in 2017, which resulted in the deaths of one civilian and two Virginia State Police. Also, throughout the world, such growth is evidenced by the 2019 mass shootings of worshippers in two New Zealand Mosques, resulting in 51 deaths.

It is fitting that this special edition of the *Journal of Cultural Encounters, Conflicts & Resolutions* would memorialize the 400-year anniversary of the Black experience in America by examining aspects of African-American culture that have enabled people of African descent to endure and survive one of the most brutal, violent, inhuman forms of slavery known to mankind—and make significant advances in social progress while thriving and excelling in many areas of human endeavor. It is also an opportune time to examine the residual, systemic manifestations of institutional and structural racism that still disproportionately affect African Americans and people of color. At the time of this writing, America is in the midst of twin pandemics—one being the novel Coronavirus-19, which has caused more than 195,447 deaths in the U.S. to-date, and is disproportionately infecting and killing African-Americans. The other is historical in nature, that of racial violence against Blacks, which was epitomized in the cellphone video-recording of the public execution of George Floyd, a 46-year old Black man suffocating under the knee of a white, a Minneapolis Police Officer for an unutterably agonizing 8 minutes and 46 seconds.

Project 400: Our Lived Experience was the two-day conference held at Cleveland State University, September 27th – 28th, 2019, and is the basis for this special journal edition. It examined the historical and contemporary effects of slavery as well as the institutional and structural racism in

sustaining and perpetuating many of the racial disparities and inequities that persist for blacks today in the areas of Health, Education, Economics, and Criminal Justice. The COVID-19 pandemic has shone a glaring spotlight on many of these racial and ethnic disparities. In particular, this historic public health crisis has exposed the significant racial health disparities affecting blacks and people of color. The novel coronavirus' infection and mortality rates are higher among those with preexisting, chronic health conditions such as asthma, diabetes, obesity, hypertension, and heart disease, all of which are disproportionately found among African-Americans. These disparities in Blacks being infected and dying from the virus are found in cities and states across the country—like Chicago where Blacks are 30% of the population but 68% of those that have died from the virus and similarly in Milwaukee County, Wisconsin, where African-Americans are 26% of the population, yet 81% of the virus' casualties.ⁱⁱ And, although Detroit is a majority-black city, Blacks are approximately 14% of Michigan's population; yet, they represent 40% of the state's COVID-19 fatalities.ⁱⁱⁱ Here in Ohio, blacks are 13% of the population and 24% of the coronavirus deaths in which race is known, in comparison to 63.3% of whites who are 81.9% of the state's population (Ohio Dept. Health, US Census Bureau). The underlying chronic, but treatable, health conditions that put Blacks at greater risk of contracting and dying from the virus are not solely due to biological or lifestyle factors. They stem from centuries of racial discrimination in access to quality healthcare and the appropriate medical treatment, as well as other social variables that determine health outcomes and well-being. These social determinants of health are interdependent factors that are mutually reinforcing and create saturation effects across the major societal institutions that define life chances, health and quality of life outcomes.

The broadcasting of the horrific murder of George Floyd, while the country was still in the midst of a coronavirus-induced house-arrest, forced the nation, and White America in particular, to witness this killing of a Black at the hands of the police, in a way that all the other countless state-sanctioned murders of Black victims for generations had not, in turn igniting the largest mass civil rights movement in the history of the world. The masses of humanity that have taken to the streets in cities and towns—big and small, urban, suburban, and rural—in the wake of George Floyd's murder, coupled with the recent shooting deaths of Breonna Taylor, a 26-year old Black female EMS worker killed by 3 white Louisville Police officers, and Ahmaud Aubrey, a 25-year old Black male killed by a white former police officer, his son, and another white male in South Georgia, demanding an end to racial violence, police reform, and structural racism,

have also been the most diverse demonstrations in response to the death of Blacks in American history.

The contributions of the scholars included in this special edition of *Cultural Encounters, Conflicts, and Resolutions* examines aspects of the Black Experience within and in response to the American political, economic, and criminal justice systems. Given the historically marginalized status of Blacks within each, these systems disproportionately predispose them to both the novel coronavirus contagion and to the ravages of a racially biased criminal justice system, which all too often is manifested in the death of a Black at the hands of the police.

Distinguished poet, playwright, and youth worker, Useni Eugene Perkins' article explores the sociohistorical, political and cultural factors that coalesce to flagrantly criminalize the young Black male, making him both a casualty and coconspirator of his own racial oppression within the America's Prison Industrial Complex. He offers an array of interventions grounded in a Rites of Passage framework to disrupt the Black males' succession within the School-to-Prison Pipeline.

Dr. Timothy Black's examination of the American carceral system traces the origins of the contemporary manifestations of what he refers to as the of "*The New Debt Peonage*," to the convict leasing system of the post-Reconstruction era, constituting in the present, as in the past, a new form of pseudo-slavery. He examines the impact of a regime of criminal justice policies and practices on the lives and community-reentry efforts of a group of predominately African-American men in Cleveland, Ohio.

Thirdly, Dr. Mittie Davis Jones' analysis of the racially disparate administration of federal public policies illuminates the federal government's role in creating and perpetuating impoverished, racially segregated communities, both of which significantly predispose African Americans to being fatalities of both COVID-19 and police brutality. She offers anti-racist policies as alternatives to the racist or race-neutral policies of the past and present, to remedy the deleterious effects that these policies have on African Americans and other communities of color.

Right now scientists race to find a vaccine, and public officials at all levels of government seek to balance public health and curtail the spread of the virus with stabilizing and restarting their economies. Protestors across America and around the globe demand an end to racial violence, police brutality, and systemic racism. These twin pandemics will undoubtedly change society, and life as we knew it pre-COVID-19 and prior to the murder of George Floyd, in profound and unpredictable ways. Given the 400-year history of racial oppression and its legacy of structural and institutional inequality and racial violence, we must seize this opportunity to redefine and transform society, to make it more just and equitable for all. These

authors and this special edition of *the Journal of Cultural Encounters, Conflicts & Resolutions*, offer these scholarly contributions as catalyst in this regard.

ⁱ Gates, H. L. (2019). *Stony the Road: Reconstruction, White Supremacy, and The Rise of Jim Crow*. Penguin Press.

ⁱⁱ Cineas, F. (April 8, 2020). "COVID-19 is disproportionately taking black lives." *Vox*, <https://www.vox.com/identities/2020/4/7/21211849/coronavirus-black-americans> downloaded April 16, 2020.

ⁱⁱⁱ Johnson, A., & Buford, T. (April 5, 2020). "Early data shows African Americans have contracted and died of coronavirus at an alarming rate." ProPublica. <https://www.propublica.org/article/early-data-shows-african-americans-have-contracted-and-died-of-coronavirus-at-an-alarming-rate> downloaded April 7, 2020.