Two Georges: History in Black and White

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In the United States, the lives of Black men have been characterized by vulnerability, instability, and insecurity. During enslavement, they were whipped, raped, hunted by patrols, and killed with impunity. Europeans in the United States had the privilege of disciplining Black people as they saw fit. The Europeans who came to the United States were of British, Scottish, Dutch, German, and Irish descent. The term European was swiftly replaced by "white" as the antithesis of the Black enslaved people who originated from Angola, Congo, Gabon, Gambia, Guinea-Bissau, Mali, and Senegal. Being "white" became a privilege that was used to sustain civil domination, especially after Bacon's Rebellion in 1675.

Nathaniel Bacon led Bacon's Rebellion in Jamestown, Virginia, against William Berkeley, the governor of the colony. European indentured servants and enslaved Blacks became allied in their plan to destroy Jamestown. This insurrection against Britain threatened to topple the socio-economic hierarchy. As a result, laws were passed to make Blacks enslaved by heredity into perpetuity. European indentured servants and farmers advanced in social stature as they were given more power by landowners. This was specifically executed in order to create more of a divide between "whites" and Blacks, to avoid any potential joining of forces in future rebellions.

With the Missouri Compromise in 1820, Missouri was admitted to the Union as a state that allowed enslavement. Maine was admitted as a free state, and enslavement was banned in former Louisiana Purchase lands north of a designated land line. Additionally, in that same year, states that required voters to be property owners, removed that clause for "white men" and added new, and different requirements for Black men. As a result, "white" men rose in society and became more protective of maintaining their increased wealth, power, and status.

The chasm between Black and "white" continued to widen after the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863 and expanded further throughout the period

of Reconstruction from 1865- 1877. This era was a short-lived period of healing and rebuilding in the South following the ending of the American Civil War. The Reconstruction Act of 1866-1867 attempted to strike down restrictive codes that targeted Blacks. The 14th Amendment in 1868 promised to provide equal protection to Blacks under the law, and grant citizenship to all persons born or naturalized in the United States. The 15th Amendment in 1870 granted suffrage to Black men, however they remained disenfranchised by poll taxes, literacy tests, and other means for almost another century. Despite these constitutional amendments designed to aid Blacks, "white" dominance and subordination persisted. In 1880 Frederick Douglass observed that "the old master class is to-day triumphant, and the newly enfranchised class in a condition but little able that in which they were found before the rebellion."[1] Similarly, W.E.B. Du Bois wrote of the post-Civil War era that "the slave went free; stood for a brief moment in the sun; then moved back again toward slavery."[2]

Growing up in rural Missouri in the 1920s, my father George was sheltered as much as possible from knowledge of enslavement, and the Jim Crow laws of the Deep South that prohibited Afrikan Americans from achieving cultural equality through segregation. Born in 1927, George grew up in St. Louis, Missouri, where the tremors of the Deep South's racial earthquakes from Black Codes, lynching, and peonage were felt.[3]

Joining the United States Airforce at eighteen, George was sent to

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[1] Frederick Douglass, *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (Boston: DeWolfe, Fiske, & Co., 1895), 611.

[2] W.E.B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860-1880* (New York: Free Press, 1998), 30.

[3] Afrika has thousands of languages and evidence from Afrikan linguistics show that in most Afrikan languages, there is no letter "c." Languages carry historical messages from ancestors to new generations with a sense of pride in ancestry. As these languages were revised and rewritten by Europeans, the messages were erased. The Afrikan country Kongo become Congo, and the capital city of Ghana, Akkra, is now Accra. As a colonizer, changing an existing language to suit European standards was the beginning of the removal of Afrikan political, scientific, religious culture, then assigning it to the colonizing oppressor. Gwendolyn Brooks, the first Black author to win the Pulitzer Prize, selected the Kiswahili spelling of Afrika with a "k" in order to reconnect and fuse herself and her work with the language of the ancestors. Brooks links her audience as well and signifies the loss of her potential native language through enslavement. Haki R. Madhubuti, noted poet and author, advocated for spelling "Afrika" with the letter "K" in his collection of essays, *From Plan to Planet: Life Studies—The Need for Afrikan Minds and Institutions* (Chicago: Third World Press, 1979). In this collection, Madhubuti encourages Black people to control their destiny and to step away from imposed control. This self-determination and empowerment begins with reclaiming Afrikan languages.

Shepherd's Field, Texas and became a Military Policeman. There, he experienced racism after he, and military colleagues of Mexican ethnicity, were not allowed to enter restaurants through the front door, if at all. Incidences like these instilled in George contempt for all matters of racial injustice. Being in the service opened his eyes to see the racism that had always existed. Nevertheless, upon returning from his drafted voyage during the Second World War, he learned about the evils of racism, and devoted his life to the elimination of this transgression.

Abandoning his original hopes of becoming a minister, George became a journalist, aiming to correct attitudes "based on erroneous information" and enlighten the public about the civil rights that had not been granted to Afrikan Americans. Hand in hand with the church, George used his faith as a way to free him from the troubles brought on by the dominantly "white" and racist community. In this respect, the church acted as a liberator during his most difficult times and allowed him to share as much information about civil rights with an ignorant community.

The rural South of George's lifetime was a land void of civil laws that protected the rights of minorities in the 1920s. Segregated movie houses, schools, restaurants, lodging, and public transportation were the casualties of the South's racial warfare against civil rights that young George had to experience. When he returned from the draft, he received his undergraduate degree in Journalism. Seeking an occupation, George moved to Chicago with the hope of being able to have his voice heard. In 1952, George began to work for The Chicago Daily Defender, the principal Chicago newspaper aimed at promoting civil rights. The newspaper appealed, apart from Chicago and the North, to the southern states, encouraging Blacks to migrate to the North as a social upgrade from sharecropping. At the *Defender* he covered the criminal courts, and community news with stories about the uproar of a "white" community after a Black family moved into a "white" housing project.

George worked at The Defender during a time of "tokenism" when Blacks were hired minimally, their employers thought that one token Black employee was enough to belie the company's otherwise racist policies. Civil rights spokesmen pushed the government to avoid punishing solely overt acts of racism like tokenism and instead urged its' elimination, giving Blacks fair representation in schools, jobs, and other aspects of society. Court officials took heed of Lyndon B. Johnson and

John F. Kennedy's attempts to ensure that Blacks gained jobs based on merit and not racial preference. Companies suspected of not hiring enough minorities were penalized, and outreach to minorities became standard.

Civil rights groups like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (N.A.A.C.P.) that George strongly supported, attacked school segregation, exposed any uninvestigated lynching, and fumed over Black unemployment under Roosevelt in 1941. The strain against the civil rights coalition of Blacks, however, gave rise to new hostilities as "whites" felt this "reverse racism" was unconstitutional.

Throughout the rest of his life, whether he was rallying in the Civil Rights Movement or was infuriated at the Apartheid of South Africa, the church was the crucial variable that George was allowed to use in his revolt against society and his struggle for ethnic peace. Despite this history of hardship and pain, deliberately designed to keep Afrikan Americans from advancing in all aspects of life, "white" edicts of racism have not fully curtailed Black progress. This progress, ambition, and sense of purpose has released latent "white" resentment that has resulted in the lynching of Black men by "white" men in blue uniforms. In fact, the star-shaped badges or insignia that some law enforcement officers wear today, are remnants of the star-shaped badges that were used to identify the "Slave" Patrollers or Patty Rollers that hunted Black people during times of enslavement.

George Floyd's murder was a modern-day lynching. Who can forget the scornful sneer, and casually pocketed hands of the "white" officer that snuffed out George Floyd's life by kneeling on his neck while three other officers stood idly by and watched? Those officers are America's legacy of white supremacy, imprisonment, peonage, sharecropping, Jim Crow, lynching, and enslavement all in one. Distressingly, the image of an unarmed George Floyd on May 25, 2020, lying prone on the ground, with at least two "white" men standing over him, is eerily similar to many archival photos of "whites" attending a lynching. These troubling photos usually show crowds of "white" observers gathered around the victim, with expressions ranging from exuberance to nonchalance. The fact that George Floyd was murdered by a neck crushing injury, painfully recalls the many Afrikan Americans who were lynched with nooses.

The similarities do not end there. Attending a lynching was an event.

People sent picture postcards and kept souvenirs to prove they were there. With George Floyd, the video of his lynching circumnavigated the globe within hours with his own hashtags, #JusticeForGeorgeFloyd and #ICantBreathe. The latter hashtag was previously utilized after the murder of Eric Garner by chokehold at the hands of yet another "white" police officer. Black people everywhere have been and continue to be viewed as inferior beings solely because of their skin color, with their life-or-death dependent upon the whims of "whites." The murders of Breonna Taylor, Michael Brown, Tamir Rice, Walter Scott, Alton Sterling, Philando Castile, Stephon Clark, and Amadou Diallo all involved police mistreatment and stirred public consciousness. George Floyd's murder was different.

What made the murder of yet another Black man in police custody spark such outrage? There had been many prior calls for change regarding civil rights, equalities, and injustices. At the time of Mr. Floyd's murder, many people were at home during the COVID-19 pandemic.

This meant that more people watched the horrifying video repeatedly, recognized the abhorrence of the video, and were prompted to protest. Tensions were already high from being forced to quarantine, coupled with the murders of Ahmaud Arbery on February 23, 2020, and Breonna Taylor on March 13, 2020. The pandemic brought high unemployment, contributing to even more people being at home, allowing them to protest in droves without concern for work responsibilities. For the first time, many people felt compelled to unify and march together regardless of race, creed, or gender.

Learning from my father about race relations, as well as the sociological and emotional challenges he endured brings the struggle for civil rights into sharper perspective. He often taught me how disenfranchised people revolted against the system with their writing, art, organizing, songs, churches, and protests. Many of the people he knew, if not all of them, were actively involved in agitating and awakening the minds, souls, and spirits of the oppressed. Consequently, many people from that era produced literary work that has become world-renowned, while others changed society with their actions, all of which are now part of American history.

Many believe that "white" racism is a variant of ethnocentrism with "white" privilege buried deep in American society since enslavement. After four

hundred years of repeatedly demanding accountability for overt acts of racism and countless lynchings of Black people, walking in the streets with signs protesting George Floyd's murder may or may not bring widespread structural change to a fortified system of oppression. Our screams have been heard for years and yet, they are still sometimes met with jeers, then silence. Nevertheless, we will wait, "It's been a long time comin', but I know, A change is gonna come."[4]

[4] "A Change is Gonna Come", song by Afrikan American singer/songwriter Sam Cooke, February 1964.This song was inspired by events in Sam Cooke's life such as being refused lodging while traveling. The song became an anthem during the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s.