

New Poetry by Maggie Harrison: "Clutch and Bless"



MY RASPBERRY HEART / *image by Amalie
Flynn*

CLUTCH AND BLESS

my heart is a raspberry
 juicy yet taut
 fragile
 temporal
 eat it now
 before it degrades and
 leaves a tasteless
 piece
 of itself
 smeared on the basket.
my raspberry heart lives in the moment
 but not my gut
my gut dreams
 unpredictable
 digesting whatever latest bout
 I've consumed
 pandemic fear
 fear of white supremacists

indignation
incarceration
playacting colonization with real guns on the
range
a night in jail to protest police violence
hope for change
the audacity to hold it
all of this roils
my gut
terribly
tangled in the past
it's what I ate yesterday and am now
transforming
to expel in the future
my raspberry, my beating heart
crush it, suck it through your teeth, and savor

Poetry Review of Jabari Asim's STOP AND FRISK



1.

They say

Stop-and-frisk

Is a *brief* and *non-intrusive stop* of a *suspect*.

Which can be deadly in America where

Statistics show being black in America

Makes you a *suspect*

Even. When you aren't.

2.

They say

In order to *stop*

Police must have *reasonable suspicion* of a crime.

Which can be deadly in America where

Statistics show being black in America

Makes you a *criminal*

Even. When you aren't.

3.

They say

In order to *frisk*

Police must have *reasonable suspicion* of a gun

Which can be deadly in America where

Statistics show being black in America

Makes you *armed and dangerous*

Even when.

Even. Even. Even. Even. Even when you aren't.

4.

They say

The word *reasonable*

When statistics show police in America are

Racist.

5.

Jabari Asim's poems sing and scream *America.*

6.

And here

Here is what is true about America.

7.

America is racist.

America is unjust.

And being black.

Black in this

America is dangerous.

8.

How being black in America

Can get you.

Get you killed.

9.

The Talk is instructional.

How being black in America means giving the talk

Talk to children.

How there is

A hope it will keep them

Alive.

Asim writes –

It's more than time we had that talk

about what to say and where to walk,

how to act and how to strive,

how to be upright and stay alive.

(The Talk)

But throughout Asim's poetry there is

A painful futility.

How being black in America means *no matter*.

No matter. What someone does. How many
Talks they have. How high. Up in the air they
Raise their hands. Where police can see them.
No matter how many times
They do as they are told. During another and
Another and another traffic stop. No matter
How many times they
Say *no* and *yes* or *please don't kill me*

It will not matter

And they might get killed anyway –

*But still there is no guarantee
that you will make it home to me.
Despite all our care and labor,
you might frighten a cop or neighbor
whose gun sends you to endless sleep,
proving life's unfair and talk is cheap.
(The Talk)*

10.

Asim gives us America.
All its unfurled and bloody white supremacy.
He marches America up and down the pages
Of *Stop and Frisk*

Like a parade.

And makes us.
Makes us watch.
Makes us listen.
Makes us *watch and listen*.
And wonder *what the hell*.

How I am wondering *what the hell I am doing here*.
Standing. On the grass. Holding an American flag.

11.

In *Warning: Contains Graphic Violence and Menace to Society*,
Asim structures the poems as police dispatch calls.
Where a dispatcher sends police to a scene of someone who is
Black and doing nothing wrong

Encouraging police to respond

Brutally.

12.

The woman in *Warning: Contains Graphic Violence* is a woman
In her fifties. A grandmother armed. With a pink purse.
Walking
Eastbound on 1-10. Or how the dispatcher uses the word
suspect.

Or how the dispatcher says she will resist by walking away
slowly.

And how. How police should respond –

*Throw her on her back and squeeze her
between your thighs.*

*Raise your fist high and punch her face
until she is still.*

(Warning: Contains Graphic Violence)

Or how –

*She may resist by
continuing to breathe, in which case
raise your fist high and continue
to punch*

(Warning: Contains Graphic Violence)

13.

The woman in *Menace to Society* is a professor.
Not a menace. How the dispatcher calls her in

Anyway –

*Attention all units,
black woman walking
outside the lines
near College and 5th.
(Menace to Society)*

The dispatcher warns police. How –

*She may resist by flexing her vocabulary,
insisting on respect and kicking your shin.
(Menace to Society)*

At which point –

*consider your life in danger.
Be advised that promising to slam her
conforms to university police patrol,
as does twisting her arm behind her back
before you throw her to the ground.
(Menace to Society)*

14.

Asim's *Walking While Black* is an American
Play
In three acts.

How it starts with –

*A man walking in the middle of the road.
A man walking in the middle.
A man walking.
A man.
(Walking While Black)*

Then the muzzle flash. Blast. And whip of a gun –

Firing

Firing

Firing

Firing

Firing

Firing

Firing

Firing

Firing

Firing

(Walking While Black)

Or how this American play ends painfully. Predictably –

A man dying in the middle of the road.

A man dying in the middle.

A man.

Dying.

Heat.

(Walking While Black)

Curtains start to shiver. Before lowering. Smattered

Applause. Hands coming together again and again.

This impact of a performance that happens every

Day in America. When you are black in America.

15.

Asim's *Stop and Frisk* poetry is a poignant profile

Of a racist America. Heartbreaking poems about

People who are racially profiled.

16.

A man looks for loose cigarettes outside a gas
Station. Making noise in *Cancer Sold Separately*.

Asim writes –

Apparently he slept on the surgeon general's warning

*to black men: bellowing in public
may be hazardous to your health.
(Cancer Sold Separately)*

17.

Again. In *Loosies*. The warning –

*Enough loosies over time can be hazardous to health,
As deadly as breaking up a fight in an intersection crowded
With witnesses or dashing through drizzle for Skittles and
tea.*

(Loosies)

A man rummages in the glove compartment of his own car
In front of his own house –

*But a black man in the middle
of the night knows better than
looking for loosies beyond his own driveway.
Safer instead to root around the glovebox
For that previous, planned-ahead pack.*

(Loosies)

The man. The man
Rummages in the glove compartment of his own
Car. In front of. Front of. Of his own house. And

Gets shot at by the police –

*Later he'd say it felt like a firing squad
when deputies opened up from behind, leaving him
not only smokeless but sixty years old and shot in the leg.
Suspected of stealing his own car in front of his own house,
he thought his neighbor was joking when he heard a
command to put his hands in the air.*

(Loosies)

18.

This is a profile. Of an unjust America.
That does not care. Care about the pain
Of being black and brutalized in America.

19.

Of course, there is the accusation. White
Supremacist accusation of –

*All he had to do was comply and he would not be dead.
Tough shit and too damn bad.
(Found Poem #2)*

*In One thousand chokeholds from now,
It powerfully lingers.*

Or how Asim's poetic response is a
Measurement of necks squeezed or
Choked and strangled. He writes –

*One thousand chokeholds from now,
Black and brown people will no longer insist on access to
taxis.
They will not step into elevators when white women are already
inside.
(One thousand chokeholds from now)*

20.

Because how many chokeholds will it take.

How many beaten bodies. Bloodied cheeks.
How many
Broken hyoid bones
Snapping strangled necks. How many. How
Many penetrated raw rectums. How many
Will it take.

21.

Or what it does. What is does. To people

When a country does this.

22.

In *We Have Investigated Ourselves and Found Nothing Wrong*
Asim shows the effects of racism and injustice in America by
Manipulating font. Using a strikethrough. And crossing out
All the references to rights. Or how. All that's left are
words

And lines like this –

remain silent

broken

choke

you're next

(We Have Investigated Ourselves and Found Nothing Wrong)

23.

Every poem in *Stop and Frisk* is an answer
To the question of compliance. The accusation
of *One thousand chokeholds from now.*

Because no matter how many necks get choked.

No matter.

Backs or chests get

Shot up.

No matter how many abdomens get ripped up. High velocity
Muzzle or shred intestines. No matter how many heads get
Shot. Bloody hole matted by hair and follicles. No matter
How many.

24.

The. Brutality. Will. Not. Stop.

25.

Furtive Movements gives us names. A poem
Made up of names. First names last names.
Targeted by racial profiling. And brutalized
By police. How almost all of them are dead.

Killed by police.

26.

Because Eleanor Bumpurs did not leave when evicted. How police
Shot her dead. Because Tyisha Miller was unconscious in a
broken

Down car. How she had a gun in her lap or when police woke
her.

She sat up and grabbed it. And they shot her 23 times. And
dead.

Because when his football hit a police car. How Anthony Baez.
He

Resisted arrest. And police choked him. How he died of
asphyxiation.

Because Jonathan Ferrell crashed his car. Went to a house.
Banged

On the door. Or how he ran at police. And they shot him 12
times.

Dead. Because Claude Reese was 14 and standing on stairs in
such

Darkness. How police thought he was holding a gun. How he
wasn't.

How the bullet entered his skull behind his left ear and how.
It never

Came back out. Because Amadou Diallo looked like someone else.
Or

Did not put his hands up in the air. How he reached in his
pocket for

His wallet. But they shot him. Shot him and shot him 41 times
dead.

Because. Because Michael Wayne Clark. Because Jonny Gammage
Did not pull over. Because Oscar Grant. Police had him face-

down.

On a subway platform. Shot him in the back close range.
Because

Police beat Mohammed Assassa when he struggled. Broke it.
Broke

His hyoid bone when they strangled him. Because police hit the
car

That Sean Bell was driving. Hit it with more than 50 bullets.
Because.

The Central Park Five were innocent. Because LaTanya Haggerty
was

A passenger in a pursued car. How police thought she had a
gun. But

She was talking on a cell phone. And police shot her dead.
Because.

Henry Dumas came through the turnstile. Shot dead. Because
Sonji

Taylor was on the roof of a hospital. How police say she
lunged at

Them with a knife. But they shot her 7 times in her back.
Because.

Jordan Davis. Because Johnny Robinson threw rocks at a car
draped

In the Confederate flag. Because Eula Love resisted. How it
was over

An unpaid gas bill. Because Michael Stewart sprayed graffiti.
How

Police hog tied him. And then choked him to death. Because
Rekia

Boyd was in a park. Because Prince Jamel. Because Gavin
Eiberto

Saldana. Because Aiyana Jones was 7 and in a house that got
raided.

How police shot her. How it was the wrong house. Because
Marcillus

Was homeless and sleeping in a bush. How he threatened a K-9
dog

With a screwdriver. Police shot him dead. Because Rodney King.
And
Everyone. How everyone saw. Because Abner Louima got strip
searched
Outside a nightclub. Police kicked him in the testicles. Raped
him at the
Station with a broomstick. Broke teeth when they shoved it in
his mouth.
Because Kenneth Chamberlain was wearing a medical necklace.
Because
Julio Nunez. Because Patrick Dorismond. Because Jimmie Lee
Jackson who
Police shot in Selma. How he was unarmed. Because. Because.
Because.

27.

Their names are eulogy.

Presented in *Furtive Movements* as a list. Their
Brutalized bodies paraded out. The letters that
Make up their names are the drumbeats rolling
The low guttural groan of a tuba. This screaming
Trombone. Or how Asim capitalizes some of the
Letters. These are the lyrics to the song that is his
Poem. How it reads *FUCK THA POLICE*.

28.

But we cannot. Let's not. Forget
Renisha McBride. Crashed her car –

Renisha reeling

Head full of fire,

wreck and

Ruin behind her.

(Reckoning, for Renisha McBride)

How Renisha ran to a nearby house

For help.

For help and Theodore Wafer came
To the door. Shot her through it. The
Screen door dead.

Let's not. Let's not. Let's not forget
How racism and injustice in America
Is all encompassing. Dark streets or
Racist neighbors. How a bullet can
Tear through a screen door like
Skin. Which is why. Which is why –

*No more odes for the Confederate dead.
Let's grieve for Renisha instead,
All the Renishas, the broken sisters crushed to dust
And bone in our neighbor's tangled pathologies.
(Reckoning, for Renisha McBride)*

29.

Asim makes the powerful point in his poems
Not to. Not to forget women. Because racism
And injustice in America crosses and breaks
Gender lines. Being black and a man in this
Country means. Getting thrown against the
Hood of a car. Cheek bone. Zygomatic bone
Crushed. Horseshoe hyoid bone fractured
From the gripping. Pressing and strangling.

Or shot dead.

But so are women.
And girls.

Because when you are black in America
And a woman. Racism and injustice in
America means you may be expendable.

30.

Asim's poems *don't start none*, *A House Is Not*, and *Wild Things* Offer a portrait of a woman caught up in the racism and injustice

Of America. She is an abused wife who. Finally shoots at him. Her

Abuser. She is –

*A woman wreathed in smoke,
standing her ground.
(don't start none)*

And when she misses. Bullets hitting air. How police come.

Drag her half naked outside. Breasts exposed. Outside of Her apartment complex and her neighbors. How they are Standing and watching and filming. Or police. How there Are 12 officers. So many. So many men. Asim writes –

*Good men stood all around all around the good men stood all around
(Wild Things)*

Conjuring. For her and for us. A memory of –

*your great-grandmother
raped by white men with guns on the dirt floor of a bar what
she
remembered most were those who stood and watched, doing
nothing
(Wild Things)*

31.

Asim's poetry serves as a gut-wrenching indictment.

How brutality may come in the shape a man's hands make
When he wraps them around the neck of another man and
Squeezes until he kills him. How brutality is also standing on
The stairs of an apartment complex and watching a woman
Dragged out of her apartment by police. Her breasts exposed

And the skin of the back of her thighs and buttocks scraping
Raw against cement.

This is the parade.

Parade of what America is. And who is responsible.

32.

Or Relisha. In *Vanishing Point*. A child in a DC shelter
with –

*A numb mom and three hungry brothers,
dirt, scabs, bedbugs, and a teddy bear
named Baby.*

(Vanishing Point)

How the janitor preys on her. Reveals his plan to
Groom her with candy. And kidnap her. Or how.

It will not matter. Because –

*Don't nobody care about these kids.
Half they mamas don't want 'em
and the city sure don't.*

(Vanishing Point)

33.

Vanishing Point is terrifying.

That moment. The one where Relisha will
Disappear –

*You'll see her for the last time at Holiday Inn,
Pink boots and paper bags streaming light
From a security camera.*

(Vanishing Point)

But Relisha is just one. Just one.

One of the already. Forgotten.

34.

In *The Disappeared* Asim writes –

*Every portrait posted on the Black and Missing website
looks like someone I know.
(The Disappeared)*

How –

*Sixty-four thousand
mostly missing in New York, Georgia,
North Carolina, Maryland, and Florida:
signs of struggle, prints wiped clean,
empty cars with engines running.
(The Disappeared)*

35.

The dead and gone haunt Asim's poetry.

Or how they should. Should haunt all of us.

36.

In *Young Americans*, they march in the streets –

*Dead children make mad noise
when they march. The doomed, solemn-eyed youth
of Chicago are putting boots in the ground,
gathering in ghostly numbers
to haunt us with their disappointment.
(Young Americans)*

How they will keep marching. Keep marching.

How –

The slaughtered innocents of Chicago

*ain't going nowhere gently.
Circling the sad metropolis
in loud, unearthly ranks,
they raise their voices to the bloody sky,
above the roar of the monstrous guns and the
bullets, falling like fat rain.
(Young Americans)*

37.

Asim shows us America.

America where being black means
A bullet will come for you. Where
Police will come for you. America
Where you will be forgotten even
As you lay on the floor of a subway
Platform. Police knee in your back.

Laying on the on ramp of a freeway
Pinned. Pinned between the thighs
Of a police officer.
Where you struggle. Struggle to just
Breathe one more time. Pleading.
Pleading for your humanity to be
Remembered.

38.

The men and women and boys and girls
Brutalized and beaten. Raped and killed
For being black in America march in the
Powerful and heartbreaking poetry of
Stop and Frisk.

39.

Poems that are snare and are bass.
Skin stretched over the drum of this

Country. Poems that are percussion
Of police brutality. Pounding beat in

This American parade

Of black bodies assaulted. Performative
High step. Poems that are the alto and
Tenor. The deep bassoon.

Sharp piccolo of human pain.

40.

Poems that are 8 and 8s on loop. That
Are feet hitting cement. Feet strapped
In showstoppers and patent leathered
Marjorette boots. Leather tassels that
Shake. Heels smacking asphalt.

41.

Asim's poems sing and

Scream *America*.

42.

How every day America assembles its
Racist and unjust formation. And how.
Every day. Racism and injustice march

In an endless and brutal loop.

43.

I am a white woman.

Asim's poems coil around me like a marching
Tuba. Around my body like a metal snake.

How they blare what is true in my ears.

These are American poems.

These are beautiful brutal bloodied American
Poems.

New Poetry by Maurice Decaul



U S Grant on the Disbanding of the Iraqi Army

I heard thunder in the mountains
witnessed soft amber lightening in the clouds
saw in the saplings, & yearling whitetail, promise.

When I reached out to take Lee's hand
to shake, I noticed also, the newness of his uniform
recognized that my own had been caked by
mud & dirt from my ride, & knew then
those questions which had kept me awake
the awful headaches which
overtook me, were for naught.

We had achieved our grand strategy
while in Richmond, the opponent was mired in tactics.

Magnanimity & benevolence being
my best & softest weapons
I applied them aggressively & fed
those desperate men, twenty-five-thousand
meals. I pardoned them & let them keep
hold of their horses therefore denying

them any excuse to develop into a resistance.

This I did in prudence
not wanting to ask the great General to surrender
instead providing him a means
to retire his army from the battlefield, with dignity.

Blue Ridges

Virginia moon, like a wet breast of an old lover
firm like an unripe doughnut peach, has been playing
hide & come find me with clouds & shadows.
On the night highway, road signs like
men in robes, guard rails like teeth or head stones
deer with their headlights look, stand poised
& ready for martyrdom.
Rain clouds blacken the sky; after it rains, Sairan
give the mountains their name. A blue heron lifts its wings.
Southern faces carry confederate residue
like a disaster or a nude woman, I stare.
When is a plantation no longer a plantation?
On the lake shore, with nutria, turtles, brown recluse
& copperheads, I know, I know these waters.
The small voice in my head says leap
it says, these waters will mask your smell.
How will I live here, in the south?
When my belly warns me, be home by dark.

Charlottesville

A woman sits next to me on the bus
I have nothing to say so I look out the window
& I think, if this was a generation ago

& I chose to ignore or respond to this lady's
entreaties, I might've become like strange fruit
ripening in a southern summer.

I want to throw up.

A brochure reminds those of us unfamiliar
in its quaint, elegant way, that "you" are now
in the rural south where respect & gentility...

I hope this woman doesn't expect a toothy smile
or a chortle, or that I will step off the sidewalk
or keep on listening to her go on & on.

Aleluya

Flocks of birds, explode like atoms;
cottontails, in coyote scat.

Climate

In the market, we look past each other
even as we both reach for strawberries
Excuse, me.
, excuse me.

*

I have a habit of biting my nails.
I fear being bitten by water moccasins.
I dread country roads during new moons.
Last night, I mistook, the whitetail, for spirits.

*

During afternoon rumbling
wind shouting through fractures in stone
like an invocation from the dead
for hemlocks to sacrifice their branches.

*

Slaves' tears fall from heaven, floods
our plantation, loosens clay, rounds out pebbles.

Dispatch: Istanbul, Spring 2017

I found myself in Istanbul late March on a 17-hour layover; my ultimate destination being a small island off the coast of Venezuela. I figured that while I was in the “Gate of Felicity” I had some obligation not only to explore the city, but to give you a brief snapshot of it as it is in 2017.

I’m not Anthony Bourdain and I don’t work for the Travel Channel. I do not need to tell you “Istanbul is an old city”, you know it is an old city. Nor do I need to tell you that Istanbul used to be Constantinople, as I’m sure you have gathered that as well from any number of documentaries devoted to the place. I need not tell you of my feelings of awe as I gazed at the Hagia Sophia in the following hours, nor do I need to extrapolate on my feelings of warmth— physical and emotional— as I sat in the oldest bathhouse in Turkey (Çimberlitaş Hamam, 1584 C.E.). I also do not need to subject you to my dumbstruck wonder as I stood looking at the giant dome of the Blue Mosque. You can hear about all of these very same places watching Rick Steves or typing “Istanbul” into YouTube’s search bar.

What I do need to tell you is that Istanbul is in trouble— and it finds itself in peril alongside the rest of the country. Nearly three months ago I wrote for *Areo Magazine* about Erdogan’s “quiet cleansing” of military personnel suspected of disloyalty, and how this purge resulted in the suicide of a Turkish officer on the base where I resided. Since then, I’m afraid to say, the situation in Turkey has not improved.

To be clear, Istanbul still does an excellent job of projecting the facade of modernity. Western visitors—like me—frequent night clubs, hotel bars, and raves to our leisure. We freely enjoy the historical sites. We walk on the cobblestone streets undisturbed, where, it seems, every other business is a coffeeshop that plays smooth Jazz and has wacky furniture. But behind the curtain and through the smoke, one will find signs of the regime's Islamist authoritarian influence creeping in, "soft" though it may currently be.

Take for example what is happening to Istanbul's red light district in Karaköy. Like the city of Amsterdam, Istanbul used to be known in part for its legalized prostitution. As far back as the Ottoman empire sex workers in the region enjoyed relative freedom, and it's been no secret that the beautiful "window women" of the Beyoğlu section are major drivers of male visitors to the city. But under the Erdogan regime's political blend of nationalism and religious conservatism, state-run brothels are finding that their licenses to operate are not being renewed, and sex workers fear that once they are out on the street they will face violence and harassment.

A second example occurred when my taxi driver was giving me a driving tour through the city. I began to look at the apartments, shops, ancient walls, hospitals, and skyscrapers, and found that what they all had in common were large hanging banners displaying the face of President Erdogan—often in a triumphant pose looking off into the distance. Ubiquitous iconography celebrating "the leader" is a feature common to all burgeoning or well-established dictatorships. In Saddam's Iraq, for example, a mural or statue of the tyrant was practically on every street. The same was the case in Cuba under Fidel Castro. In North Korea it is still this way. The self-appointed gods demand their tributes and public worship, and it appears that a year after the attempted coups Erdogan is walking this particular well-worn path.



Many citizens of Istanbul and Turkey love their leader so perfectly that they spontaneously hang giant banners of him from their window. It is considered a great honor

I ask my driver what Turkish news is available to an English reader, and he points me in the direction of the state-owned newspaper Yeni Safak. I suppose this is one of the few sources of news he can point me to, seeing as how the regime has forcefully closed down all other dissenting publications. As I begin to scroll through the English version of Yeni Safak's website, it doesn't take long for me to find worrisome anti-Western sentiments. One piece floats the accusation that Germany supports terror attacks on Turkey. Another preaches to its readers that Erdogan "thinks only of Turkey's present and future, not of himself", and that the reality for Turkey without Erdogan as president would be the Qur'an and hijab banned.

Beyond the crackdown on sex worker freedom and freedom of the press, there is also a rise in antisemitism in Turkey. The regime regularly treats its Jewish population with suspicion, accusing them of having more loyalty to Israel than to the country in which they reside. Lest you think that this anti-Jewish fervor lies only with the regime and its citizen loyalists, think again. It has become a part of the culture as well. Famous Turkish pop singer Yildiz Tilbe made headlines three years ago when she tweeted "God bless Hitler" and "If God allows, it will again be Muslims who will bring the end of those Jews." To which the mayor of Turkey's capital Ankara replied "I applaud you." According to a 2015 poll conducted by the Anti-Defamation League, 71% of Turks harbor antisemitic feelings.



Mein Kampf has an enthusiastic following in the former Ottoman Empire. It's been a bestseller for many years

It turned out I didn't need any of this foreknowledge of rising antisemitism in Turkey to get a clue, during my brief stay, that it was happening. When I returned to the airport at the end of my layover (a bit more sober than when I left it), I found that every single media shop was selling Mein Kampf on their front shelves beside recent releases. Since seeing a book by Adolf Hitler sandwiched between new Clive Cussler and Lisa Gardner novels isn't a normal sight (especially when these stores only possessed about 15-20 books in total), I asked one of the managers about why it was there. It turns out the infamous work has been a consistent bestseller in Turkey since its publication in the Turkish language in 2005. That's twelve years as a bestseller.

Again I should stress that this so far is a rather "soft" form of authoritarianism when compared to past dictatorships like Stalin, Saddam, Mao, etc. A tourist may notice Mein Kampf in the airports and see Erdogan's face everywhere they turn, but overall they could go through their entire stay in Istanbul without feeling any "dark clouds overhead". At least for now. My time in the city resembled nothing like, say, Hitchens in Iraq or in Bosnia.

But this is because Turkey is only in the beginning stages of its totalitarian hell ride. The situation will get worse. Much worse. If I were still a gambling man, I would put all my money on it. In mid-March, Erdogan made a statement that "Europeans will not walk on the streets safely" if the attitude of European governments toward the regime does not change; a threat that further isolates his nation from the

international community. Human rights activists and journalists should not take their eyes off of this part of the world for a second.

The Long March Ahead: A Veteran's Place in Resistance

The day after the election felt all too familiar. It felt like 9/11. Then, as now, that day only promised a long road ahead. The years that followed, I dreaded a war I felt duty bound to fight. I was only twelve on 9/11, but I came from a family of Vietnamese refugees, for whom war and resistance is as much a part of the fabric of our lives as family reunions and weddings. We have always fought for whichever country we called home, Vietnam under the French, both the communist north and American-backed south, and now the United States. My brother and I both fought in Afghanistan, and my family shed no tears when we deployed because for us it was inevitable—we fight.

Before all of that, on 9/11, amidst the anguish and strife, I somehow had the presence of mind to think:

Welcome to the rest of the world, America.

I thought the same thing the day Trump claimed victory. Yugoslavia came to mind that morning. My friend Sara, a Croatian-American writer, likened a [Trump presidency to the election of Slobodan Milošević](#). The hate-speech and ultra-nationalism of the Trump Campaign were the same starting points for ethnic cleansing and genocide in the Yugoslav wars. To many, Yugoslavia was once a paragon of multi-culturalism, but we witnessed a model society descend into conflict

distinguished by crimes against humanity. In *Love Thy Neighbor*, Peter Maas writes that before the Bosnian War started, Yugoslavs thought the brazen inhumanity that occurred would be impossible. They satirized and lampooned the idea of a civil war on national TV. All it took were a few—a small, cursed, hateful few—to throw a once great nation into turmoil.

My wife and I spent the whole day texting, asking, *what are we going to do?* She told me that she wasn't going to be one of those Jews that waited in Berlin until the day they put her onto a train; she wasn't going to just wait and see. Some part of me wondered if we were being irrational, these epigenetic memories of pogroms and falling napalm—surely these nightmares would never come to fruition? We have middle class jobs, a rent-stabilized apartment, we vote in local elections—surely it would never come to violence? I asked myself if everything I worked towards—my art, my family, my dreams—would be cut short by another conflict. The soldier in me yearned for the comfort my M4 carbine gave me in Afghanistan, but I didn't fight for an America ruled by the rifle rather than the ballot.

I was told by white men in my life to be patient, wait for the smoke to clear because it cannot be as bad as everyone thinks. One man told me that the campaign's bigotry might subside, that it was only a tactic to get into power. He said that the adult thing to do now was to build bridges, as if my anger at the election's result was childish—now wasn't the time to take up arms. I remember thinking that no one would come for him for being the wrong skin color, for saying the wrong thing.

I knew then that resistance was my only option. I struggled with that decision. I wondered if I was just contributing to a deeper division in a country that seemed split nearly straight down the middle. Right wrong or indifferent, we elected Trump president—by action or inaction, we are all responsible. Yet it can't be just about healing, because the people that brought Trump to power seem to have little interest in

bridging the divide given the uptick in hate-speech.

My wife and I took to the streets Wednesday, the ninth of November alongside thousands. We flooded Union Square. A city in despair called out, voices echoing through glass and concrete canyons. Those voices became one. Though we disrupted the organized chaos of Manhattan rush hour, bystanders cheered us from their city buses, honked their horns in solidarity, even joined us. Rain fell, but we were warm. When the night was over, I felt purged of despair. I am wary of emotionally cathartic experiences, because poverty, illness, and war have taught me that catharsis can be a cheap illusion, but I thought I felt something genuine.

That Saturday, I marched again. There were thousands more demonstrators on Fifth Avenue, where veterans had paraded with their flags and patriotic banners just the day before. There was something subdued about the demonstration, contained—police barriers formed a fence between us and pedestrians shopping at upscale retailers or couples leaving from brunch. The mass of protestors stretched for dozens of city blocks—it was hard to see where the huddled bodies began and ended, but there were times when the slogans and chanting stopped, falling into a cowed silence. It had only been a few days, and I worried that the collective passion that compelled us to gather had somehow subsided.

The closer we came to Trump's tower, the closer the police hemmed us in. A block away, the demonstrators were penned in on all sides by barricades. I speculated on how many of the men and women the NYPD would be called on to enforce the systemic cleansing of the country proposed by Trump and his cohort. How many would relish it? Would I count them among the enemy soon?

It's just a job, most of the officers said when I asked them why they joined the force.

The black officers laughed when we started chanting, *Fuck Giuliani*.

I told one sergeant from the Seven-Seven out of Prospect Heights that I was sorry they had to spend their Saturday out here.

“At least it gets us out of Brooklyn,” he said.

When we reached the police blockade below that glaring, obsidian edifice, Trump supporters—young men in their twenties perhaps—heckled the crowd. These men—or boys—were not the white working-class poor, those rust-belt disenfranchised that the new media looked to scapegoat after the election. They were patricians, dressed in expensive oxford shirts and high-end outdoor jackets. I can’t remember what they said; I just remember their smug self-assuredness. While the others around me tried to ignore them, I yelled back. I wore a hat that read *Operation Enduring Freedom Veteran*, with a Combat Action Badge embroidered at the center.

“Motherfucker,” I said, “why don’t you go down to the recruiting station and put your money where your mouth is.”

While his friends backed down, one of them leaned over the barricade and shouted louder. I didn’t hear what he said over the sound of my own voice responding in kind. As we marched past I slung insult after insult until they were out of sight. I used my status as a veteran to humiliate him, and some part of me is ashamed, because I forgot that I didn’t just fight for my idea of what America should be, but his as well.

By that point, my friends were tired and hungry. Everyone’s enthusiasm had dissipated. As we wriggled out of the pen, street vendors hawked cheap light-up toys out of granny carts and high-school kids took selfies, while an activist festooned with leftist pins and patches performed for a news anchor on the other side of the corral.

Free of the crowd, I watched the spectacle from the perspective of the cameras and passers-by. I remembered that they protested in Yugoslavia too, but tens of thousands had to die before Milošević was brought to justice. Almost everyone hoped for a peaceful resolution—everyone but the ultranationalists who laid their genocidal plans. In *Love Thy Neighbor*, Maas captured the laments of Bosnians caught unprepared for the violence that would beset them for nearly three years. As I watched the crowd disperse, I wondered if I too would be caught underprepared—outgunned, outmanned, starving. I wondered how many of these women and men around me would be willing to take up arms. Perhaps my greatest asset as a veteran was my capacity for violence, my ability to fight and kill, but the idea dismayed me.

When my train crossed the Manhattan Bridge, my wife texted me.

Traffic is totally fucked on bway/ in the 20s

Good job ☐

Social media, the news, my friends—they all noticed the stand against hate. The whole country watched—continues to watch those that struggle for equality. I understood then that as a veteran, I am not an asset because of my capacity for destruction. We veterans seeking to fulfill our country's promise of liberty and justice for all are assets because of our capacity to organize. Going forward, we must exercise and teach our acumen for strategic decision-making, our ability to marshal resources, our ability to lead. If America is to resist the threat of mass deportation, hate crimes, and free-speech suppression, it will need its veterans.

Perhaps the day will come when we must defend our communities against violence, but violence is a tool of last resort. We would do well to remember that organizations like the Black Panther Party, Young Lords, and the American Indian Movement were populated and led by veterans who sought to build

community, contrary to the popular narrative that they were terror organizations. Veterans are already standing up to Trump's vision for America. Organizations like [Common Defense](#) are speaking out against misogyny and homophobia, and [Veterans for Peace](#) are standing in solidarity with Muslim Americans in their #vetsvshate social-media campaign.

University of Massachusetts Dartmouth Professor and Albert Einstein Institution founder Gene Sharp outlined [198 methods of non-violent action](#) to resist the threat of hate looming before us. For now, mass protests are important to show the country how many of us oppose racism, sexism, and homophobia, but there is more work to be done. What stands out about these methods is that in aggregate they amount to the formation of an alternative society. Nonviolent methods can be performed by any of us, from members of the government to workers and consumers. Sharp's protégé Jamilia Raqib gave a [TED talk](#) on using these nonviolent methods to disrupt and ultimately dismantle tyrannical regimes like Daesh, but they could easily be applied to a Trump autocracy. She says, "The greatest hope for humanity lies not in condemning violence but in making violence obsolete." Our country needs us again, whether infantry, mechanics, or logisticians—our skills can build that alternative society together.

There is already so much hate in our country, and those of us who fought know that war is not a vicious cycle, but a downward spiral. The challenge before us is not to respond to hate with violence, but to foster a society that values community above enmity. My friend, Ali Dineen, a musician and activist, told me that we should not seek to call our adversaries out; rather we should call them in. I might have asked that Trump supporter to talk instead of berate him. I might have simply asked him what his name was, undoing bigotry is a long process that starts with a [conversation](#). In the coming years I fear that resistance may come to mean armed conflict, and though my soldier's heart sometimes yearns to

fight again, I don't want to fight my own countrymen. Violence can only deepen the deep divide in America, but making violence obsolete, having a vision for the future that includes our enemies, that kind of resistance can bridge the divide in our country. I spent four years in the Army practicing the art of war; now in revolt, I have the chance to build rather than destroy.

Photo Credit: Ken Shin

Correction: A previous version of this essay stated that Gene Sharp was a professor at NYU.

The Sellout by Paul Beatty: A Review

Shortly after Bob Dylan won the Nobel Prize in Literature, the Booker Prize was awarded to fellow American Paul Beatty for his novel *The Sellout*. It seems Americans are having a moment in the world of literary prestige, maybe to counterbalance the current political nadir. Dylan was the first American to win the Nobel in 23 years, and Beatty is the first American ever to win the Booker Prize, the pre-eminent prize in Anglophone letters. Originally the Booker Prize had been limited to British writers, then eventually to English language writers from the larger British commonwealth, now to any writer in English. I have read a few handfuls of the past winners and candidates, and I can say that Paul Beatty's win is well-deserved and ranks among the best of them.

The Sellout is a satire on race in America. It is not only one of the funniest and most intelligent books I have read [about race](#) in America (a relatively limited number for me), but one

of the funniest and most intelligent books I have read, period. The novel is told by a Black urban farmer with the surname Me in a fictional South-Central Los Angeles slum called Dickens. This impoverished locality, "the murder capital of the world", was an embarrassment to L.A. and the U.S.A. and was disincorporated by the authorities. One of the central plans of Me is to reconstitute and delineate his hometown of Dickens. He also begins to slyly reinstitute segregation, first on his girlfriend's bus, then in shops, the library, and the school. After this gambit, crime plummeted and student test results skyrocketed.

The main character was raised and home-schooled only by his father, a prominent psychologist and intellectual who made his son's life into one long racial sociological experiment. The farm they inhabit takes on Garden of Eden-like qualities, with an impossibly wide-range of exotic fruits that are well-known around town, and delicious enough to make rival gang members put away their Glocks to lick up watermelon juice. One of the members of the local donut shop intellectual club is a Black media impresario named Foy Cheshire, who steals Me's father's best ideas to get rich, and calls the main character "the Sellout" for most of the book.

The funniest and most controversial character by far is an aged television actor named Hominy Jenkins, who played a minor role in the old Little Rascals TV series of the 1920-40s. Hominy rejoices at all signs of overt racism, and happily enlists himself as the Sellout's lazy and unwanted slave. The eventual discovery of this relationship and the resegregation scheme puts the main character behind bars, and eventually in front of the Supreme Court.

There are numerous mentions of real-life African-Americans, often unnamed for legal reasons, throughout the novel, including Barack Obama, Clarence Thomas, Colin Powell, and Dave Chappelle. The novel makes use of the author's detailed knowledge of Los Angeles, as well as Black pop culture,


intellectual culture, language, film and TV, and literature. The plot is very engaging from the first page to the last, as well as being chock-full of new ideas in almost every paragraph. The author never seems to run out of interesting and funny new formulations about race and life in America. It is a very difficult book written with frankness and irreverence, not worried about upsetting any sacred cow or offending overly sensitive readers. It appears at a time when just such blunt discussions of race are needed.

One instance of how biting the book can often be is this passage about all of the miserable cities of the world that rejected Dickens as a potential sister city. The last of these is the Lost City of White Male Privilege:

“The Lost City of White Male Privilege, a controversial municipality whose very existence is often denied by many (mostly privileged white males). Others state categorically that the walls of the locale have been irreparably breached by hip-hop and Roberto Bolano’s prose. That the popularity of the spicy tuna roll and a black American president were to white male domination what the smallpox blankets were to Native American existence. Those inclined to believe in free will and the free market argue that the Lost City of White Male Privilege was responsible for its own demise, that the constant stream of contradictory religious and secular edicts from on high confused the highly impressionable white male. Reduced him to a state of such severe social and psychic anxiety that he stopped fucking. Stopped voting. Stopped reading. And, most important, stopped thinking that he was the end-all, be-all, or at least knew enough to pretend not to be so in public. But in any case, it became impossible to walk the streets of the Lost City of White Male Privilege, feeding your ego by reciting mythological truisms like “We built this country!” when all around you brown men were constantly hammering and nailing, cooking world-class French meals, and repairing your cars.”

In the final anecdote in the novel the main character tells about a long-ago visit to a local comedy club featuring open mic night for black comedians. Halfway through, a white couple walks in and begins joining in the laughter. The comedian confronts the white couple and asks them to leave. "This is our thing," he says. The main character then expresses regret that he did not stand up for the couple's right to be there. It's a serious end to a powerful, nuanced, and funny book. As all satire, it punches up at an entrenched system of power—racism and bigotry, in this case. Most of the blows landed. In "post-racial" America, though, it will take a lot more people punching to topple the system in question. And a lot more people reading and writing and engaging in open dialogue with each other, and defending each other's rights to live and laugh freely.

It's All So Familiar; It's All So Heartbreaking

Today, November 24th, 2015, Jason Van Dyke was charged with  first-degree murder in the slaying of Laquan McDonald in Chicago, Illinois. We all should be charged for the same thing. I won't argue with anyone who wants to call Jason Van Dyke a bad apple, but the problem is larger than that.

The problem—the problem that led to the death of Laquan McDonald—extends to Jason Van Dyke's police department, whose officers allegedly went into a Burger King and erased the surveillance video. It extends to the Mayor's office and to the State's Attorney's office, who were dilatory in bringing charges. It extends to our legislatures who have shielded our law enforcement officers with cloaks of qualified immunity,

impunity, and legal invincibility. It extends to our courts, all the way up to the Supreme Court, for eviscerating the Fourth Amendment rights of the citizens.

The problem extends to each and every single one of us who wants to claim citizenship in a democratic republic.

Laquan McDonald is on all of us.

We are a society. We have a culture. We share a nation. We call ourselves the *United States of America*. We pride ourselves on our democratic ideals. We claim exceptionalism. Equal protection under the laws. A government of the people and by the people. Just as we as a nation cannot absolve ourselves for the slaughter of innocents overseas when we send our troops to war, we can't abdicate our own responsibility for the death of Laquan McDonald or any of the others unjustly harassed, abused, or murdered in our name.

All it takes to file criminal charges in this country is probable cause, a bar so low in our courts that if it were not so tragic it would be laughable. It took over a year to charge Jason Van Dyke with first-degree murder despite the fact that clear video evidence showed far more than probable cause that he committed first-degree murder when he opened fire on a juvenile, a teenager who was moving away from him, a kid who made no threatening gestures toward Jason Van Dyke. He opened fire and he kept firing. Laquan McDonald fell to the ground and Jason Van Dyke kept firing.

It was memorialized in video. Evidence exists. Probable cause exists. As a society, we should be expected to seek justice for whomever was responsible for the death of Laquan McDonald. But we didn't. We delayed, and justice delayed is justice denied.

It took 400 days to charge Van Dyke in the shooting of Laquan

McDonald.

Jason Van Dyke gunned down Laquan McDonald on October 20th, 2014. A judge, in response to a journalist's Freedom of Information Act request, ordered the video of the shooting released to the public by November 25th, 2015. 400 days.

400 days have gone by since Laquan McDonald breathed his last while he lay bleeding in the streets from sixteen bullet holes, with all the bullets being fired by one sworn to *uphold* the law and *protect* and *serve* the public.

400 days. The State's Attorney, she's an elected official. She's a politician. The video had been requested by the public for a year. When the courts finally forced the city to release the video of the slaying as unrest continued to grow, she waited until the day the video was released to press charges.

#BlackLivesMatter –Laquan McDonald's life mattered.

If Laquan McDonald had been arrested for shooting and killing someone, if the roles were reversed, he would have been put in jail and charged as soon as the courts were open for business. He would have been denied bail. He would have been assigned to an overworked public defender who could not possibly be expected to provide effective assistance of counsel with the immorally low funding and staffing in the public defender's office. Laquan McDonald would either be coerced into pleading or he would have a mere formality of a trial before he was sent to prison or death row. No one would blink, because that is how our country operates. That is the status quo.

Instead, Jason Van Dyke is a white police officer who has a thin blue line to erase video tapes for him. He is a white police officer who has the strongest unions and political lobbies behind him. He is a white police officer who works in the executive branch of our government, hand in hand with the attorneys responsible for charging decisions and prosecutions. He is a white police officer who has 400 days to prepare a

defense, to prepare his family, to practice those magic words, "I feared for my life." He is a white police officer who may have never been charged in the first place if a journalist didn't fight for that video to be released, who may have never been charged had that video not forced the hand of the State's Attorney in her own self-interested political game.

We are all complicit; we are all responsible for change.

Plenty of people will spill words indicting Jason Van Dyke, but plenty of right-wing racists will instead blame the victim and say that if Laquan McDonald weren't a "thug," if he had just followed the directions of police, if he had just not committed any crimes in the first place, he would still be alive. Their logic will rest on the idea that anything short of unflinching obedience to the State, anything short of complete purity of spirit (and skin) deserves the sentence of death with no trial.

Plenty of people will blame a police culture that encourages officers to shoot first and ask questions later, yet plenty of others will write op-eds about a non-existent war on police.

Plenty of people will march in Laquan McDonald's memory to honor him and to protest the sad truth that our government—and thus, the majority of our citizenry—cares less for the lives of black people and other people of color than it does for the white majority, yet many will point to the red herring of black on black violence.

Plenty of people will scream out in anguish because they aren't heard when they say, "Black lives matter," but—sadly—plenty of people will scream out in anger and denial to drown them out. Plenty of people will miss the point entirely; and to protect their own fragile psyches, to continue living in denial, or to maintain their own status quo, they will cry out, "All lives matter."

It's all so familiar, and it's all so heartbreaking. So many

words will be spilled about the blood we continue to spill, and most of them will be pointing the finger at someone else. So few will hold up a mirror and say, "How am I complicit?" The truth is, we are all to blame.

We live in a culture of fear in which we demonize "the other." We live in a culture of violence in which we use guns in misguided efforts to solve or prevent our problems. We live in a culture in which we are at war with each other—black lives vs. blue lives, liberals vs. conservatives, extremist evangelicals vs. everyone, and the list goes on.

We live in a culture in which we voice outrage over the blood spilled in our streets, in our movie theaters, and in our schools; yet, we do nothing about it. We live in a culture in which we are all given one vote, we are all given voices, and we continue to either not use them or we waste them to maintain the status quo. The status quo is not acceptable.

My heart absolutely breaks for Laquan McDonald and for his family. And my heart breaks for us all.

Matthew J. Hefti is the author
of [A Hard and Heavy Thing](#) (Tyurus / F+W) .

The Racist Arguments For, Against Gun Control

Gun violence is deeply entrenched in America. Chances are, if you've spent any time outside the Upper East Side of Manhattan in the last 30 years, you've been touched by gun violence personally—someone you've met or know personally has been hurt or killed by guns. It's a problem that affects us all.

It's also a complicated problem, in the sense that the two groups of people who are most enthusiastic about the issue are the ones making certain that nothing happens to change the status quo. On the one hand, you have on the right the numerous NRA-member, 2nd Amendment-quoting survivalists, who think that far from the US needing gun control, what the US needs is more guns, everywhere. These people are dangerous. On the other hand, you have a smaller but equally vocal group of people on the left—the precious, very-well educated shop-at-Whole-Foods-for-their-~~vanity-illness~~ types—who think that the only people who should have guns are the police and the military. These people are dangerous.

And both groups may be racist.

The 2nd Amendment, which provides for a “well regulated militia” was written with several things in mind. One was an organic, community-level response to attacks by hostile states and nations. Another was attacks on colonists at the peripheries of U.S. territories by Native Americans (then called “Indians” or “Natives”) who often disputed settlements (for understandable reasons). Another was the prospect of a tyrannical government arising in America itself—a guarantee provided to each State against the possibility of a large entity destroying the small, at a time when that seemed more plausible and immediate than it does today.

One of the most important considerations at the time, well documented in other publications, was the fear that slaves would gain access to guns, enabling them to organize a rebellion. As time went on, this concern diminished in the North (where they did away with slavery and indentured servitude in favor of more benign methods of employment, such as wage slavery and the systematic exploitation of immigrants in factories). Meanwhile, demographics made the problem (from the politically-dominant White population's perspective) much more immediate in the South. There's a fairly convincing argument to be made that the tradition and legacy of gun ownership in the South is tied directly to fear of a massive racial uprising.

So when the NRA people say they want guns to protect themselves, they're saying they want guns so they can *feel safe*. The legacy of that feeling of safety in the South is tied directly to slavery, and the worry that a large group of angry black people—dslaves, or, in today's parlance, former slaves / criminals / thugs—would come after white people. The only way to protect oneself from that fear—the only way to be *safe*, according to this way of thinking—is to own guns.

On the extreme of the progressive position, the urban, largely northern “nobody should have guns except the military and the police” advocates of gun control, racism is more benign, but based on the realities of life-as-it-is, undeniably present. This group, typified by intellectuals like *The New Yorker's* Adam Gopnik are operating on the same basic assumptions as their southern and Midwestern countrymen—they want to be *safe*—and the best way to be safe from gun violence, according to this small but vocal group, is to take all the guns off the street, absolutely prohibit them from personal use, and only permit them to the military and police.

While the military is about as white as the population – the combat branches, officers (the leaders and the ones with the guns, so to speak), and senior officers are disproportionately

white. Most of the police are white, also disproportionately so given the populations they patrol. So when the extreme left says “the guns should be in the hands of the police and military,” actually what they’re saying—whether they’re conscious of this or not—is that they feel *safe* with the military and police they have, and that those people should have guns. That is, they feel *safe* when the people in authority have guns, as long as the people in authority are just like them.



On the other hand, while there are black advocates of better gun control, their idea of gun control rarely includes a more perfectly-armed police force and military. Their idea is—like that of most of the left, many moderates, and centrists on the right—simply that guns should be more difficult to procure, to keep them out of the hands of mentally unstable or those with criminal tendencies. It’s difficult to imagine a less objectionable idea: guns are available and restricted like cars, with various permutations to handle different types of weapons.

In summary, citizens who believe that nobody should have guns are probably racists. Citizens who believe that everyone should have guns are probably racists. Citizens who maintain that while it should be more difficult to have guns, law-abiding, mentally sound tax-payers in the United States of America should have access to them do not exhibit any explicit or implicit racial biases, at least when it comes to this issue.

Against Obvious Racism

Let's be honest about racism. It's here. And it's not going anywhere. But its prevalence is surprising, again, if we're being honest: we've been under the mistaken impression, for some time, now, outside the ghetto, outside poverty-stricken areas and urban centers (I'm using white code for places that black people live) that America is a fundamentally just society. We thought that we had judicial mechanisms sufficient to satisfy all segments of the population – if not *equally*, at least on some kind of sliding scale. We thought racism was on the downswing. Black comedians, rappers, and religious authorities seemed to be ministering to the disproportionate attention young black men attracted from police. Culturally, we'd accepted, on a broad level, that being black meant that you were more likely to go to prison or have trouble with law enforcement. We accepted similar things about the Hispanic population, and rarely thought anything about the Native American communities – they were wisely placed on reservations many years ago, and given responsibility over themselves, which meant that what happened to them was their fault, and not ours. Recently, the proverbial chickens have come home to roost. We've seen behind the curtain. And the truth is this: while the punishment and social opprobrium have discouraged certain obvious forms of racism, racism itself is as thick on American life as pond scum on a still pond.

When I was in Afghanistan, one of the most remarkable lessons was that justice, and governance, were largely arbitrary – matters of aesthetics. One village would be ruled by a pro-government militia (Afghan Police and Army rarely patrolled, much of what we called “government controlled” land in Afghanistan was, in fact, militia controlled). The militia would collect taxes of 10% or 15% from the population, and would take responsibility for adjudicating tribal disputes. In other words, they acted like the Police, and tribal mechanisms

(elders, etc.) acted like our judiciary. Another village, across a road, or some other terrain feature, would be ruled by the Taliban. The Taliban would collect taxes of 10% or 15% from the population, and would take responsibility for adjudicating tribal disputes using Sharia law – a Mullah would interpret crimes and, having established guilt or innocence, would impose punishment based on the Koran.

Whether a village accepted militia or Taliban rule was a combination of self-interest, security, group preference, and other variables that I do not claim to have understood, as an outsider. The important takeaway, for the purposes of this article, and understanding the role justice plays in our own society, is that *literally any* mechanism was preferable to none, and that the role of “justice” was to keep the peace, was to ensure social stability, and an absence of strife or struggle within a given community. Otherwise, war resulted. Without justice, tribes would go to war against one another over disputed resources, in a heartbeat. This was the situation on the border of Pakistan, territory the government didn’t even have the strength to dispute in 2007, let alone manage.

Our American justice system has been failing for a while, now, and the only reason it hasn’t been more obvious is that it’s only been failing certain portions of the population. For those individuals who are angry about this fact – that it took the well-publicized deaths of three consecutive black men under suspicious circumstances, and the refusal of a Grand Jury to acknowledge what our eyes and ears have shown reasonable people to be true – all I can say is that one knows what one knows. I can’t take responsibility for the past, but I can acknowledge the present, and agree with the obvious, logical assessment that things are not correct, things are not just. The system is creating unrest where it should be resolving unrest. The American justice system – and American society in general – is, in as fundamental a way as one can

imagine, broken.

The problem is not the police. I take great exception to the wealth of anger and opprobrium heaped upon our policemen and policewomen. The police are here to enforce our social standards, and they do so, quite effectively. Instead, we should be observing our own actions, and looking in the mirror to assess whether or not the problem lies within ourselves, the people of America. When you see a group of young black men, does part of you worry, does it provoke some nameless anxiety that is not felt when you're around a group of young white men? When you're sitting at a bar and a black man walks in, do you react differently from when a white man enters? Do you see a group of Hispanic people at a bus stop or in a parking lot and immediately draw conclusions about them, their motivations, their histories?

Of course you do. And when a young black man who stole a \$5 pack of swisher sweets cigarillos from a convenience store is shot by the police, when you breathe a silent sigh of relief: "one less scumbag who might get rape my wife and blast rap music loudly," that's not an indictment of the police, that's the police doing what you hoped they'd do. Ditto the hell-kid with the pistol replica, and the criminal giant who was blackly and horribly selling loose cigarettes for profit, illegally, on a street corner. *Not in my town, you think. Motherfucking property value killing monkeys.*

You can lie to me all you want, and you can also lie to yourself, if that's important to maintaining whatever fiction you're perpetuating. But a lie is a lie, and the truth is this: you're fine with the police hassling black people, because you think black people are criminals, and you want the police to hassle criminals. I feel the same way. We're in a safe place here, we can be honest with each other. I'm scared on the train when black and Hispanic people get on board on Bridgeport or Stamford – they rarely have tickets, and always have some cock-and-bull story about misplacing it, or

moving seats, or who knows what. My hypothesis? They're on the train to rob employed (this is white code for "white") people of their money and tickets.

So – but it's too obvious, now, that's the real problem with Ferguson and Eric Garner and "I can't breathe." The jig's up – people know who we are (white people, and specifically white men), and they know what we want, because they see our desires accomplished through our police. We need to make a change, so people stop rioting and burning the franchises that white people own, like CVS and Rite Aid and Family Dollar. We need to give the blacks justice – even if that means occasionally sacrificing a police officer to a kangaroo court. After all, this is really about *our* safety, and our ability to hold onto the grudges and stereotypes we cherish. If we don't feed the occasional officer to the wolves, it'll all be too obvious, and we'll actually have to change how we think about black people, and women, and Mexicans, and Chinese, and homosexuals. Police officers understand why they get paid overtime and hazardous duty – it's not so they should be safe – they're keeping *us* safe. And sometimes that means we have to hang a police officer up high, by the neck, to prevent the rabble from rioting, from getting on the train and stealing and looting and burning.

On Racism and Other Bigotries

Racism, anti-Semitism, sexism, homophobia, tribalism, nationalism, parochialism, xenophobia, jingoism, bigotry, intolerance, hatred. These are the topics to be discussed presently. I was inspired to write this after reading a short essay by Sartre called "Portrait of an Antisemite," and realizing that all forms of bigotry are connected and share

the same pathologies and deficiencies. Firstly, the bigot appeals to emotional and passionate arguments rather than reason. The bigot is happy to confound rational interlocutors by means of either worn-out cliché, invented evidence in his favor, or, in the last case, hysterics. The bigot prefers intimidation and bullying, and uses these tools to bring his opponent down to his level. He does not accept the authority of logical consistency, and if he uses any form of logical argument at all, it is an obviously flawed one that he hopes will go unchallenged. Therefore, the bigot is typically (but not always) anti-intellectual. He reacts to challenges by resorting to hysterical or violent rhetoric, or, in the best case, merely dismissing the challenger as "one of them".

Secondly, the bigot lives in a world that is constantly defined by "us versus them" and other types of Manichean struggle. His world must be a simple one in which he is on the side of "Good," and there is always something else which threatens his own well-being, which is "Evil" or "the Other." His world is defined negatively, by what he is not or what he is against, rather than positively, what he is for. Therefore, the bigot is often (but not always) politically conservative, and when changes happen in the world he tends to become a reactionary.

Thirdly, the bigot only exists in a specific social context. He is never alone in his beliefs. His attitude itself is always the product of social indoctrination, and often validates the bigot's special sense of belonging in his community. Sartre writes: "Antisemitism is distinguished, like all the manifestations of an irrational collective soul tending to create a conservative and esoteric France. It seems to all these feather-brains that by repeating at will that the Jew injures the country, they are performing one of those initiation rites which allows them to feel themselves a part of the centers of warmth and social energy; in this sense anti-Semitism has retained something of the human sacrifice."

The impulse to bigotry almost certainly stems from a vestige of the human tribal instinct which has survived in the development of our species. Everyone who was not a member of our immediate family or tribe was potentially, and most likely, an enemy to be avoided or killed. We are no longer in need of this ancient urge, however, and its survival attests to the strength of the instinct. The more prominent place in our modern lives of reason, science, and historical knowledge also dictates that there is no excuse for those intolerant masses of people who cling to beliefs that have long outlived any usefulness they might have once had in pre-history.

Of all the types of bigotry, anti-Semitism is one of the oldest in existence and most infamous. Its history can be dated specifically to the first two centuries of Christianity, and its roots derive completely from religious intolerance, though it has acquired over the centuries a racial aspect due to the fact that Jews did not often mingle with Gentiles and thus kept their Semitic physical features. [Note on the word "Semitic": it derives from a root word that originally only described a broad group of languages that were based around Mesopotamia and the Arabia peninsula. Though "Semitic" is commonly used to refer only to Jews, or speakers of Hebrew, it could properly be used for anyone who speaks Arabic, Aramaic, Maltese, or diverse ancient languages such as Phoenician and Akkadian.]

The Gospels of the New Testament became gradually more anti-Jewish as they were written. Mark, the first to be written around roughly 65 CE (over 30 years after the crucifixion), took no especial notice of the role of the High Priests of the Temple, the Pharisees, the Sadducees, or any other Jewish agents as complicit in the death of Jesus (except Judas, of course); it was a Roman-led affair. By the time we get to John, written around 100 CE, the local bands of new Christians had begun to spread, and to win ever more converts among the Gentiles as well. The new religion needed to separate itself

as a faith from its monotheistic progenitor, and placing blame on the Jews for the death of Jesus was an easy solution. After John, we see the earliest of the Apostolic Fathers, Justin Martyr and Tertullian, place emphasis on the guilt of the Jewish people as a whole for their crime of deicide. Ironically, Tertullian, who was an anti-Semite and celebrated the eternal hellfire awaiting all non-Christians, also wrote tracts arguing for religious freedom for Christians, who were being persecuted sporadically around the empire. From there, it is a long 2000-year history of intolerance towards Jews in European societies leading ultimately to the Holocaust.

Racism is the belief that a difference in the amount of the pigment melanin in his skin makes a person of particular hue incomparably superior to those with a slightly higher or lower amount of the pigment. Europeans and their descendants, having first achieved dominance over the rest of the world due (mostly) to fortunate geography that led to the strategic and ruthless deployment of guns, germs, and steel (Jared Diamond has written a book by this title that explains convincingly the long series of causes and effects that led to Europeans dominating the world through colonial expansion and empire—I previously reviewed the book [here](#)), are the biggest abusers of the bogus “racial superiority theory” which roughly states that some “races” (namely, Europeans) are superior to others (the rest of the world, and especially other humans with darker skin) because they (Europeans) have stronger militaries. Never mind the fact that these militaries were developed over the centuries through a vicious cycle of escalating warfare amongst themselves, to which all other indigenous peoples would have rightly been unprepared and shocked upon finding themselves on the receiving end of European barbarity during the Age of Discovery. Because of this rather arbitrary course of history, we most often witness humans with white-ish skin tone being racist against other humans with darker skin tones. I must emphasize that the mental disease of racism can be found in all societies, but

that it is especially common and despicable when used by those wielding power (Europeans and their descendants for the last 500 years) against those who are relatively powerless (Third World countries, and the poor and minorities in all countries).

Italy, the country in which I live, recently elected a new government; one of the appointed ministers of the majority Democratic party is Cecile Kyenga, a woman of African origins, having immigrated to Italy at a young age from Congo. She received an education in Italy, lived her life in Italy, and is obviously Italian for all practical purposes; she now serves as the Minister of Immigration, a post which would seem to fit her skills quite well. If you ask a racist, however, the only pertinent issue is her inferiority and otherness due to the higher level of melanin in her skin. Members of the Italian Parliament from the far-right Northern League party felt that it was appropriate, during a recent speech of the Immigration Minister, to throw bananas at her and yell "Go back to Africa!". Another senior member of Parliament from the Northern League party publicly and shamelessly called Kyenga an orangutan. These were elected members of Parliament, and racists, who were elected by other racists to support their bigoted beliefs and to try to stop the immigration of people with more pigmented skin.

Closer to home for me is the case of Barack Obama. The election and re-election of America's first black president (half-black, but no one seems to care about that distinction) would have naturally made us assume that racism was waning. In some ways it was true (we elected a "black" president!) but in other ways it revealed exactly to what extent racism is alive and well. The election of Obama seems to have deeply offended racist bigots around America (I cannot imagine why). For years they had quietly been forced underground and could not openly express their racist beliefs in mixed company, but they always knew they were right since people like them – people with

white-ish colored skin – were in charge of things. They muttered about the injustice of affirmative action, and howled whenever a darker skinned person was accepted for a job or in a university when there was at least one person with lighter skin who was rejected. They knew that there was something inherently superior about their relative lack of melanin. So you can imagine the shock when Obama was elected.

Obama represents, for the racist, the Great Other—a person who is so far removed from the familiar and correct world that the racist inhabits that he might as well be an alien. Never mind that he is just a moderate, centrist Democrat with a great family and biography who is almost totally inoffensive as a person. Never mind the fact that the people who oppose him as if he were the second coming of Vladimir Lenin in America are basically opposing a guy who would have been a moderate Republican a couple decades ago. I have visited America three times since Obama was elected, and one of those times I visited the dentist. This dentist was previously unknown to me, and I went to him on the recommendation of my family due to his low prices. He and his two assistants were very friendly and loquacious elderly people with deep Southern drawls (one might even say Southern charm). When it came time for the final inspection of my teeth, the dentist, while I was unable to talk or reply due to the metal tool jammed in my mouth, proceeded to tell me in confidence that Obama was secretly a Muslim, and that of this fact he (the dentist) had never been so sure of anything in all his life. Charming.

Though they are rarely empowered to openly state their racism (progress!), the bigot can easily transfer the reasons for his distrust of Obama from one thing to another. He will not say, in company, that the amount of pigment in the president's skin makes him evil, but that is what they mean when they accuse him of being un-American, socialist, fascist, Marxist, Kenyan, and talk about "taking their country back". Back from whom? Since white people exploited black people for slave labor in

the building of America, after completing the genocide of the original darker skinned native people, to the racist this is the proper relationship for all time. In America, the strongest form of racism appears as white supremacy, which was used to control the huge African slave population of the South for centuries, as well as to ensure that the lower classes of poor and disenfranchised whites never sided with the slaves against the rich upper classes.

One final note about racism and politics in America: the Southern strategy. This was a cynical strategy formulated by Republican party operatives in the time of Richard Nixon to exploit and wield the racism of the South to create a wedge between white voters and black voters, and to ultimately win elections. The strategy was used quite effectively by Ronald Reagan, who mocked black recipients of welfare aid and casually let the white racist voter know that he will not allow black people to take advantage of the system to get ahead any longer. The Republican party continues to use the strategy today, kicking and screaming and becoming less and less coherent in their indiscriminate use of intolerance for political gain. The two elections of Obama, and the changing demographics of America, has basically doomed to failure the Southern strategy (though not racism itself). Another strategy will doubtless be formulated to pit people of different skin tones against each other, and distract them from those who truly exploit them.

Sexism, on the other hand, is the belief that a human animal of one sex is inherently, or innately, superior to one of the other sex. While there are surely some scattered examples of women who hate or look down on men as inferior, it is obvious to all that the real issue is male chauvinism, or misogyny (from the Greek "hater of women"). This is the belief that humans of the male persuasion, who are genetically predisposed to produce more of the hormone testosterone and so become physical larger and stronger, are therefore superior, more

intelligent, and more fit for power than women. You see, to the sexist bigot, bigger size means both bigger intelligence and bigger right to rule the human world. It is hard to say which is more prevalent between racism and sexism, but sexism is probably more tolerated and more bound up in the structure of all except the most progressive societies. This has been the story ever since the rise of modern human civilizations around 10,000 years ago, when agriculture led to new cities, new kings, and new war gods (who overthrew the old mother goddesses). Is there any reason a woman should not get paid the same amount of money as a man for doing the exact same job for the exact same amount of time? Rationally speaking, no. But to the chauvinist a woman can never be as good as a man in anything (except raising children, of course), and so she should not deserve equal pay or equal rights.

Back to Italy, my country of residence, we can see some of the worst examples of structural misogyny in the developed world, as well as some reasons to have hope for improvement. The man who has led Italy for the largest part of the last two decades, Silvio Berlusconi, is both the richest man in Italy and the owner of a media empire. He surely has one of the most openly disrespectful attitudes towards women of any "leader" in the developed nations. He appointed female porn stars to cabinet positions, and has very effectively employed Italy's long-standing culture of chauvinism and machismo for his own purposes. Though he still controls the country's right-wing party, he was finally convicted in one of the dozen lawsuits against him (this one not for underage prostitution but for tax fraud) and will not serve again as prime minister. On the flip side, a recent election has just made the new Italian parliament the youngest ever (average age 47) and the highest female representation ever (31% – for comparison, after the recent US elections Congress now has its own highest female representation ever at "only" 18%). This part is too easy: elect more women, and things will improve!

It is no secret that religions have played a huge part in maintaining and justifying institutional sexism. We shudder to imagine the sad lot of most women born into most majority-Muslim countries. Not being able to drive, not being able to leave the house without a male relative, and husbands being legally protected against beating and raping their wives are three common features. It is difficult to even imagine a road towards political empowerment at this point, but we can hope for a quick improvement in basic education and human rights at the very least. Christianity has also celebrated the submission of wives to their husbands, and the second-class status of women in general. Thus, many Christian women have accepted their lot with resignation for millenia because it was written in the Good Book. Fortunately, the Enlightenment and the advent of secular politics in the Christian countries has led to the gradual enfranchisement and empowerment of women. We can already imagine the potential sexist resurgence that will accompany the first female American president (much like the resurgent racism after Obama), but let us hope in any case for more women in positions of power.

Changing to another form of bigotry, homophobia is when a person hates human beings who love other human beings who happen to share the same genitalia. The homophobe is filled with fear, hate, and typically suppressed homosexuality. Religions, once again, have told people that homosexuality demands a death sentence, and there are probably not a small number of homophobes who would like to enforce such a legal code (and still do today in certain Third World countries such as Uganda and Russia). In Leviticus, there is a long list of verses specifically outlawing sex with mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles, sisters and brothers in law, mothers and fathers in law, sons and daughters in law, mothers and daughters or granddaughters at the same time, women having their period, and animals, in addition to those proscribing men lying with other men (the preceding verse also warns against child sacrifice); those other things tend to get

ignored and forgotten. That would require too much logical consistency for the bigot. Even so, I do not recall any of the words of Jesus condemning homosexuals – he hung out with 12 unmarried dudes! –, or for that matter women (he hung out with prostitutes!), dark-skinned people (he was a dark-skinned person!), or Jews (he was a Jew!). He did say, however, that all of the laws of the Old Testament were valid, so we should assume that he was anti-incest, anti-child sacrifice, and anti-gay. Homosexuality is a trait that can be found in at least 1000 other animal species, including all the primates (such as chimpanzees, monkeys, and humans), many other mammals, birds, and even fish. It is a product of evolution, just like higher or lower amounts of melanin or testosterone. And despite the bigoted homophobe, love always trumps hate.

Finally, let's talk about nationalism. This is the peculiar belief that the particular section of the earth's crust on which you are born is superior to every other piece of earth, and thus it demands your lifelong loyalty. This idea is appealing to large numbers of ignorant and easily manipulated humans who, as we have seen, often need little excuse for emotional prejudice against anyone other than those who look like them or were born in close proximity to their section of earth. This idea has had great utility for governments since the advent of the modern nation states in state-sanctioned homicide and theft against people born on more distant pieces of earth. Never mind the fact that national borders are highly artificial and arbitrary, and are often the result of accidents of history if not intentional theft. Also never mind the fact that the place where you are born is completely random and outside of your control, and that the only thing we can ever control is our own actions. Those would be facts based on reason and reflection, which are things not to be found in the bigot's arsenal.

It is no wonder that nationalism has been expertly and cynically whipped up by political leaders since the beginning

of civilization, but especially since the rise of the modern industrial nation states in the last few centuries. At the outbreak of World War One, Germany and England enthusiastically asserted their mutual superiority and hatred towards each other, despite each being the biggest trading partner with the other prior to the war, and despite being the most developed scientific nations in the world. Dr. Samuel Johnson famously said: "Patriotism is the last refuge of a scoundrel." While we cannot be sure exactly what he meant, we can guess that it has something to do with the ease with which a malicious intent can be excused by an appeal to Patriotism. Presumably, love of one's country, but not love of anyone else. It is not common in which we find even the most ardent patriot who evinces love even towards all the people of his country.

So now, what do we do about racism and other forms of bigotry? First, we always keep in mind that there are no different races, but only one human race. Race is a social, rather than a biological construct. Biologically, the genetic diversity between the human species is a tiny fraction of a percent of our genetic code, and the genes that determine pigmentation are even still a smaller fraction of that fraction. According to the United Nations, there is no distinction between the terms *racial discrimination* and *ethnic discrimination*, and superiority based on racial differentiation is scientifically false, morally condemnable, socially unjust and dangerous, and that there is no justification for racial discrimination, in theory or in practice, anywhere. Similarly, there is no human nature, but only human behavior. We are all free to make our own choices in how to act, but there is no excuse for acting badly towards others.

Next, we need to keep in mind that there is no paradox of tolerance, and tolerance of intolerance is, in fact, intolerance. If we create a system based on rules and reasons, and someone acts outside of those rules and reasons, then that

person is outside the system. Our society is what we make it, and to protect tolerance we must not support intolerance. Every act of intolerance or bigotry is, however minor it may seem, ultimately an emotional injunction to hatred and violence. As Sartre writes: "Antisemitism is not in the category of thoughts protected by the right to freedom of opinion." This could be applied to the other forms of bigotry as well. He writes later: "The Jew is only a pretext: elsewhere it will be the Negro, the yellow race; the Jew's existence simply allows the antisemite to nip his anxieties in the bud by persuading himself that his place has always been cut out in the world, that it was waiting for him and that by virtue of tradition he has the right to occupy it. Antisemitism, in a word, is fear of man's fate. The antisemite is the man who wants to be pitiless stone, furious torrent, devastating lightning: in short, everything but a man."

Equally, the bigot is someone who falls short of reaching full humanity by excluding other humans. What is needed is a sense of solidarity, for our shared planet, our shared lives, and our shared fate. What we need is a love of humanity as a whole. That is the only way to live, and the only way to live together.