

#2020VISION

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Photographs by Olivia Gilmore

I hear a lady yell out, ‘Don’t kill him.’ It’s a moment when you realize that you’re hearing your own potential death being narrated in front of you and you have to be aware of George Floyd and how many other Black folks in our history have heard those executions spoken before them in real time. I felt myself wanting to cry out ‘I can’t breathe’ with the weight of these men on top of me and I couldn’t say the words. So, these folks continued to just stop just merely being bystanders, as we’ve seen in so many other videos, and actively engage and resist. They were finally able to pull me from under these men.

- Vauhxx Booker ¹

This is not an essay as such; it is not expository nor is it persuasive. I have no argument to make. Rather this is an attempt to account for the events that have defined the year. It is a patchwork analysis. It is not a new summation of the present crises by any means, but through repetition and slight iterations, comes a grain of nuance which develops the conversation ever so slightly.

The decade commenced with symbolic significance. 2020 was employed to inscribe inspirational social media posts with “Vision is 2020,” suggesting finally that “this would be the year!” But, the year for what? Some Americans took it to mean there was a hopeful light at the end of Donald Trump’s medieval four-year term that would come in the form of a new President, perhaps even a democratic socialist like Bernie Sanders. To mean that maybe this was the year that Medicare for All would become a reality. To mean that maybe this would be the year that racist and homophobic attitudes would shift with the new decade. We took it to mean that this represented a fresh start—*the future!*—personally and collectively. 2020 has thus far lived up to its symbolic promise, however, in unanticipated ways. Illusions have been stripped off and injustices exposed, but collectively, we remain nearsighted, blind to what’s ahead.

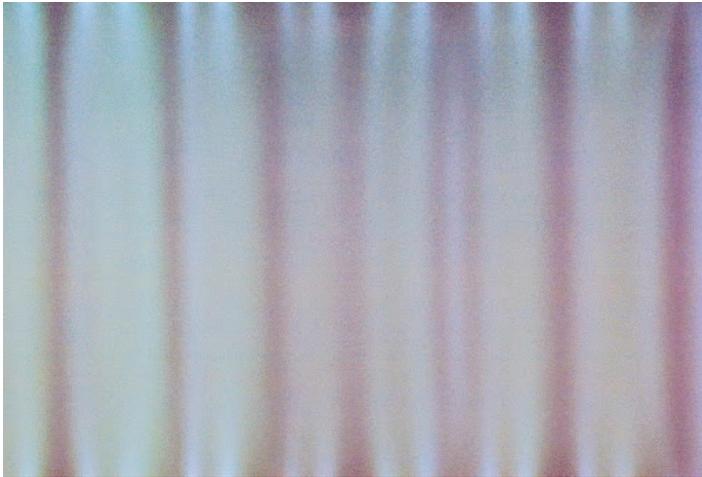
In a cinematic apocalyptic climax, a pandemic exposes the injustices of organized human life. Essential workers put their lives at risk, not having the luxury to social distance, while Black Americans are disproportionately dying from the Coronavirus, representing one fourth of deaths in the US.²

On a global scale, we can see that:

COVID-19 is a threat multiplier. We have a health emergency, a humanitarian emergency and now, a development emergency. These emergencies are compounding existing inequalities. In advanced economies, we’re seeing higher rates of mortality among already marginalized groups. And in developing countries, the crisis will hit vulnerable populations even harder.

-UN Deputy Secretary-General, Amina Mohammed³

Consecutively, under Trump's extreme right-wing presidency, over four-hundred years of racist violence has reached a fever pitch, aided through the release of brutal videos, first of Ahmaud Arbery's murder by white supremacists in Georgia, and second—months later—of George Floyd's murder in Minnesota by a cop, which grimly echoes the murder of Erich Garner six years earlier.



The historical amnesia that society at large has experienced previously should not be possible with the images and videos accessible in a moment's time. One does not have to dig in the archives for reference, they may simply open any social media platform to see others do the work of memoriam. While the immediate access and proliferation of media of murder and violence holds us more accountable than ever, we must avoid desensitization as well as voyeurism. I am reminded of Susan Sontag's seminal 2003 essay *Regarding the Pain of Others*; in it, she reflects on the paradoxical nature of journalistic photographs which capture violence inflicted on human bodies. She says:

Being a spectator of calamities taking place in another country is a quintessential modern experience, the cumulative offering by more than a century and a half's worth of those professional, specialized tourists known as journalists. Wars are now also living room sights and sounds.

-Susan Sontag⁴

Now, seventeen years after Sontag's piece, being a spectator of calamities taking place in one's own country—the United States—is a quintessential contemporary experience. Violent atrocities are ubiquitous sights and sounds not relegated to the living room but emancipated through the smart phone. Journalists are not the sole documentarians—anyone may participate in documenting violence—in perplexing complexity, the persons making the videos are varied: sometimes they are the perpetrators of the violent act themselves, the perpetrated, or the bystanders. Sontag writes of wars abroad These wars are made more visible within the border, the violence that we have always inflicted upon African Americans and Indigenous people within the empire, on the home front, is being recognized for the unjust terror that it has always been. Society en masse is paying attention. We seem to be in a sea change and while there are many reasons to remain hopeful, it does not necessarily guarantee that it is for the better. We may be able to reach shore if we are not pulled backwards by a violent tide.



Opal Tometi, a founder of Black Lives Matter believes that these “protests are different because they are marked by a period that has been deeply personal to millions of Americans and residents of the United States, and that has them more tender or sensitive to what is going on”.⁵

Truly, the weeks following the murder of Floyd have been momentous in history. There have been daily marches in the United States to protest systemic racism and police brutality, along with simultaneous international protests. It feels that we may be at the cusp of real transformation. Alexis Okeowo notes in her piece in *The New Yorker* entitled *How to Defund the Police* that New York, San Francisco, Milwaukee, Durham, Norman, Oklahoma,

and Los Angeles have each made various steps to do, by either cutting funds, banning the use of military-grade weapons, or re-investing bloated police budgets into education and community initiatives.⁶ Monuments to confederate leaders have been removed from their pedestals; a level progress is in the making, at least symbolically so. And, while change might feel imminent, the arc of history does not bend toward justice for the marginalized unless we remain vigilant to make it so. Collectively, we must meditate on what real transformation means, choose to sustain our engagement with the abolitionist movement, dismantle the prison industrial system, defund the police, and after all that we must see racism as inextricably linked to capitalism and neoliberal policies that privatize the most basic of resources and services, eventually depriving not only Black and brown people in the United States and around the world, but poor people in general. Collectively, the issues of race will not be dealt with unless the system itself is reconstructed. So how do we sustain the movement? There is a grain of hope, but also an obvious rhizome of a real problem, deeply buried and rooted in a subsoil that has seeds preceding the Declaration of Independence when Thomas Jefferson wrote “All men are created equal.” “There was no contradiction in the bold claim,” says Michelle Alexander, “if Africans were not really people.”⁷

The movement could continue in one of two directions, as Dr. Robin D.G. Kelley notes in his interview with Jeremy Scahill on *The Intercept*. The first direction could be a drastic reconstruction of the capitalist system and with it, its implicit racism (in what Cedric Robinson calls Racist Capitalism) and the second direction could be a move toward fascism—one that would be a response echoing what we witnessed in the 1860’s after the first Reconstruction, which took place after the abolition of slavery or in the 1960s after the second Reconstruction. Kelley quotes from his forthcoming book, *Black Bodies Swinging*, “. . . Reverend William Barber is right, we are living through a third Reconstruction and the great rebellion of the summer of 2020 marks a moment of reckoning between real freedom and fascism.”⁸

It is particularly daunting, as D.G. Kelley points out—because previous reconstructions have been extinguished by extreme right-wing backlashes. Historically recognized events in American history, while momentous in their own right, did little to make life more equitable for Black Americans today. What about the Civil War? The Thirteenth Amendment? The Civil Rights Act of 1866 and of 1875, The Civil Rights Act of 1964, and the Voting Rights

Act of 1965; while these were momentous steps on one hand, it is fair to ask why these movements, acts, bills, amendments and laws did not accomplish true freedom following the initial “abolition” in the United States. The United States’ carceral system is perhaps the most blatant example of systemic racism today, it incarcerates almost 2.3 million people in the United States.⁹ A 2016 statistic shows that Black people in the U. S. were incarcerated in state prisons at a rate 5.1 times that of whites.¹⁰



After the first Reconstruction, legalized racial discrimination manifested through Jim Crow Laws in the 1860s, and after the 1960s Civil Rights era—the second Reconstruction—backslide in the ‘70s, with the rise of the Ku Klux Klan and the expansion of the prison-industrial complex. (Kelley) Looking to scholars in this area of expertise elucidates the situation we have come to, there is reason to fear that this movement could get derailed, but with that fear must come the determination to meditate on how to sustain the Third Reconstruction. As Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang say, that the process of “Decolonization is not a Metaphor.” That is to say, without acknowledging the historical project of settler colonialism and our own superficial “moves toward innocence” the process of decolonization will not be fulfilled. “Settler moves to innocence are those strategies or positionings that attempt to relieve the settler of feelings of guilt or responsibility without giving up land or power or privilege, without having to change much at all.”¹¹

Decolonization, which sets out to change the order of the world, is, obviously, a program of complete disorder. But it cannot come as a result of magical practices, nor of a natural shock, nor of a friendly understanding. Decolonization, as we know, is a historical process: that is to say, it cannot be understood, it cannot become intelligible nor clear to itself except in the exact measure that we can discern the movements which give it historical form and content.

-Franz Fanon¹²

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