

## **My remarks are directed to the white people in the room**

Talk delivered to the Peace and Justice Studies Association national conference, September 27, 2018, Arcadia University (Pennsylvania)

1. **Now**, (many more of) **you** are on the precipice, experiencing dehumanization, degradation, premature death and soteriological insecurity. **Now** your factories have shut down, because industrial capital is not your daddy. Your people are overdosing and dying like flies, because Big Pharma is your daddy. **Now**, you are sliding down down down, below the glitter and glamour of whiteness. You thought **that deal** was gonna save your ass. But pay close attention: the chimera of whiteness was nothing more than a trick executed by the bloody hands of white capital. To procure free, and cheap and degraded labor they propped you up with myths of superiority. They created a vortex of violence that undergirds your civil society and your American dreams. **Your** white picket fence was really barbed wire. Your apple pie was poisoned by pesticides and the trauma of slave and near slave labor. Your excessive desire choked the rivers with filth and smothered the air with toxic dirt. But you persisted in your myths. You clung to the apotheosis of your mediocrity, hoarding the wealth created by my ancestors and turning a willfully blind eye to the systematic genocide, state-sanctioned and extra-legal murder and the maelstrom of quotidian violence. But **now** they are coming for you. What do you do? Do you cling to your whiteness, to your false and shaky privilege? Or do you lay your body on the line and resist. It is up to **you**. Its up to you.
2. White supremacy and capitalism were joined from the beginning. Kick started by the rape of the African continent—the transportation of some 12 million black bodies and the genocidal theft of these indigenous lands. Euro/American wealth begins at the nexus of capitalism and white supremacy, violence and dispossession. The white men who wrote the U.S. Constitution evaded recognition that slavery was foundational to the U.S politically, economically and socio-culturally. They told lies about white superiority that served as an alibi for the violence of accumulation. Nevertheless, it was enslaved Africans, brought in chains, that provided the labor that allowed the United States to grow into a capitalist economic power. While they were producing cotton, sugar, tobacco and rice, my ancestors were thoroughly dehumanized. They were chattel, real estate, property. They were bought and sold yielding profit for slave owners and a host of allied industries including Southern merchants, who supplied food and clothing to slave owners, railroad and ship owners who transported slaves, Northern banks that handled the exchange of money, and Northern insurance companies covering slave owners' investments. The slave trade was the foundation of the entire economy.<sup>1</sup> The entire economy rested on the backs of slaves. The New England textile industry, for example, was fueled by the labor of enslaved blacks picking cotton. Indeed, according to the scholar Garakai Chengu, cotton was to the early nineteenth century, what oil was to the twentieth century: the commodity that determined the wealth of nations. Cotton amounted to a staggering 50 per cent of US

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1 Maurie D. McInnis, "How the Slave Trade Built America," *The New York Times*, April 3, 2015, accessed at [http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/04/03/how-the-slave-trade-built-america/?\\_r=0](http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/04/03/how-the-slave-trade-built-america/?_r=0) on 8/31/2016.

exports and ignited the economic boom that America experienced. America owes its **very existence** as a first world nation to the degradation of my enslaved ancestors.<sup>2</sup>

3. From the beginning, white supremacy and capitalism depended upon the relation of terror. It was **terror and violence** that attended the Atlantic slave trade and opened the possibility for the generation of great/white/wealth. And it is **terror and violence** that attends the black incarcerated body of the twenty first century. On one end, in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, black death fueled the accumulation of capital. On the other end in the twenty first century, black death and warehousing are tools for solving the endemic crisis of over-accumulation.<sup>3</sup> The point is that it is upon the dead and debilitated black body that **your** white culture, society and political economy rises. **Your** lifestyle is enabled by terror, violence, death. Your civil society with all its hypocrisy and denial is based upon the death and degradation of my people.
4. Ruth Wilson Gilmore, the Marxist geographer, defines racism as the state-sanctioned or extra-legal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death. Black, brown and indigenous people are under constant attack, legally and extra-legally, and the result is terror, violence and the looming reality of early death. This is true in terms of police violence, mass criminalization, deportation and the abject failure to protect. But it is also true everywhere, every day through the most intimate details of our lives. The bodies of black women and black children have no value. A black woman is 22 percent more likely to die from heart disease than a white woman, 71 percent more likely to perish from cervical cancer and 243 percent more likely than white women to die from pregnancy or child-birth related causes.<sup>4</sup> **243 percent!** Black babies are two or three hundred percent more likely to die in infancy than white babies.<sup>5</sup> In cities like Baltimore, Philadelphia and Chicago there is a **20-year** gap in life expectancy between people living in black neighborhoods and those living in wealthier white ones.<sup>6</sup> An entire generation; **twenty years**.

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2 Garakai Chengu, "How Slaves Built American Capitalism," *Counterpunch*, December 18, 2015, accessed at <http://www.counterpunch.org/2015/12/18/how-slaves-built-american-capitalism/> on 8/31/2016.

3 Thoughts in this paragraph were informed by Frank Wilderson, III, (2003) "Gramsci's Black Marx: Whither the Slave in Civil Society," *Social Identities*, Vol. 9. No. 2: 225-240.

4 Sheela Nimishakavi, "Racial Health Disparities are Well Documented," *Nonprofit Quarterly*, December 12, 2014. <https://nonprofitquarterly.org/2017/12/12/racial-health-disparities-well-documented/>, Nina Martin and Renee Montagne, "Black Mothers Keep Dying After Giving Birth," NPR.com, December 7, 2017. <https://www.npr.org/2017/12/07/568948782/black-mothers-keep-dying-after-giving-birth-shalon-irvings-story-explains-why>

5 Qing Wai Wong, "The Black-White Infant Mortality Gap," *Public Health Post*, January 18, 2018. <https://www.publichealthpost.org/research/black-white-infant-mortality-gap/>

6 Olga Khazan, "Being Black in America Can be Hazardous to Your Health," *The Atlantic*, July/August 2018. <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2018/07/being-black-in->

5. Eric Garner was confronted by police for selling loosies. 的知 minding my business, officer. Please just leave, he said. And then a police grabbed him in a choke hold and five others pinned him down on the sidewalk and forced his arms behind his back. “I can't breathe,” Eric Garner said eleven times. And he died. Three years later, Eric Garner's warrior daughter, Erica Garner, died.<sup>7</sup> She died of heart failure after a severe asthma attack and after three years of waging an intense battle seeking justice for her father. Why have no police been convicted or sent to jail for killing black men, she demanded? Why do police departments possess tactical military equipment that make community protest routes resemble war zones?<sup>8</sup> In an interview two days before she died, Erica Garner said this: “My father died on national TV. I had to see him die on national TV. I felt the same pain my father felt on that day when he was screaming 'I can't breathe.' He was sayin' he was tired of bein' harassed, tired of bein' arrested, his money bein' stole from him. . . . I'm not givin' up and **this is the fight**, I'm in this fight forever, we deserve justice.”<sup>9</sup> Forever was short, though, because Erica died. Death at the hands of police, death by the weight of oppression and grief; either way Erica and her father died prematurely, caught in the vortex of terror and violence that completely defines this space called America.
  
6. I turn to George Jackson, author, theorist and revolutionary who thought and wrote brilliantly about what it means to be human in a world that wants you dead. Jackson was very clear that white supremacist monopoly capital would not be defined away with peaceful protest. “The argument that the prestige of power will let itself be educated away is too idiotic to be allowed to stand. Waiting for power to move to its inevitable collapse is suicidal for all concerned,” he wrote.<sup>10</sup> Jackson's exploration of the meaning of revolutionary violence centered on exposing the brutality and repression that keep the U.S. intact. To expose the terms that white supremacist monopoly capital rule is predicated on, Jackson believed in the sacrifice of an armed revolutionary vanguard. What he so clearly articulated was that armed revolution or not, we are sacrificed. “Born to a premature death,” he wrote, “A menial, subsistence wage worker, odd-job man, the cleaner, the caught, the man under the hatches, without bail. . . . Anyone who can pass the civil service examination today can kill me tomorrow. Anyone who passed the civil service examination yesterday can kill me today with complete immunity. I've lived with repression every moment of my life, a repression so formidable that any movement on my part can only bring relief, the respite of a small victory or the release of death.”<sup>11</sup>

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[america-can-be-hazardous-to-your-health/561740/](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/30/nyregion/erica-garner-dead.html)

7 Vivian Wang, “Erica Garner, Activist and Daughter of Eric Garner, Dies at 27,” *The New York Times*, December 30, 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/30/nyregion/erica-garner-dead.html>

8 Julie Hirschfeld Davis, “Obama Faces Growing Expectations on Race and Policing,” *The New York Times*, July 21, 2016. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/22/us/politics/obama-police-race.html>

9 Benjamin Dixon interview with Erica Garner, December 28, 2017. <https://twitter.com/BenjaminPDixon/status/946436687588192257>

10 George Jackson, *Blood in my Eye*, Baltimore: Black Classic Press: 51.

11 *Ibid*, 7.

Since I am already dead as a slave, Jackson is arguing, the **only** redeeming course, the **only** way possible for us to claim our humanity and simply live is the sacrifice of armed struggle.

7. I am a product of violence. A deep and searing violence that shapes my ontology, the contours of my history, the dimensions of my future. I did not make the violence. The violence made me, and it will unmake me. I wept as I quoted George Jackson. I wept as I faced the dilemma, the truth that the desire to be black and simply live requires a confrontation with repression and violence that consists of violence and bloody sacrifice. I do not see a way out of this dilemma, because I cannot trust you. But this is what I know and what I want to say to you: being human requires **you** to recognize that your life depends upon savage brutality and murder. Being human requires that you confront the terror and violence upon which rests the foundation of your white lives. For us to simply live, to express our humanity, and for the possibility of nonviolence it is ultimately up to you.

This is the truth. Revolutionary nonviolence is up to you.