

As a psychologist by training, I prefer a systemic analysis of behavioral and social exchanges in terms of process and sequencing for determining causality. My objective is not to act as an apologist for Blackness or to assign blame to Whiteness, but to uncover the context of the “Black Lives Matter” movement, to interpret American race relations through the peep-hole that the massacre at Charleston and its aftermath in South Carolina and the South affords us, and to advocate for positive social justice outcomes through dialogue and change in this American time of crisis, or turning point.

### *Black Lives Matter: Cracks in the foundation of the US moral order*

Over the past few years, the rapid dissemination of information about extrajudicial killings of Black men, women and minors at the hands of Whites—especially those with police authority—has led to wider public acknowledgment of the extent of institutionalized White racism in the US. In case after case, justifications for the killings of Blacks that might have been acceptable only a short time ago have resulted in criminal charges. Release of videotaped evidence, streamed across social media, enable the assembly of large crowds to address grievances publicly and immediately. More and more, protesters are referring to these killings as lethal policing of the Black communities. The killings produce even more trauma than that already suffered through racialization by housing, education, business, and legal institutions.

#### The Church’s response to Black trauma from lethal policing

As the Black body count escalated over the past few years, a notable clerical leader, The Most Reverend Edward K. Braxton, bishop of Belleville, Illinois, wrote a pastoral letter for January 1, 2015, “The Racial Divide in the United States: A Reflection for the World Day of Peace 2015.” First, the bishop gave his readers a “thought exercise,” inviting them to imagine themselves in a US where Blacks were in charge, and even the Catholic Church was a racist Black institution. He then envisioned a “new” Catholic Church mandating all future churches to have racially diverse images of God. He described the vestiges of the human slave trade that captured, bought, sold, and owned Blacks in bondage to work mostly on the lucrative plantations in southern states. He included social, emotional and psychological slavery: slavery to prejudice, racism, bias, anger, frustration, rage, violence, and bitterness in the face of systemic injustices.

Bishop Braxton pointed out the racial divide in his own Church, wherein of 78,000,000 US Catholics, only 3,500,000 are African American, and most had superficial contact with Catholics of a different racial background. He outlined the accounts of the deaths of Oscar Grant, forced off the train by a security guard at a Bay Area Rapid Transit stop; Trayvon Martin killed on the streets of Sanford, Florida; John Crawford III, killed at a Walmart store in Dayton, Ohio while talking on the phone and carrying a toy rifle; Michael Brown, Jr. of Ferguson, Missouri; Eric Garner, choked to death on the street, under the suspicion suspected of selling single cigarettes without tax stamps; and 12 year-old Tamir Rice, while sitting in a gazebo at the park in Cleveland, talking on his telephone and playing with a toy gun. These cases had led to marches to the Capital Mall calling for an end to the use of deadly force by White police, with the exception of the killer of Trayvon Martin, who was a volunteer neighborhood

watchman. Apologizing for his own Church's flawed history of social injustice, he condemned racism as the sin that says some human beings are inherently superior and others essentially inferior races; the sin that makes racial characteristics the determining factor for the exercise of human rights. Bishop Braxton stated that Americans have every right to expect, even demand, to be treated with equal dignity by law enforcement, the courts, in the public arena and in our churches.

### Racist White drama in response to the focus on Black trauma

This focus on Black trauma incited racist White counter-measures to maintain dominance and control over the Black population through terrorism. White racist responses to increased coverage of racial injustice have proliferated boldly, predictably, including the Charleston killings of June, 2015 and the defiant unfurling of the Confederate flag.

I will by-pass past much of the history of American race relations, covered intensively and extensively by Ta-Nehisi Coates' "The Case for Reparations" in the June 2014 issue of *The Atlantic*, past the exoneration of the self-appointed neighborhood watchman and killer of Black 17 year-old Trayvon Martin who was visiting his father. I will also by-pass the racial differences in court outcomes to "Stand Your Ground" laws that, over the past decade or so, propagated in over half of the US, authorizing the use of deadly force when feeling threatened.

For many, the refusal of the Grand Jury to indict a White policeman for firing 12 shots at unarmed Black teen Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri on October 9<sup>th</sup>, 2014 marked a turning point in their sense of social justice. White construction contractors present at the scene demanded to know from the policeman, "Why did you shoot him? He had his hands up!" The refusal to indict the shooter resulted in widespread civil unrest across America and abroad. Thousands of White Americans hit the streets and marched along with Blacks against what was seen as police oppression, especially against Blacks. They chanted "Black lives matter" and "Hands up! Don't shoot!" Appalled by the Grand Jury decision, the federal government initiated investigations at Ferguson, which immediately resulted in the removal of several local law and court officials.

### "Stand Your Ground" is not a license to kill Blacks

An earlier important case in this analysis does not involve a policeman, but speaks more directly to the milieu fostered by the presumed dispensability/disposability of Black lives and supported by "Stand Your Ground" trial outcomes favoring White shooters in court. On November 23, 2012, Jordan Russell Davis, a 17 year-old Black teen, was murdered at a gas station in Jacksonville, Florida. His assailant, a 47 year-old White man, had claimed that he feared for his life, that he was "standing his ground" when he shot 10 rounds into a car filled with four Black teens who had not turned down the volume of the music playing in their car when he demanded it. He fled the scene, drove to his motel and ordered a pizza. By the time he returned home, he discovered that the police had his license tag number, so he turned himself in. Throughout his preparation and defense, he had smiled with a smug confidence.

Nearly two years later, at his so-called "'loud music' murder trial," he was sentenced to 90 years plus life for three attempted second-degree and one first-degree murder convictions. He was dumbfounded. He looked at his parents and shrugged his shoulders in disbelief, palms up?

"You will learn to be remorseful."

Jordan's father, Ronald Davis, with validation in the court of the American justice system, addressed those revolutionary words to a White man. He stated a Black sentiment that had been choked out,

suffocated, strangled, peripheralized and suppressed for hundreds of years in America. “You will learn to be remorseful.” In the America of the man who murdered his son, it had never been necessary to imagine that lesson. In Ronald’s son’s case, however, taking a Black life did matter.

Closer scrutiny of accounts of Blacks killed under police custody soon followed. A video of 43 year-old Eric Garner, a Black father gasping “I can’t breathe” as he was choked to death on July 17, 2014 by New York policemen brought thousands across America into the streets. Many outraged White Americans were discovering that racism and structural oppression—up to and including extrajudicial executions—were not figments of the Black imagination.

The defensive White reflex, “All Lives Matter”—sometimes adopted by White politicians speaking before Black audiences as well as Black entertainers with cross-over appeal—down-plays the significance of the statement that Black lives matter. It attempts to nullify mass protests against “Stop-and-frisk” policies, racial profiling, White hate-group members in law enforcement, and militarized police forces “going to war with the Black community” in places like Ferguson, Missouri and Baltimore, Maryland. It is an attempt to keep White feelings at the center of the debate.

## The Massacre of Charleston signaled the illegitimacy of White racism

On June 17, 2015, a 21 year-old White man attended a prayer service at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church in downtown Charleston, South Carolina. There, he methodically shot nine Black people to death, in the hope of starting a race war. He left one survivor to tell the tale.

The date coincided with the 193<sup>rd</sup> anniversary of the suppression of the 1822 slave rebellion in Charleston, led by Denmark Vesey, one of the founders of the church. Emanuel AME has a history of civil rights activities. Officials from across the nation met in Charleston to mourn Pastor and state senator Clementa Pinckney, 41; Cynthia Hurd, 54; Twanza Sanders, 26; Sharonda Singleton, 45; Rev. De Payne Middleton-Doctor, 49; Rev. Daniel Simmons, 74; Susan Jackson, 87; Ethel Lance, 70; and Myra Thompson, 59, all victims of the slaughter.

The next day, President Barack Obama noted the significance of the attack. “Mother Emanuel is, in fact, more than a church. This is a place of worship that was founded by African Americans seeking liberty. This is a church that was burned to the ground because its worshipers worked to end slavery... Mother Emanuel Church and its congregation have risen before from flames, from an earthquake, from other dark times to give hope to generations of Charlestonians, and with our prayers and our love and the buoyancy of hope, it will rise again now as a place of peace.”

The Massacre at Charleston: The epitome of misdirected White hatred of Blacks Central to the shooter’s world-view is a bitter rejection of the American neoliberal political economic system as it affects poor, especially Southern, Whites. According to CNN journalist John Blake’s “One Battle the Confederate Flag Is Still Winning,” the system resembles the scheme designed by 19<sup>th</sup> century White elite politicians and industrialists to weaken White workers’ power and to lure corporations with promises of low taxes and minimal regulation.

Michael Lind, author of *Land of Promise: An Economic History of the United States*, referred to this system as “Southernomics,” an economic policy honed in the Old South. “Southernomics,” Lind shows, is spreading across the United States.

Just like a bullfighter in the center of the arena, Southern White politicians and industrialists, over many generations, have distracted the raging bull of White workers' frustrations with a cape of Black, Brown, and immigrant workers, successfully protecting their position in the center of the ring. Hence, the Charleston killer projected his virulent hatred onto Blacks and other non-Whites. He scapegoated them for his personal downward mobility, angrily portrayed Black progress as discrimination against Whites, and suffered a boding sense of sexual inadequacy, as revealed through his rants against "race-mixing" and "Black men raping White women and taking our country away." Federal authorities classified the killer's action as a hate crime.

The killer attributed his version of White Supremacy to the Republican-founded Council of Conservative Citizens. That organization immediately referred to the killer as "deranged", and disavowed responsibility for his actions, while admitting that the information he gleaned from their website was accurate.

### Debating the Southern tradition of White Supremacy First

Angry demonstrators across the nation condemned the slayings at Mother Emanuel and called for removal of the Confederate flag from the South Carolina capital grounds. Opposing forces in the legislature vowed allegiance to their cultural heritage, claiming their love for the flag had nothing to do with racism. The flag, however, had been placed above the Capital Building in 1961, in defiance of advances in Black civil rights. The legislators had decreed that there was to be no debate about its removal without overwhelming approval by that body. The flag stayed atop the State House until 2000, when a Black-led boycott forced a compromise. The flag was to be placed on a pole in front of the building, and a monument celebrating the contributions of Black South Carolinians was allowed on the grounds, as long as it did not celebrate any actual person or event. Despite sharp White conservative resistance, and driven by condemnation of the flag from the state's industry leaders, the South Carolina legislature voted to remove the flag from the Capital grounds on July 10, 2015.

### Black fear of White backlash

For many Black grassroots leaders, opposing the White Supremacy system with justice is dangerous, because its actors do not hesitate to terrorize and traumatize its victims. Removing the flag represented state opposition to White Supremacy, and the expected repercussions followed. While Mother Emanuel was still burying her dead, White hate groups began to swarm. Declaring continuing support for the Confederate flag, Klan members clashed with militant Black self-defense groups and mainstream religious representatives.

"If they will kill us in church, where the hell will we be safe?" Malik Shabazz, attorney and former chairman of the New Black Panther movement, asked protesters outside Senator Pinckney's funeral. Members of National Action Network, led by some of America's top church elders, tried to offer solace.

A week or so after the flag was lowered, members of the Ku Klux Klan, an organization of White Supremacists, announced they would hold a rally in protest over the weekend on the Capital grounds. While it might be comforting to presume that the tragedy at Mother Emanuel Church was the work of a single deranged person, his actions were more the predictable result of someone who grew up on a steady diet rich in a White Supremacy that had roots throughout the country. White racists acted out their anxiety over the removal of a symbol of their historical social and moral order, in dramas replete with Ku Klux Klan regalia, adding to Black trauma from the Charleston massacre.

## *The New Charleston* and the hope for White racist redemption

We write histories to legitimate a present order of political and social power, and to substantiate claims of authority. In an America weary of its history of profound conflict and intra- and inter-racial fratricide, Blacks and Whites need a new meta-narrative and a common symbol of fraternal cooperation for mutual benefit and peace instead of domination and submission. Both Bishop Braxton and President Obama intoned this sentiment regarding the historical relationship between Blacks and Whites in America.

Dolores Hayden, in *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History*, focused on the significance of an installation, *The New Charleston*, to explain how place can help us discover a common critical understanding of ourselves. *The New Charleston*, an extraordinary dance floor at the Avery Research Center for African American History and Culture in Charleston, is an exhaustive, complex look at one city and the spatial history of African Americans in it over three centuries. The roof is supported by three columns, the windows have no curtains, the floor is nearly stripped of furniture, and the brick walls are bare.

*The New Charleston* is the product of a collaborative enterprise by sculptor Houston Conwill, poet Estella Conwill Majozo, and architect Joseph de Pace. In *The Spirit of Mourning: History, Memory and the Body*, Paul Connerton describes *The New Charleston* as a memorial dance floor, a detailed map representing an elaborate narrative, a cosmogram of mourning that depicts a water journey and the multi-layered story of a captured people placed on ships sailing from the the Rokel River in Sierra Leone, across the Atlantic, through the Caribbean and into Charleston Harbor. *The New Charleston* is a *lieu de memoire*, a cross-road, a place where time and space meet memory. It depicts many sites of resistance, suffering and death, as well as celebration. Conwill's Artistic Team used indigo blue (once grown in Charleston) and white made from local oyster shells to create the floor design with its 14 "spiritual signposts" on a map of historic places of importance to African Americans—like the community center, the church, the slave market, and the hanging tree.

[Place picture of *The New Charleston* about here]

White racist history salves the wounds of those with dreams of righteous ascendance to positions of wealth and prestige enjoyed by slave-owners. In the words of Pulitzer Prize winner Toni Morrison, however, "if you can only be tall because someone else is on his knees, then you have a serious problem." Progress at this juncture requires acknowledgment and acceptance of a more critical and honest history such as that presented in *The New Charleston*. It also requires fearlessness, for Whites to disqualify greed, racism, and social injustice as the foundations for American society; and for Blacks to develop leadership at every level of American society. *The New Charleston* provides a cross-road where Northern and Southern Black and White Americans can meet in authentic dialogue.

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