



Demonstrators in Washington gather outside the White House to protest the death of George Floyd. DEE DWYER



R A C I S M

LETTERS TO AMERICA

Eight Black Canadian writers on the racism crisis gripping the world

WITH THREE WORDS and his life, George Floyd delivered a message that, down the centuries, America's ruling class has seemed no more inclined to hear than the white Minneapolis cop who knelt upon Floyd's neck.

I can't breathe.

Rare is the phrase that cuts so cleanly through the modern-day cacophony to capture a moment, and describe a shared feeling. What is it to be Black in 2020? To feel consigned to a permanent underclass by dint of one's race?

It is, say many of those who live the experience, to suffocate.

Floyd, 46, had scarcely uttered his haunting words before joining the shamefully long roll of Black men and women to die in the United States at the hands of white police officers. Footage of his last moments ricocheted through social media, prompting sympathetic protests in cities across the United States, as well as in Canada. As it has throughout America's troubled racial history, anger turned to violence. At this writing, 11 civilians and one law enforcement officer in the U.S. had died in riots and shootings. Far from seeking to ease tensions, President Donald Trump stoked them, threatening to deploy the army against his own people.

Through it all, Floyd's dying phrase was on the signs, tongues and protective face masks of many demonstrators. *I can't breathe.* But will it effect lasting change? Will anything? With those questions in mind, *Maclean's* asked Black Canadian writers Desmond Cole, Andray Domise, Esi Edugyan, Lawrence Hill, Sandy Hudson, Eternity Martis, Rinaldo Walcott and Ian Williams to pen open letters to America addressing the recent upheaval and the task of confronting racism that—deny it as some Canadians might—persists in their own country. *

Ian Williams

The cameras on your phones make Black people invisible



Dear cellphone manufacturers,

Something seems to be wrong with the cameras on your phones. They're recording double exposures. When Black people look, we see a white officer shooting a Black man five times in the back (*Walter Scott*), or pummelling a man for jaywalking (*Nania Cain*), or killing a man in front of his apartment building (*Keith Lamont Scott*), or choking a man then pressing his head into the sidewalk until he can't breathe (*Eric Garner*).

That last scene, only with the white officer's knee on the Black man's neck, was recorded again recently (*George Floyd*), but we can't keep recording on these defective cameras. These recordings eat up battery and Black people. And when we show the videos to white folks, they don't see anything. The only explanation I have is that there's some kind of filter on your camera that's making Black people invisible.

As a result, some of us are trying to become visible by gathering in groups. Make yourself large when attacked by a bear, right? We gather and adjust the lighting by setting places on fire. Your cameras are better at capturing these moments. Yet, in the playback, we're backlit by the past, and the more the file is shared, the more compressed it becomes until all that most Americans see is high-contrast black and white. What is corrupting our files?

Your devices also have a problem with the focus. A police officer murders a Black man, but the focus is on race riots. Even on the social media apps I download, the subject keeps changing from #blacklives to #alllives.

Focus is bad. Resolution is poor. Objective video evidence is not enough to convict officers—*no charges, charges dropped, not guilty, mistrial, paid administrative leave*—or to make substantial policing reforms.

Evidence. We have so much evidence, our phones are out of storage. Evidence has been repeatedly controverted by white America. I got a news notification: George Floyd's—I





A protester in Minneapolis is helped by medics after being teargassed outside the city's Fifth Precinct CHANDAN KHANNA/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

can't breathe—autopsy report claims that he did not die from traumatic asphyxia but, in part, from his own underlying health conditions. Again I watched the video on my phone. The cop is kneeling on his neck. I don't get it; is the news app buggy?

Somehow your phones work well for white women who call the police on Black people as we birdwatch (*Amy Cooper*), sell water (*Alison Ettel a.k.a. Permit Patty*), barbecue (*Jennifer Schulte a.k.a. BBQ Becky*), and nap at Yale (*Sarah Braasch*). I can't tell what brand of phone they're using to make them sound so convincing.

Although I no longer live in America, sometimes I think a white woman will call the police on me for entering my own vehicle if I linger too long outside, searching for keys. She'll think I'm carjacking my absent white

self. When I go running (*Ahmaud Arbery*) at a nearby track, I leave my backpack on a bench. When I retrieve it, I worry that people will think I'm stealing my own backpack so I always open it immediately and confidently, and sip water to prove that it's mine. According to a poster taped to a tree, a backpack was stolen recently. Everyone's on high alert. I've never seen another Black person at that park. You know what that means.

There are software issues with your phones that I won't get into. My date and time function is frozen in the 18th century. My location tracker positions me crossing the Atlantic Ocean. The system updates to this point have failed to fix your devices. What you really need is a totally new operating system. ♣

Ian Williams is the author of the novel *Reproduction*, winner of the 2019 Scotiabank Giller Prize.

Esi Edugyan

'The weight of change should not rest on the shoulders of Black people'



To the woman on the plane,

It was the spring of 2018, and we were flying from Denver to Seattle. You were in late middle age, your blond hair greying at the roots, and you were travelling with a younger woman I assumed to be your daughter. After some polite greetings, I settled silently into my window seat, listening to the two of you talk. You were dismayed by a piece you'd watched on the news the previous evening in your hotel, the story of a Black Lives Matter protest turned fiery. "I don't understand why anyone would turn against the police," you said in resignation to your daughter. "Why go out of your way to make enemies of the people whose job it is to protect you?"

You did not seem like a malicious person, and you are probably kind and considerate in your daily life. But you spoke as someone who has always had faith in the system because you'd been given no first-hand reason to doubt it, without allowing that such faith is a luxury not everyone has access to, that someone whose life looks nothing like your own might have sound reasons to be angry.

Your words surprised me. Just days earlier, Stephon Clark, an unarmed 23-year-old Black man, had been shot to death in his own back-

yard. I did not understand how anyone viewing the footage of this or other fatal confrontations with police could come away speaking as you did. I felt the same unease when, after the death of George Floyd, an acquaintance expressed surprise at the vehemence of the protests shaking America. "But then, I'm not Black," she said.

I understood she was trying to be empathetic. But the weight of change shouldn't rest on the shoulders of Black people—and indeed, it doesn't. For true systemic shifts to occur, everyone has to feel the disgust and frustration; everyone has to recognize that the whole underlying structure is so irreparably broken that no one can afford to live like this anymore.

The historian Adam Hochschild has written that modern protest has its roots in England's abolitionist movement. It was the first time in history that such a substantial group of people became indignant—and remained indignant—over the rights of others. Few Englishmen had any experience with the slaves a continent away whose toil made their consumption of sugar, coffee and tobacco possible. And yet huge numbers of Britons tirelessly signed petitions; more than 300,000 refused to eat sugar; slavery in Britain eventually met its end.

Idealism is not only for the young. Nor

should it be left only to those who bear the greatest brunt of systemic inequities. Everyone must do the work. The pattern of outrage and forgetting cannot be sustained. This changes nothing in the long run. The work is never finished, in the way that the work of a modern marriage is never finished—it requires constant recommitment and vigilance, and a dismantling of archaic roles to avoid total collapse.

And so, to you, I ask this: please don't leave the work for your daughter. Or your daughter's daughter. Nothing thrives in complacency. Don't let forgetting prevail. ♣

Esi Edugyan is an author. Her most recent novel is *Washington Black*.

Desmond Cole

*One lake divided by a line.
They said it would be
different on this side.*



To the Canada-U.S. border,

You lied to us. You promised us things would be different on this side. They are, but not different enough to save us.

When I was a boy, I traced your shadow from underneath white paper through a page in my giant atlas. I didn't understand how you could divide Lake Ontario in half, the same water with seemingly different owners and responsibilities. But I envisioned the magic moment when weary Black freedom-seekers passed through you like ribbon at the end of a marathon, as their white captors watched helplessly from their side of the line. You promised so much.

And things are different on this side. Every day our white majority wakes up to discover we are here, and by night they have forgotten us again. They say we are so few that we need not be counted, so they don't know how many of us spent the day growing their vegetables, driving their cabs and nursing their elders. We say there are too many of us in jail, in child welfare, in immigration detention. They laugh and say, "Don't be silly, you barely exist." They tell us the real dividing line is the border.

We are African and Afro-Indigenous and Afro-Latinx, we are Bajan and Jamaican and



Marchers in Washington express their anger and outrage over George Floyd's death to police DEE DWYER



Haitian. In their remembering, the white people will boast about this diversity, like the proud kid showing you his collection of marbles. But in their forgetting, when no one's around to impress, they put us back out of sight. Once we cross over you, we must be quiet, like grateful and humbled guests in a museum.

Our Prime Minister has made a joke of our complexion more times than he can remember. He said he mistook us for a costume—he loves costumes. His supporters have warned us that if we don't forgive him, a much more awful white man will replace him. They point in your general direction, and remind us how much worse things can be if we insist on being seen. They created you to have an elsewhere to send us back to.

Indigenous writer Leanne Betasamosake Simpson says her people have called that great divided lake Chi'Niibish rather than Ontario. The Nishnaabeg and other Indigenous peoples were here long before you were an idea. White settlers on either side of you could not destroy each other and didn't need to. Instead they drew you up on maps and agreed to only steal from their own sides of the line. More recently they have agreed that Black freedom-seekers who try to cross the line must now be sent back.

Despite your insistence on dividing us, we can still see through you. We see Black people in the United States setting a country that is trying to kill them on fire, and we know they are fighting with and for us, making space for us to speak, too.

Things are very different here, but not enough to save us. ♣

Desmond Cole is the author of *The Skin We're In: A Year of Black Resistance and Power*.

Eternity Martis

'Black women: It's time society fights for our lives, too'



Dear Black women,

America was built and sustained on your labour and loss.

You've picked up your signs and loudspeakers more times than you can count, carried your babies on your backs and organized groups to head to the front lines, demanding justice for your fathers, sons, friends

and partners. The tear gas and smoke from burning buildings have brought you to tears, but this was no match for the pain of losing another Black man.

You continue to lead racial equality movements, from the Combahee River Collective in 1974 to Black Lives Matter in 2013, demanding justice for others. But who demands justice for you—for me—in a world that forgets our existence?

We tell Black men and boys to watch out at night, to know their rights, to survive. We remind them that this cruel world sees them as suspicious, aggressive and inherently criminal. But who reminds us—our mothers, daughters, girlfriends and partners—that we are also in danger?

Black women, who experience “misogynoir,” a mix of misogyny and racism, are also aggressively punished by police. The cases are endless: in July 2014, 51-year-old Marlene Pinnock was pummelled by a cop on a California highway; also in California later that year, Charlena Cooks was handcuffed on her stomach while eight months pregnant for not showing her ID; and a month later, Dajerrria Becton, a 14-year-old girl, was repeatedly slammed to the ground by an officer at a pool party in Texas. A 2018 U.S. study found that Black women are the group most at risk of being shot by police while unarmed.

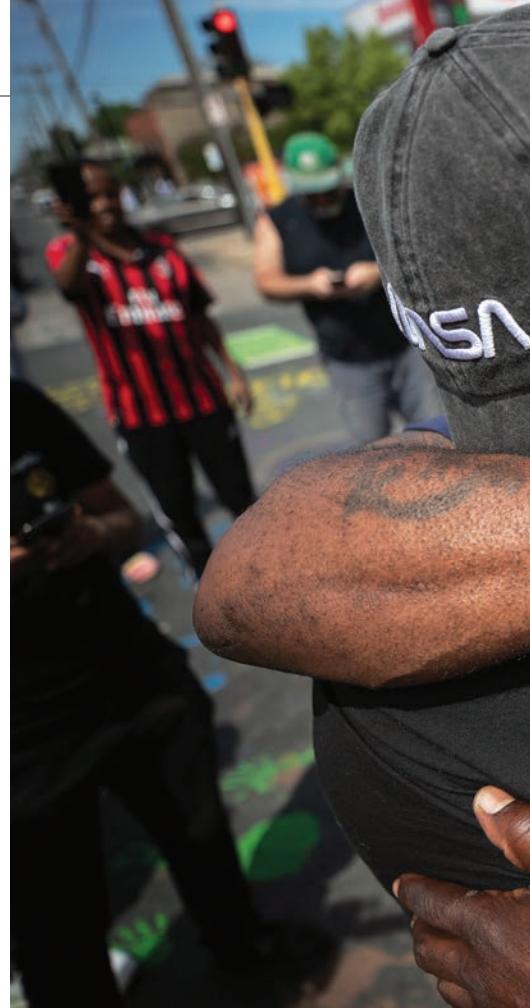
Canada has its own cases—in 1989, Sophia Cook was shot and temporarily paralyzed by Toronto police, and in 1993, Audrey Smith

was forcibly strip-searched on a Toronto street corner by police because she looked “like a drug dealer.” A 2019 Nova Scotia human rights report found that Black women are “significantly overrepresented” in street checks, being stopped 3.6 times more than white women.

Following the mysterious death of 28-year-old Sandra Bland in Texas in 2015, who died in police custody after being arrested at a traffic stop (authorities ruled it a suicide), the #SayHerName movement was galvanized, bringing awareness to the police brutality that Black, cis and trans women experience. In the years following, Black women who were killed by police faded into the collective memory. Then in March 2020, Breonna Taylor, a Black emergency medical technician, was fatally shot eight times by police who raided her Louisville, Ky., home unannounced. Her death has not been brought to justice.

There is hope. As I write this, there are protests in Toronto and Halifax for Regis Korchinski-Paquet, a 29-year-old Black and Indigenous woman who fatally fell from her Toronto apartment while in the presence of police. Meanwhile, protests for Breonna Taylor are still strong in Louisville. It’s time society fights for our lives, the way we fight for all others; America—and Canada—depend on it. *

Eternity Martin is the author of *They Said This Would Be Fun: Race, Campus Life, and Growing Up*, a memoir.



Rinaldo Walcott

The passing ceremonies marking his death did not stop the war'



To the late Essex Hemphill,

Your poetry and essays have been a force in my life since my first encounters with them. As a Black gay man, you have given me language to see myself and to be an actor in the Black community. Your moral and ethical clarity on homophobia, anti-Black racism and living life during AIDS, that other pandemic, has become part of my perspective. Your uncompromising challenge to Black, white, straight and gay remains a powerful guide for how to be in the world. In moments of crisis, I turn to your example and words.

I want to bring you up to speed on the ongoing disregard for our Black lives, on the ongoing state violence that we’re continually subjected to across North America. I want to tell you what has been kindled for me with the brutal murder of George Floyd in Minnesota by the police.

Essex, I live north of the 49th parallel where we are repeatedly told we have it better than those in the U.S. I live in a place where our current Prime Minister wore blackface so many times he could not recall, and where Black life is given short shrift, too. In Ontario, where I live, Black people are more likely to be living in poverty and substandard housing. We are over-policed and we are 20 times



Former NFL player Tyrone Carter hugs a protester at the site where George Floyd was killed JERRY HOLT/STAR TRIBUNE/GETTY IMAGES



Protests across the U.S. began in May and continued into June: a young girl in St. Louis on May 29 (left); a protester in Los Angeles on May 27 MICHAEL B. THOMAS/GETTY IMAGES; JASON ARMOND/LOS ANGELES TIMES/GETTY IMAGES

more likely to die in encounters with the police compared to a white person. But there has been something animated by the death of George that is deeply familiar and that calls out for something more—something beyond mere redress, arrest and conviction.

This time we must work toward an abolitionist future for our world. It will begin with redirecting billion-dollar police budgets to communities in distress, giving them access to better housing, health care and transportation, and ownership over how conflict is managed in their communities. Abolition of governance by violence is the only option for our future now.

The calm solemnity on the face of the police officer as he kneeled the life out of George Floyd will stay with me for the rest of my life. While George's death was the most sensational one recently, here in Toronto we lost Regis Korchinski-Paquet under suspicious circumstances; in February we lost Ahmaud Arbery in Georgia while he was jogging; Breonna Taylor in Kentucky while she was sleeping in her bed; Tony McDade, a trans man in Miami.

Tony's death in particular would have hit you hard in the chest, Essex, because we were reminded that some Black deaths can matter less. Hearing of Tony's death made me recall your poem *When My Brother Fell*:

*I only knew he had fallen
and the passing ceremonies
marking his death
did not stop the war.*

Essex, I am swinging wildly between anger and despair, between sadness and outrage, but I won't let them see me cry. Tears are not what is called for at this time. ♣

Rinaldo Walcott is a professor of Black diaspora cultural studies at the University of Toronto.

Lawrence Hill

Vote that Willy Lump Lump out of the White House

Dear Dad,

It has been a century since you were born in Missouri; 75 years since you served as a Black, non-commissioned officer in the American army in World War II; 67 years since you moved to Canada after marrying my white mother in

Washington; 58 years since you became the first director of the Ontario Human Rights Commission; and 17 years since you have been resting in Toronto's Mount Pleasant Cemetery.

I remember you on Sunday mornings: you would play Count Basie on your record player, and using a miniature fork, you'd pry smoked oysters from a tin and place them onto Ritz crackers. With mustard.

After the war, when I was just 10, you told me that your own father told you that you were not made to live in a segregated nation. After you moved to Toronto with mom, you made sure that your three children knew that Canada and the United States were founded on misdeeds—stealing land from Indigenous peoples, disenfranchising and killing them, and using enslaved peoples.

Since you've been gone, a Saskatchewan farmer was acquitted of second-degree murder after shooting an Indigenous man, who was just sitting in an SUV, in the head. Cops are killing unarmed Black folks. The man in the White House waits for peaceful protesters to be teargassed so he can walk to a photo-op outside a church where he does not worship.

Your slender fingers ensnare another Ritz cracker. Playfully, because you laugh to survive, you drum up your most derisive term for an ignoramus and say, "That no-account in the White House is a Willy Lump Lump."

"Do not let him and his enablers out of your sight. Raise hell until the cows come home. Put more into education and anti-poverty programs. And vote that fool and all of his down-ballot folks out of office."

Your words continue to rise out of my soul: "They have no respect for Black folks, Muslims, Mexicans, refugees or women," I hear you say. "They seek to turn the United States of America into a dictatorship. Don't believe it? Hitler was elected. Give that Willy Lump Lump and his people another inch, and they'll pervert the things that we hold most sacred."

Dad? From the Mount Pleasant Cemetery gravestone etched with the name "Daniel G. Hill," *What else have you got for me?*

You switch the record to Duke Ellington, and start humming *Take the A Train*. "If you think it's just an American problem, you're a fool. In the 1950s, your mother and I could not rent an apartment in Toronto. In the past 20 years, dozens of Black, Indigenous and people of colour have been killed by police in Canada."

I imagine you offering me a cracker. The oysters remind us of family and all the great things we miss from the United States. You lift your chin as your voice trails off: *Keep up the good fight in Canada. We have the same problems here, but we're just in denial.* ♣

Lawrence Hill is the author of 10 books, including *The Book of Negroes* and *The Illegal*.



Sandy Hudson

'We must defund the police; it is the only option'



Dear white people,

I have a singular focus in my appeal to you today, and I need you to hear me. Our lives depend on it. It's time to defund the police.

I believe that we can do better than the slipshod "safety services" the police claim to provide for us. I know many of you are unfamiliar with the everyday activities of the police. They do not patrol your neighbourhoods under the guise of providing "safety." They do not stop you on the street under the pretense of "protection." They do not kill your people with a casual and consistent regularity that announces, *Your life is worthless.*

When they killed 26-year-old D'Andre

Campbell in Brampton, Ont., this year, the police proved to us that they are ill-equipped to provide emergency mental health services. When in early 2018, bystander Bethany McBride recorded a Black boy being brutalized by fare inspectors in Toronto, police showed that they could not be trusted to help patrol our transit systems and campuses. In 2016, when an off-duty Toronto police officer and his brother beat Dafonte Miller so badly that they took his eye, police showed they cannot be held accountable for their actions. And when they refused to properly investigate the death of 26-year-old trans woman Sumaya Dalmar in 2015, the cops confirmed, yet again, that our deaths are not taken seriously.

Perhaps to many of you, defunding the



Police in Minneapolis move toward protesters on May 30 (above); a woman gets help rinsing her eyes with milk after being targeted with pepper spray JASON ARMOND/LOS ANGELES TIMES /GETTY IMAGES



MACLEAN'S MAGAZINE

police sounds impossible. But Black people will continue to fight against accepted wisdom: we must defund the police; it is the only option. Through your inaction, you show us your inherent belief system—a Black life lived with dignity is unreasonable, and a liberated Black life is impossible.

White people, I need you to look beyond the limitations of your own making and understand that the possibility of my liberated existence requires more than a retweet, an opinion piece, and even more than attending a demonstration. That's the easy way out.

How can we expect an institution that has failed all attempts at reform to suddenly refrain from targeting, maiming and killing Black people because of a new police chief, mayor or policy? I am asking you to refuse an approach to safety that is simply good enough for you, and absolutely unjust to me.

I need you to believe that, for Black people, this maddening cycle of trauma and despair is not inevitable. It only becomes so when we fail to evolve. ♦

Sandy Hudson is one of the co-founders of Black Lives Matter Toronto and a law student at UCLA.

Andray Domise

Canada's own legacy of oppression



To my brothers and sisters in America,

I owe you a debt of gratitude, more than you can possibly know. I watch as protests blossom across the United States with collective anger at the deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and the hundreds of Black people whose lives were brutally ended at the hands of police, since the death of Mike Brown in Ferguson, Mo.

The moment of course belongs to the families of the dead, and the pushback against police brutality, but the never-ending and increasingly shocking deaths put a spark to the fumes of the broken promise of the American Dream. This wouldn't have been possible without the persistent stench of systemic anti-Black racism in America.

You don't need statistics to know America

has cheated you out of a legacy. That your ancestors' work has endured cycles of co-opting and plunder. But the numbers prove what you know, and at the moment the numbers state that roughly one in every 1,000 Black men can expect to be killed by police. The numbers show that the income gap between Black women and white women is almost as large as the gap between white women and white men, despite the fact that Black women are the fastest rising demographic in higher education.

In Canada, other writers, advocates, activists and I, parse what little information we can get—between meagre data collected by our government agencies, and work by non-profit agencies and universities—into a patchwork of evidence that this country has its own legacy of racist oppression. Of broken promises and cyclical violence.

You may not know this about us. You may also be unaware that Canada—despite forever touting its status as the final stop on the Underground Railroad—aligned itself against your lives when it mattered.

As droves of Black Americans fled the violence of Jim Crow, Canada's government and residents organized to refuse you entry and even deport those fortunate enough to clear the bureaucratic obstacles. You may not know about the vile dispatches from government agencies and even the daily newspapers, of people feeling “sorry that this country should be saddled with those that the southern States are only too glad to be rid of.”

You may not know this ideology of anti-Blackness persists today, as many of the most virulent racists who've embedded themselves in America were born and raised right here in Canada.

But in my duties as a writer and historian—as I discover ever more about white North America's wretched behaviour toward a people who've endured ancestral and contemporary trauma that is unimaginable to most nations—I discover stories of beautiful struggles, of pain transmuted to the iron resolve of resistance.

In your current struggle I feel the spirit of Harriet Tubman and Nat Turner, of L’Ouverture and Cudjoe. I know that you will endure, and that you will prevail.

For your endurance, and so much else, I owe a debt of gratitude to Black people putting their bodies, minds and lives on the line across America.

I am because we are. ♡

Andray Domise is a contributing editor at Maclean’s and a historian.





A young woman takes a knee in front of police officers during a protest in San Jose, Calif., on May 29 DAI SUGANO/MEDIANEWS GROUP/THE MERCURY NEWS/GETTY IMAGES