

Black Lives Have Never Mattered!

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<p>Received on: 03 Dec 2024</p> <p>Revised on: 08 Jan 2025</p> <p>Accepted on: 12 Jan 2025</p> <p>©2024 The Author(s). Published by International Journal of English Language, Education and Literature Studies (IJEEL). This is an open access article under the CC BY license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).</p> <p>Keywords – African-Americans, Police, Violence, Hughes, McKay, Black Lives Matter</p>	<p><i>In the year 2023, a number of Blacks in the United States died at the hands of the police who resorted to heavy-hand arrests. This sparked a movement of protest called “Black Lives Matter”, which has been decrying this form of violence against African-Americans. Since the death of George Floyd in 2020, it has been one of the most powerful movements for the defense of Black rights. It all came to a climax on May 25, the day one which, during his arrest, George Floyd, an African-American, died of suffocation. Yet if we revisit the American history, we shall easily observe that the law enforcement agents were often used to exert violence and abuses against the Blacks, the aim being to torpedo their efforts to integrate into the mainstream society and thrive economically. The purpose of this article is to demonstrate the police or State-sponsored brutality have existed since the abolition of the slavery in the US. The denunciation of such violence is one of the main themes of the poetry of Hughes and McKay to a lesser extent.</i></p>

I. INTRODUCTION

In the 1950s and 1960s, police violence in the USA was a serious concern, particularly in connection with the struggle for civil rights. In order to thwart the socio-economic integration efforts of African-Americans, police forces were often called in to enforce segregationist laws and, if necessary, to crush demonstrators for equal rights with bloodshed.

On March 7, 1965, police, state troopers, and a citizen “posse” violently attacked civil rights marchers as they were attempting to cross the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama, United States. More than a dozens of marchers were hospitalized for injuries sustained on that day, later referred to as “Bloody Sunday” due to cruelty with which the pacific African-American activists were dealt with by those who are supposed to protect them.

Police misconduct during this period extended beyond protests. In many African-American communities, the use of the police as an oppressive

force tasked with perpetuating institutional racism was widespread.

In cities such as Birmingham and Selma in Alabama, or Jackson in Mississippi, as well in the industrial North city centers, where iconic racial leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr, Rosa Parks and other civil rights activists staged peaceful walks, sit-ins and boycotts to confront racial segregation, employment discrimination, voting rights and other forms of injustice, police resorted frequently to dogs, fire hoses and truncheons to disperse crowds and bully demonstrators.

Black Lives Matter (BLM) is an overnight movement that was pioneered in 2013 by three African-American activists, including Patrisse Cullors, Alicia Garza and Opal Tometi, in the wake of the not-guilty verdict pronounced in the case of George Zimmerman, a neighborhood watchman, who had shot and killed Trayvon Martin, an unarmed Black teenager. The events took place in Florida in 2012 with the vigilante's

acquittal sparking a wave of indignation in the United States and exposing the breadth and depth of racial tensions, inequalities and systematic injustices suffered by African-Americans in the country.

The purpose of this article is show that police excessive of use of violence against Black people is not something new in the United States and the hidden objective behind that violence is to slow the latter social ascension and economic progress.

We will first expose the case of Georges Floyd's assassination by the police in Minneapolis in 2020 and how it represented a turning point in the Black Lives Matter movement, giving it new impetus as it eventuality resonated across the globe. And then, we shall revisit part of the American history in an attempt to show cases of violence by police targeting African-Americans and we will finally highlight some of the poems by Hughes and McKay written in denunciation of the excessive and abusive use of violence their racial brethren both in the US and in Jamaica.

II. GEORGES FLOYD'S DEATH: THE FINAL DROP

It was in the context of the passing of Georges Floyd, that three brave ladies created the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter, which was taken up on social networks as a way of denouncing police brutality and racial discrimination against Black persons in the States. In just a few months, this movement has become a global symbol of the fight against racism and violence against people of color, particularly African-Americans. Seven years later, the movement for racial justice gained a fresh momentum in 2020 with large-scale protests staged across the country, this time in reaction to the death of George Floyd, a black man killed by a police officer in Minneapolis. The killing of George Floyd on May 25, 2020 in Minneapolis, Minnesota, was a turning point in the fight to do away with police violence and systemic racism among Black persons in the USA. Floyd, a 46-year-old African-American, succumbed to death at the hands of White police officers during a forceful arrest in which one of the officers, Derek Chauvin, knelt on his neck for ten minutes. This cruel

maneuver, videotaped by passers-by, showed the Black man in state of agony, pleading with the officers "I can't breathe", aroused an outcry not only in the United States, but around the world. This was followed by worldwide protests that reinvigorated the Black Lives Matter movement. Millions of people took to the streets to voice their outrage at racism and police violence against people of color.

The fate of African-Americans who fell under the bullets of White police officers did not leave Black writers and leaders unaffected.

"The Hill We Climb" by Amanda Gorman which highlights the need for resilience and unity in the face of injustice, incarnates to a large extent, the spirit of the Black Lives Matter movement and other struggles for equality and justice. It partly reads:

We will not march back to what was but move to what shall be, a country that is bruised but whole, benevolent but bold, fierce and free, we will not be turned around or interrupted by intimidation because we know our inaction and inertia will be the inheritance of the next generation, our blunders become their burden. But one thing is certain: if we merge mercy with might and might with right, then love becomes our legacy and change our children's birthright¹

Here we've seen a call for action from Gorman. According to the poet, in spite of the unspeakable violence and brutality against African-Americans, Blacks, Whites, Yellows all alike, must join forces in order to help usher in a new era of justice and freedom. In her opinion, the US must be greater than what is depicted on TV every time a young Black man dies to police excessive use of violence.

III. LONG HISTORY OF VIOLENCE

However, should we delve into the recent history of the United States, we would easily see that's the same old story, that the days of African-Americans have always been held cheap and numbered. In an article entitled "Black Lives Don't Matter" Joao Vargas indicates "*Evidence of poverty, unemployment, persistent residential segregation, exposure to environmental toxins, substandard schooling, disproportionate presence of children in the foster care system, police harassment, and imprisonment: these intersecting dynamics, while also*

¹ Amanda Gorman, The Hill We Climb, Viking Books for Young Readers; 1st edition (30 March 2021)

*impacting vulnerable whites and non-Blacks, uniquely define the transgenerational social and physical death experience of Blacks. Police brutality is just one aspect of a constellation unendingly generating anti-Black forces”.*²

These decade-long police beatings and repression of equal rights organizations had a profound impact on American society, and are often seen as a starting point for ongoing efforts to root out systemic racism in policing.

In his capacity as a spokesperson of the Nation of Islam, and then as an independent activist, Malcolm X exposed the reality of police violence. Unlike leaders since as Martin Luther King Jr who rejected the tit-for-tat approach as a way to confront police violence, Malcolm X asserted that African-Americans had the right and duty, to fend off unjustified attacks, including from the police. One of his most famous slogans, “By any means necessary”, was a statement of his commitment to equality, even if it entailed meeting violence with violence to protect one's own self and others. In Malcolm X's view, non-violence in the face of this illegal crackdown was nothing short than a weakness, and he encouraged therefore a more aggressive stance. He outspokenly labelled the police as an instrument of White oppression, and harshly criticizes the justice system which he deemed overtly biased against Blacks.

Langston Hughes the African-American poet whose long writing career expanded from the 1920s to the late 1960s, was particularly preoccupied with the police violence exerted at his fellow Black brothers in northern urban centers. A great deal of his poems is an overt denunciation of the law enforcement agents' brutality on his racial brothers. The oppression of the police of the Blacks in Jamaica, was also a source of concern for the Harlem Renaissance poet Claude McKay.

IV. HUGHES AND MCKAY UP IN ARMS AGAINST POLICE BRUTALITY

In the first half of the twentieth century, the Black masses, who couldn't take it anymore, in the context

of the cruelty of lynching spree, the unfair sharecropping system, the senseless *Jim Crow* laws and all kinds of abuse of colored girls in the American South, decided to leave the South, thinking that they could only find respite in the North, where they hoped to secure a more humane and dignified existence.

Thus, many African-Americans turned their back to their meagre possessions, packed their bags and bought themselves a one-way ticket to the cities of the North or East, provided they could get away from the South, which had been inhumanly hostile to them. This is the phenomenon known as the *Great Migration*. The poem 'One-Way Ticket' by Hughes captures this reality most eloquently:

*I pick up my life
And take it with me
And put it down in
Chicago, Detroit,
Buffalo, Scranton,
Any place that is
North and East –
And not Dixie
...
I am fed up
With Jim Crow laws
People who are cruel
And afraid,
Who lynch and run, (201)³*

This mass exodus brought millions of African-Americans from racist southern states to cities in the North and East, such as New York, Harlem, Chicago, Detroit, and elsewhere, in the hope of a more humane existence. Fleeing Dixie for these Black masses meant, in their minds, fleeing the racial injustice of which they were the victims. But once in the cities of the North and East, they were to experience disenchantment. Their dream of a decent life soon turned into a nightmare. Not only they had no prospects of decent employment, but they also

² Joao Vargas, “Black Lives Don’t Matter”, published in the website of Society For Cultural Anthropology <https://culanth.org/fieldsights/black-lives-dont-matter>

³ Langston Hughes, *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*, ed. Arnold Rampersad, Associate ed. David

Roessel, New York, Vintage Books, 1994 (References to Hughes' poems are to this edition and are indicated in brackets throughout the text.)

encountered exploitation and economic discrimination in these urban centers. What's more, they were prime targets for police violence and the psychological oppression of White mainstream society. The disillusionment of Black migrants from the South to the cities of the East and North finds one of its most eloquent expressions in Hughes' "Evenin' Air Blues", a poem in which a Dixie-born Black who had dreamed of a more humane life in the North, voices his disappointment at the cruelty of life awaiting Blacks in this part of the country. He is on the verge of losing his sanity because of the racial oppression he believed was behind him:

*Folks, I come up North
Cause they told me de North was fine.
I come up North
Cause they told me de North was fine
Been up here six months-
I'm about to lose my mind. (225)*

Indeed, the cities in the North and East are not eager to accommodate Blacks, whom they consider inferior. The issue of "white racial superiority" resurfaced in this part of the country. It's no longer lynching and *Jim Crow* regulations that are used to enforce this alleged White superiority. It's rather the police who are called in to brutalize the Black masses into conceding their inferiority. The police, who are there to protect all American citizens, turn out to be a tool of Black oppression. In Hughes' view, there can be no doubt that the police in the North and East are the direct equivalent of the Ku Klux Klan in the South:

*They took me out
To some lonesome place
They said: "Do you believe
In the great white race?"
They hit me in the head
And knocked me down.
And then they kicked me
On the ground. (252-253)*

Hughes' poignant tone has a certain universal dimension in that it also supports the thesis that imperialist powers have often used physical brutality to impose their false racial superiority, as Jemie points out: "The poem holds five hundred years of history in

capsule, spotlighting the physical violence by which the West established and enforced the myth of its superiority over the rest of world". Thus, in the eyes of the African-American poet, the police appear as the embodiment, in urban centers, of the oppression of the Black community, of which he is the uncompromising defender. This is further evidenced by his piece "Third Degree", in which Hughes castigates the beating of an African-American man solely because of the color of his skin: "Hit me! Jab me!/Make me say I did it./Blood on my sport shirt/And my tan suede shoes (370)"

In the process of beating the innocent victim into confessing to a crime he, undoubtedly didn't commit, the "law enforcers" are quick to kick him in his privates. This gesture is highly deliberate and noteworthy, as the White policemen seek to leave the black man impotent and unproductive. These blows, purposely aimed at the unfortunate black man's genitals, are intended to "nip in the bud" his potential offspring. According to Hughes, this is a cowardly and hypocritical attempt to exterminate the Black race from American soil. The poor victim is not unaware of this genocide:

*Three kicks between the legs
That kill the kids
I'd make tomorrow (371)*

In a further poem entitled 'Who But The Lord', Hughes again is up in arms against the police brutality of which his racial brothers are the victims. This time, in an effort to denounce these racist excesses, the poet highlights the helplessness of black folks in the face of White policemen. The poor black man, with no weapon to defend himself and no one to turn to for help, comes to the conclusion that only Providence can save him from the police:

*I looked and I saw
That man they call the Law,
He was coming
Down the street at me!
I had vision in my head
Of being laid out cold and dead
Or else murdered
By the third degree.
I said, O, Lord, if you can,
Save me from that man!*

Don't let him make a pulp out of me! (322)

Unfortunately, the God to whom the poor victim pleads, is not forthcoming. Indeed, the poem suggests that He is totally insensitive to the plight of Blacks:

But the Lord he was not quick.

The Law raised the living hell

Out of me! (322)

As in Hughes' poems referred to above, McKay's work frequently castigates the police brutality of which Blacks, particularly those living in large urban centers, are the intended targets. In "The Apple-Woman's Complaint", the Jamaican poet rants against the use of the police to perpetuate the oppression of Blacks. This, too, is the complaint of the apple seller to whom McKay gives voice:

Black nigger wukin' laka cow

An' wipin' sweat-drops from him brow,

Dough him is dyin' sake o' need,

P'lice an' dem headman boun' fe feed.

...

De headman fe de town police

Mind neber know a little peace,

'Cep' when him an' him heartless ban'

Had sufferin' nigger in dem han'

...

We hab fe barter-out we soul

To lib t'rough dis ungodly wul';-

O massa Jesus! don't you see

How police is oppressin' we?⁴

The Jamaican apple-seller's attitude to police oppression is not altogether distinct from that of her racial brother in the United States of America, since they both call on Lord Providence for protection from the men who are supposed to keep everyone safe. McKay has hard time accepting the excessive and unjust use made by the all-White police of the power in their hands. He expresses this point of view elsewhere in the following terms:

God gave you the power to build and help and lift;

But you proved prone to persecute and slay

He gave you law and order, strength of will

The lesser peoples of the world to lead;

*You chose to break and crush them through life's mill
(134-135)*

The problem of violence against Blacks has deep historical roots, and is closely a result of systemic racism and the social, economic and political exclusion of African-American communities.

As far back as the 18th and 19th centuries, "slave patrols" were organized groups recruited by slave owners to maintain order and subjugation of enslaved Blacks in the United States, through the enforcement of enslavement control laws.

While enslaved Blacks were relatively spared a certain type of violence because they benefited to some extent from the protection of their masters, who were careful to safeguard their physical integrity in order for them to be more productive, their situation was quite different in the wake of the abolition of slavery in 1865. Indeed, for the first time on American soil, newly freed Blacks were confronted with widespread violence during the Reconstruction period (1865-1877) and beyond, including lynching sprees and racially-motivated assaults, often with the connivance or disregard of the law enforcement agents.

The Black Codes (1877-1960) further institutionalized and "legitimized" segregation and inequality, and the police often played an active role in enforcing these racist systems.

V. CONCLUSION

As we pointed out earlier in years of the Civil Rights Movements, law enforcement officers have often resorted to violence and brutality against peaceful activists. Scenes of police violence, such as the brutal beating of protesters in Selma, Alabama, were emblematic of State-sanctioned oppression.

Racial profiling, stop-and-frisk and other unjustified practices disproportionately target black Americans, resulting in abuse that ends in tragedy. Cases of police killings, such as Rodney King (1991), Michael Brown (2014), George Floyd (2020), Breonna Taylor (2020) and many others, have highlighted the excessive use

⁴ Claude McKay, Complete Poems ed, William J. Maxwell, Illinois, University of Illinois Press, 2004, (References to

McKay's poems are to this edition and are indicated in brackets throughout the text.)

of violence towards Black persons under the pretext of policing.

Studies consistently show that African-Americans are more likely than Whites to die to police violence even when they have no weapons or resistance.

While it's undeniable that advances have been seen in some areas, due in part to efforts and initiatives such as Black Lives Matter that have emerged in response to this violence by calling for accountability of perpetrators, genuine political reform and systemic change, police violence remains a burning issue and continues to be at the heart of activism, political debate and academic research.

The paper has examined police violence against African-Americans in the United States, tracing its historical roots to systemic racism and the post-slavery era while highlighting significant events, including the Civil Rights Movement and the emergence of the BLM movement, which denounces police brutality and systemic inequality.

However, it has a limitation, namely its inability provide a deeper analysis of the specific achievements and challenges of the Black Lives Matter movement due to a lack of resources and in-depth studies published on the matter.

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