COLORADO COLLEGE

Transcript of CC Conversations on Racism, Policing, and Protest

This panel discussion included Colorado College faculty experts who discussed this topic from a variety of disciplinary perspectives. Manya Whitaker, associate professor of education, moderated the panel on June 18, 2020.

Manya Whitaker: All right, good afternoon everyone. Thank you so much for attending today's first conversation. I'm Manya Whitaker, associate professor and chair of the education department, and I'll be moderating today's discussion on racism, policing and protest. Before we get started, there's just a few logistics that I wanted to cover. We asked people to submit questions ahead of time and so we'll try to get through as many of those as possible. Once we stop the live stream, there will be a transcript available for you to download. So I'll ask the panelists to introduce themselves and in doing so, to share how they're engaging with and reading events, particularly as they relate to their disciplinary perspectives. So Dr. Hunt, I want to start with you.

Christopher Hunt: Thank you. I'm really excited to be here today. And I am Christopher hunt, and I am an assistant professor of religion and modernity in the department of religion. So [inaudible 00:03:51] answer question of how I engage this contemporary movement from my discipline. So this contemporary movement is often framed as a so called secular movement. And in the public imagination, it is often compared to other Black movements of the past like the civil rights movement, which had a particular relationship to southern Black churches. But this solely secular reading of our movement is problematic in and of itself. Because I believe that the claim Black Lives Matters is a profoundly religious claim and I'd often read it and understand that as such, so what do I mean by that?

Christopher H.: So now for me to say it's a religious claim requires an expansive understanding of religion and the religious, in other words, I'm pushing at the edges of what is typically understood as religious. So my understanding of Black religion is that Black religion at its core is to borrow from Anthony Pan, a quest for complex subjectivity. So in other words, Black religions, referring to the religions of the diaspora arose in the midst of an anti-Black

world, right? One in which Europeans attempted to reduce Black humanity to the level of lifestyle [inaudible 00:05:00] to the level of things, right? So in the midst of an anti Black period called modernity, Black religion arose in an attempt to build a sense of self, and a sense of somebodyness in a world that told doric Africans that they were literally nobody.

Christopher H.: So Black religion was in essence, I argue, a struggle for humanity and has at its core, an unshakable belief that Black lives matter, right? So Black religion has always been a type of resistance to the dehumanizing workings of White supremacy. So to examine it through my discipline, is to understand it as consistent with and as a continuation of a history in which Black persons have sought to create meaning in an anti-Black world, sometimes through religious rituals, sometimes through Black preaching, sometimes through Black songs, and sometimes through protests. And it doesn't have to do with gods or churches or traditional expressions of religion, but the struggle for the full personhood of Black people, in my view is a deeply religious undertaking. And so that's how I've been engaging this movement.

Manya W.: Thank you. Dr. Sawyer. (silence). Now while we work on Dr. Sawyer's audio, I'm going to go ahead and have Dr. Rojo introduce herself.

Florencia Rojo: Thank you. I am an assistant professor of sociology here at CC. And my research primarily focuses actually on immigrant communities and Central American communities and their experiences of violence and trauma, particularly in light of repressive state policies under the Trump administration. But my academic work and my community work around responses to policing and confronting police terror have really intersected in particular in 2015 when my next door neighbor [inaudible 00:07:06] was killed by SFPD when I was a graduate student in San Francisco. And I was part of a really localized community neighborhood effort to draw attention to that particular case of police violence, this young man was shot from behind by plainclothes officers who did not speak his language. He Ch'orti', a Mayan language and Spanish and he was taking classes to learn English. But they really took advantage of his situation. And as a bilingual member of that community, I stepped in to help translate, organize and that's what brought me into this work.

Florencia R.: I mean, I've been participating in BLM protests since it started about seven years ago. But that's when my deep engagement with issues of police terror really started. And in terms of how I'm thinking about this from my discipline from sociology, my students know who've taken my inequality class or my violence class, that I really think about and we construct institutions like police, prisons, immigration enforcement, all these systems of social control, rather as for crime prevention. We examine the long histories of state

violence in the US and how US state violence also impacts state violence in other countries in other places. And in particular, I think a lot about the relationship between violence and power. So I challenge everyone to consider that not all acts of force or destruction are necessarily violent. And to really think critically about who has the power to enact violence, and when is the actor invisible because violence is being enacted by the state.

Florencia R.: So those are the broader trends, the broader picture of how I entered this work. But we're at the critical moment now and I've been engaging a lot more day to day. Starting in November, I got involved with a local group here in Colorado Springs called Justice for Devon Bailey Editorial Board. And they ... since August of last year, when Devon Bailey, a 19 year old Black man was killed by CSPD, there have been lots of local community leaders who are stepping up to demand change, to draw attention to that case, to honor him, to honor his family. And some of my students and my community based research cores worked on a project looking at police accountability practices in Colorado Springs, so we've been engaging with a lot of different community leaders locally, which is something I encourage everyone to do. People think maybe this isn't happening in a place like Colorado Springs, but people are making it happen here.

Florencia R.: There have been protests for weeks, day and night. And we've been going out to a lot of those. There's policy work happening at the city level. I've been meeting with student leaders who are thinking about a lot of different projects. There's a CSPD accountability project. Students are looking into Colorado Springs' city budget, since there's a lot of attention now to defund efforts and what do our city budgets look like? How do our city budgets represent what the people want? And how do they represent what keeps our communities healthy and safe? And we're thinking forward to some of the elections we have coming up, not just the federal election, but also really local elections. Our city council members are ... there's a city council election coming up in April of 2021 and that's going to be really important in town. So a lot of what I'm doing now is trying to focus my efforts locally, and get students engaged. A lot of students already are engaged. So I'm trying to just support the work.

Manya W.: Thank you so much. Just trying to go back to Dr. Sawyer.

Michael Sawyer: I think I should be up and running now. I got this fixed. So my name is Michael Sawyer. I'm assistant professor of race, ethnicity and migration studies in the department of English. My work is primarily on Black revolutionary thought, both domestically and internationally. So I work on Fanon and I just recently published a book on Malcolm X that argues that the central aspect of his political philosophy is his engagement with police

violence, that that is the turning point. And what he thinks is the kind of canary in the coal mine as to whether a society is just or not. And in thinking through that, he blurs the distinction between police as an institution and policing as something that happens to Black bodies. I think we see this on a day to day basis where something like the harassment of Black people, just in spaces by people who are not members of the police force is also framed to something like policing, right? So when we think about the death of Trayvon Martin, George Zimmerman is not a policeman, but it's lumped into the larger discussion of policing so Black bodies are actually policed in a certain way.

Michael S.: And for me, it's not just an intellectual project, right? The first time police ever pointed a gun at me, I was nine years old growing up on the south side of Chicago. So I've lived my entire life with the awareness that police were dangerous, that policing was dangerous, and that there was literally nothing that could be done about it except to run or hide from them. And so part of my intellectual practice is to begin to assemble what I think are both theoretical and philosophical tools to allow us to think through the process of dismantling that type of subjectivity in relationship to the state that creates a type of discursive subject. So this is right in the middle of things that I work on and I really hope that we can get to the point of asking some really difficult questions today.

Manya W.: Thank you. Me, too. Dr. Sorace.

Christian Sorace: Thank you, Dr. Whitaker for inviting me to participate on this panel. I mean, I am assistant professor of political science, and I mainly work on Chinese politics, but my focus on China deals a lot with ideology. So I want to respond to your question of how I'm reading the current moment as a form of ideology critique. And there is a famous quote attributed to Lenin that is now circulating as a meme, which is there are decades where nothing happens, and there are weeks where decades happen. For me, this is the question, are we in one of those periods now? Or to put it more directly in a way that addresses each of us, how do we make now one of those periods? And I'm very excited to hear how my colleagues address those questions in this discussion, so what I just want to talk about briefly is what I feel the vital work these protests are doing in terms of dismantling the ideological spaces of White supremacy.

Christian S.: And first and foremost, the statues. I think that their destruction is a beautiful thing. The destruction of monuments to racists, settler colonists, legacies of the confederacy which has spread to Europe where they're tearing down statues of King Leopold the second, who is responsible for the deaths of over 10 million people in the Congo. In England, the statute of 17th century

slave trader Edward Colston was pulled off its plinth and dumped into the city harbor in Bristol. And the list sadly, is endless as there is no shortage of racists. Close by in Denver, they're thinking of renaming the Stapleton neighborhood named after a former mayor with ties to the KKK. And for Americans who cry out about the preservation of history, I think Ted Cruz recently on Twitter referred to the people destroying statues as the American Taliban. And here in Colorado Springs, the far right commentator Michelle Malkin apparently hosted a Save our Statues counter protest.

Christian S.: But I want to call these people out on their so called naivete because they get it. Didn't everyone in the US cheer when the statue of Saddam Hussein was toppled or when statues to Lenin fell across Ukraine? I mean, I was sad about the Lenin statues, but I'm probably one of the few. So please, I really ... this is a plea to stop the sanctimonious bullshit, because statues tell us about how we collectively imagine ourselves as a public. So public space ... and again, this is drawing from my research in China as well, public space is not some neutral background, but is a statement about the kind of society we live in. So we should really ask ourselves why in 2020 do we still live on streets named after slave owners? And as an Italian American, I want to say, let the heads of 100 Christopher Columbus statues fall. And I just also want to follow up on what Dr. Rojo said, it's also great. Another challenge to ideology is that people are paying attention to local municipal budgets and asking themselves these questions of value.

Christian S.: So why is it that Colorado Springs' 2020 annual budget is 34% allocated to policing and 11% allocated to parks, recreation, community development and planning? Why is it despite budget cuts, CPSD wants to hire ... let me just look here, it wants to hire 20 more police officers in the next year. So in sum, I think we're really confronted with a stark contrast now about when the state responds and what kinds of values as a society the state is mobilized around. When we having COVID-19, these images of doctors wearing plastic bags for PPE and you have images of police in riot gear, you really start to ask yourself what is the value of human life and especially of Black lives. Thank you.

Manya W.: Thank you. So Dr. Sorace, you mentioned the defacement and the tearing down statues and many people view that as violence. And so I want to kick us off and ground us in a very long quote, so excuse me, from Frantz Fanon's Wretched of the Earth. I'm going to come to you with this Dr. Hunt. Quote, "You do not turn any society however permanent it may be, upside down such a program if you have not decided from the very beginning, that is to say from the actual formulation of that program to overcome all the obstacles that you will come across in so doing. The native who decides to put the program into practice, and to become its moving force is ready for violence at all times. From birth, it is clear to him that this narrow world strewn with

prohibitions can only be called in question by absolute violence." Unquote. Dr. Hunt, how can we interpret Fanon's words in the context of current protests?

Christopher H.: Yeah, so I think I'll come at this question in a kind of a roundabout way, because I think the question of violence is an important one, but also a frustrating one in the ways that it's framed in the public discourse, right? So I will say unequivocally that Black people, since the founding of this nation and before, have been on the receiving end of violence, have been the victims of violence. Now, I'm not talking about just the potential for violence from the state and agents of the state but I'm talking about the 400 year daily experience of trauma that Black people in this country have to endure. And that's not at all hyperbole, right?

Christopher H.: So often when the question of violence arises, it is Black people who are forced to offer a justification for the way in which we choose to respond to the unrelenting daily anti-Black violence that we experience, right? And I'll add to that, riffing off of figures like Malcolm X and James Cohn, that White people are not, by any means in the moral position to ever tell Black people how we are to respond to the violence we experience every day at the hands of White supremacy. Because let's be clear, all of our protests, whether it involves chanting, burning a police car or taking over a police station and setting it on fire, all of that is a response to an original violence, an original and ongoing violence that we are the victims of or on the receiving end of, right?

Christopher H.: So it should be clear that Fanon's words are incredibly relevant for our contemporary moment, because what we're seeing in this nation and even in other nations is in fact an uprising. And some folks will call that violent. And what we have in this moment is Black people and their allies saying enough to the machinations of White supremacy, and the movement is getting shit done, right? And so for too long, we've allowed folks, White and Black, sadly, with very little real knowledge of the radical nature of Dr. King's non-violent direct action to weaponize a sanitized version of King against our movements, right? So White and Black critics of Black Lives Matter will speak of King's methodology [inaudible 00:20:16] violence, as though it belongs to some type of natural or God given law, right? One that cannot be deviated from tweet or question, if one is to be legitimate in protesting, right?

Christopher H.: So even our rebellion has to be proven legitimate in the eyes of White people, right? So I think we have to wholly reject this method of neutralizing and sanitizing Black protest. The discourse of what is violence, and the appropriateness of violence is for people with boots on the ground to decide, right? I think we all should be following the leadership of the Black queer

women and femmes who are at the forefront of the movement. So what we are seeing in this movement, is the power of the masses to bring change. And sometimes that looks like burning buildings or toppling a statue or occupying a highway, so on and so on. And if you want to call that violence, that's absolutely fine, because I don't think we should be afraid of the word. And I think I'll stop there.

Manya W.: Thank you. Not to be morbid, but on this idea of violence ... So Dr. Sawyer, George Floyd's murder has been described as a modern day lynching. And whenever I hear that word, lynch, I immediately think of the White gaze and the Black spectacle as reflected in iconic images of White mobs often including women and children at the base of a tree with a Black body dangling overhead. Then I think of more recent pictures of the White man in New Jersey mocking George Floyd's murder in his driveway kneeling on a dummy. And then also, of course of George Zimmerman, who you mentioned earlier autographing Skittle bags. Now, how can we begin to understand that in 2020, a good percentage of the nation still celebrates and memorializes Black death with impunity?

Michael S.: I think this is an interesting question. And the first thing we have to grapple with this the kind of way language works, right? So lynching in the 19th century and before is much like the term transportation then, right? It meant something particular then, and now when we say transportation that includes things like aircraft etc, in the way that what you're proposing these kinds of displays that some of them may not actually be attacks on Black bodies were meant to simulate them do the same type of work. And I think this speaks to my initial point about the broad way we have to understand the notion of policing Black bodies includes things ... in the workplace, harassing Black people in the workplace becomes the same thing, right? Disallowing Black people from recreating themselves in public spaces or enjoying what we think of normal social amenity or just ticks along the dial of what you're proposing is a way from seeing someone hanging from a tree with a mass of people around them celebrating this death, right?

Michael S.: So it becomes a binary proposition where because of our access to technology now, we're able to witness these acts in ways that before were not available. And one of the things that really disappoints me is this notion that now people have become aware of this, right? This to me is a two handed kind of slap against Black people subjectivity, the first notion being that we have been lying for the last 400 years, and now only because you can see it on television, are we finally revealed to be telling the truth. And the second for White people to pretend like they didn't know that Black people were unnecessarily chastised by state violence.

Michael S.: That is the core of being White and safe in America is that you knew you were safe from Black people. And there's no ... you can watch The Andy Griffith Show from the 1960's and see the conceptualization of the police as a force to keep certain people out. So these things ... in many ways the notion of lynching as a rhetorical term has to be expanded to accommodate all these terms, all of these acts in order to prevent people from saying only to extent that you're standing on George Floyd's neck, are you actually causing the type of pain that becomes a spectacle of Black suffering almost constantly in this country.

Manya W.: And because we can now see it, right? And people have more access to it. We are necessarily seeing a lot more pushback than perhaps we've seen in recent history. And so Dr. Rojo, protests and response to George Floyd's death have now lasted over three weeks. They're global, they include diverse groups, and they've engendered at least some beginnings at policy changes. What's different about these protests compared to those we saw for Trayvon Martin, Mike Brown, and Eric Garner? Why do these feel so much bigger?

Florencia R.: Yeah, that's a great question. And I'm sure my colleagues would have a lot of thoughts on this as well. So I'd be curious what others have to say, but I think there's several reasons. I'll highlight three. And the first I think is the one that is often left out of this conversation in particular, because we're in this time of multiple crises in our country, but also globally, and it's that there has been sustained movement building and strategy. So to build off of what Dr. Hunt was saying about the Black women leaders of BLM movement. BLM started seven years ago, and there has been a cumulative effort over time. Protests, they don't just spark up and then die out. They are coordinated efforts. And each wave of protests, we are seeing the movement build. I think organizers have been really preparing for this opportunity and seized on it really strategically. So changing the discourse of how we want our power distributed in society, thinking differently about, as others have said police as an institution, but also policing and the policing of Black bodies, the opportunities, the possibilities.

Florencia R.: So I think a lot of BLM and a lot of other local groups have been thinking about defunding police or have been pushing abolitionist ideology. They're working in traditions of other social movements. So I think one of the primary and most important reasons why this is happening now at such a large scale, and at such a global scale, is the sustained work of the movement. Another reason that I'm sure is on everyone's minds is the pandemic. I mean, I think ... we know that there are people working more and working in harder conditions right now than they have before but there are a lot more people at home and unable to see their friends and unable to travel and are less distracted. I think it frees up people's time. But more importantly, this

moment we're in is challenging a lot of people's notion of what normalcy is. And so it's not just freeing up our time, it's freeing up our imaginations.

Florencia R.: We can think and imagine beyond the parameters of what we once thought was possible. And I think there are people who have been doing that work and a lot of folks who have been on the fence and a lot of folks who've been sympathetic, maybe to the cause are starting to participate more and people who thought, 'yes, racism is bad, but what can we do about it,' are also starting to realize that we don't have to accept the world as it is because external factors can come in and change it, we can harness that and change it as well. And within this point of the pandemic as well beyond convenience or beyond participation, people are suffering. Many people, many White people, many liberals, many non Black people are seeing that the state does not work for them in ways that maybe hasn't been so intimate, ways that Black folks have experienced constantly and forever. I think other people are coming into that realization and that experience that the state doesn't work for them.

Florencia R.: Mutual aid efforts have sprung up all over the country, people are doing the work that the state isn't doing for us. And that's also freeing up people's imagination to say, "Why do we need the police?" Or "Why do we need them for all the things that we think we need them for? We can do things differently, we can do things for ourselves." So I think that is a really critical contextual point of this moment. And finally, I think the level of state repression and police repression of protests is also really critical for understanding this moment. I mean, when the Baltimore uprisings happened, we were still under the Obama administration. And we had a Black president who could make really nice speeches and speak sympathetically. And again, I think many especially White liberals could hear that and say, "Wow, this is horrible, this exceptional situation in our country." The state is showing its true colors. I mean, the level of police brutality at protests, and the federal government's support of that police repression is resonating all over the world.

Florencia R.: I have family in South America, I have friends in other countries, I'm sure others do as well. And they are asking me about this every day. They're reading about it, they're hearing about it. And what they're hearing is, the police are repressing protests, and a lot of the tactics the police are using here are very similar to tactics that have been used in Chile this year. So I think that that is resonating at a new level as well. I mean, just yesterday, The New York Times published 99 cities in which the police were using tear gas against protesters, and those are just cities in which the police departments responded and confirmed their use of tear gas. So you can imagine. And by the way, Colorado Springs is on that list. And a lot of the young folks in our

community, including our students are going to those protests, right? So I think that these are just some of the reasons. I think retrospect we'll have more insight, but that's what I think is happening.

Manya W.: So as we shift our conversation to start thinking about these protests and the reforms that are now on the table, I want to talk to you Dr. Sorace because you recently published an article in which you stated, quote, "Gratitude calls on us to emotionally accommodate the world on offer, while insinuating that it might be gone tomorrow. Don't ask for a better life, be grateful for what you have. These hysterical demands revealed the insecurity of sovereign power." Unquote. Now this sounds a lot like the rebuttals we hear from White people when Black and indigenous communities demand basic human rights. What words of caution might you have for these marginalized and oppressed communities as we negotiate with local law enforcement to enact some type of reform?

Christian S.: Thank you. It's a great question. And I don't really feel like I'm in a position to give advice to oppressed communities on how to negotiate with law enforcement, but I still hope that I can offer something of substance here. So very quickly, my work on gratitude started in my research in China, how in the aftermath of the 2008 Sichuan earthquake, the government demanded displays of gratitude for the reconstruction that they gave to the people. This happened again recently, while Wuhan was still under quarantine, the government launched a gratitude education campaign, asking the people to be thankful for everything they've done for them. So this got me thinking, what are the relations of power encoded in the structure of gratitude, right? It's basically saying, "I give you a gift for which you should be grateful." Which is actually a way of denying people what is rightfully theirs, their rights and their sovereignty by treating it as an act of benevolence.

Christian S.: And this also sets up a chilling effect of calling somebody ungrateful as a way of policing their behavior through expectations for how one should act. So in the case you bring up about White rebuttals to Black people, indigenous communities and people of color who are demanding basic rights that are theirs, it is a way of actually saying, "How dare you ask for more? Don't you already have enough?" Which is effectively shutting down and delegitimizing Black feminist queer, other modes of subaltern speech. This is why it was no surprise to me that the Attorney General William Barr, recently warned Black Lives Matter protesters to quote, "Show more respect, deference and gratitude to the police." And threatened to withdraw police protection from cities that were protesting. Barr's even likened the criticisms of police to anti-Vietnam War protests, and this is a quote from Barr, about the Vietnam War protests, "The respect and gratitude owed them to the military was not given, it took decades for American people to finally realize that," unquote.

Christian S.: So if you think this is completely irrational, recall back in 2007, George W. Bush complained publicly that Iraqis were not grateful to Americans. So gratitude is a mode of maintaining unequal, racialized and gendered power relations, but challenging ... and this is now hopefully addressing Dr. Whitaker's question, challenging the logic of gratitude is risky and is an exposure to violence. Dr. Lauren [inaudible 00:34:25] talks about a broken circuit of reciprocity. And when it is White people whose expectations are breached, this broken circuit can become a noose, a mode of direct and indirect violence, the motive literal violence as well as metaphorical violence. This is why in Dr. Frank Wilderson's new book on Afro-pessimism, he talks about how he learned from a young age that the key to his safety was knowing the limits for White people, how to make them feel comfortable, and especially the tolerant liberal ones who imagine they are beyond limits.

Christian S.: And he tells this incredible ... I just finished the book and I really recommend it to everybody. He tells this incredible story of 4:30 in the morning, he's a grad student at Berkeley, he gets in a van going to the airport. And his presence in the van immediately how the White people in the van and the Pakistani driver of the van, the atmosphere changes and he has to perform and talk about his research to put White people at ease. And it really brings clear how this demonstration of the labor, this affective labor required of Black people to perform and cater to the emotional needs of White people.

Christian S.: And this has also been a theme ... I read a wonderful op-ed by Dr. Chris Lebron, a philosophy professor at Hopkins, who writes in this op-ed for The Times recently that he has done ingratiating himself into the lives of White colleagues because quote "What it is White America needs me to be for it to allow me inside?" Unquote. So in other words refusing, it is absolutely on the one hand necessary to refuse these coercive, manipulative emotional forms of policing, refusing to submit to a racialized logic of expectation and gratitude. But at the same time, we know that when that refusal happens, as Dr. Wilderson puts it, it makes the social order and the libidinal economy that subtends it go haywire.

Christian S.: So to finish up, there's a wonderful quote by him where he writes quote, "One must embrace its disorder, its incoherence and allow oneself to be elaborated by it, if indeed one's politics are underwritten by a revolutionary desire." Unquote. So I think this is also a lesson especially for White people, including myself to affirm that if the world is to radically change, rather than simply change without change, we must absolutely learn how to live with the discomfort and epistemic uncertainty of what change requires. And quite frankly, this is nothing to complain about. Because as Dr. Hunt so eloquently put it, Black people have lived with direct structural and brutal violence for

centuries, so we can deal with epistemic uncertainty to radically transform our societies.

Manya W.: Thank you. And I want to highlight something you said at the beginning of your answer. I mean, you said, "I don't think I'm in the position to tell communities of color, how to negotiate ... how to engage in protests." And I thank you for that, right? Because I'm turning to you now, Dr. Hunt, because for decades, for as long as we've been protesting and pushing back for centuries, it seems like particularly for Black people, we lean heavily on our faith leaders in moments like these. And so my question for you is, what is the link between religion and social justice especially in the Black tradition?

Christopher H.: Yeah. So that's a great question. So I would begin by saying that in conversations like these, sometimes we fall back on language shorthand of like the Black church. And I often start my classes that discuss the Black church by pushing on that language a bit and saying, we have to be careful not to speak of the Black church in a monolithic sense, because there are in many ways, Black churches with diverse theologies, ethics, sometimes opposing viewpoints of how we should relate to the broader culture in regards to political action, right? But with that said, Black churches have been present in and sometimes at the forefront of political movements or Black liberation at varying points in the history of this country.

Christopher H.: So it's fairly common knowledge that Black church spaces early in the 19th century were some of the original spaces with the arrival of Black denominational churches in the early 19th century, were some of the original spaces in the United States where Black people were able to exercise a certain level of cultural autonomy, right? So it's not surprising that Black communities and Black churches became a center of Black communal life with the role of the pastor often being one of the most powerful leadership positions to which Black men in particular, could aspire.

Christopher H.: Not always Black men, but mostly Black men, us as men. So it isn't by chance that Black churches would become the primary sites out of which political struggle for liberation would come. However, it wasn't simply a matter of convenience, in the sense of Black churches were cultural hubs. Black pastors were often community leaders therefore political action was bound to spring out of there. There's a bit more to it than that. There is a particular stream of Black Christianity, some would call it a prophetic or radical stream of Black Christianity that has been present in the US, from the time Black people have been converted to Christianity in this land, right? So that particular historical stream of Black Christian faith understands the Christian faith not to be just concerned with the salvation of one's soul, understands Christianity to be a faith that calls for the political liberation of

the oppressed here in this world, right?

Christopher H.: So that tradition is clearly seen in the actions of a figure like Nat Turner, who oftentimes folks forget that Nat Turner was actually a preacher on the plantation which he was enslaved and heard a voice from God telling him to begin his rebellion, right? And it's the same type of Christianity that fueled the civil rights movement, it's the same Black Christianity that the liberation theology of James Cohn came out of who ... Cohn came on the national scene in 1969 with the publication of Black theology and Black power, in which Cohn argued that Black power is the most authentic expression of Christianity in his time.

Christopher H.: And it's also the Black Christianity, the radical Black Christianity of folks like Ella Baker, [inaudible 00:41:26] and even for profit of Christianity of a person like Cornel West. So within this radical stream of Black Christianity is the belief that God is on the side of the oppressed. And so Black Christians, even those who were enslaved began to those ... and oftentimes they were reading texts, they were hearing texts, but they often heard texts like that in the Exodus, and they heard the narratives about a God who saw fit to free an enslaved group of people in the Exodus and literally crushed an empire to do so, they read in that narrative, their own story and believed themselves to be an exodus people and believe that God would bring about their liberation.

Christopher H.: And they didn't just wait on God to bring about their liberation, for some Black Christians, they actually agitated for their liberation. But again, we have to be careful not to paint the picture that all Black churches are about the liberation of the oppressed, right? For even during the civil rights movement, many, if not most Black churches were not on board with the actions of Dr. King and the SCLC. So that's real. However, we can't overlook the fact that the flashpoint of what would become the southern movement, the 1955 Montgomery Bus Boycott, was a movement led by Black clergy, energized by nightly mass meetings that were church services and fueled by a particular theology that understood Jesus as being unequivocally on the side of the oppressed. Now, there is a current conversation around what the role of the Black church is in the contemporary movement, and part of that question stems from the fact that the movement looks different in the public imagination from what they thought the civil rights movement looked like, right?

Christopher H.: So it isn't driven by the charismatic leadership of a few Black cismen or a few Black male clergy, right? Are there clergy participating in this movement? Absolutely. You can't minimize the work of folks like William Barber and [inaudible 00:43:24] Flender, or Tracy Blackman or the activist scholars who are writing out of Black and womanist religious studies spaces. Those folks are

there and there are members of Black churches who are there. But the Black church is not centered in this movement, and nor should it be. No particular religious orientation is centered in this movement, nor should it be, which is why some folks from the outside looking in understand it to be a kind of secular movement. But before I stop, I don't want to erase the role of other Black religions and spiritualties that are part of this contemporary movement, right?

Christopher H.: So take for instance, Patrisse Collors, who was one of the three Black women who coined the language of Black Lives Matter and who has been an activist and organizer for years. Collors is a practitioner of Yoruba ephah, which has its roots in West Africa. And there is literature that has been produced and is out there that discusses the role of holistic healing practices and African derived religions and rituals in these contemporary movements. So I think it's important to point out that although Black religions are not centered in these movements, they are present, right? And so I'll stop there.

Manya W.: Thank you. I want to make sure that we attend to some audience questions and so here's something and I think this is best for you Dr. Rojo. In her viral video, Kimberly Jones broke down various actors in a protest. Protesters, rioters and looters. What more can you add to her descriptions and have these groups always been a part of major protests?

Florencia R.: Yes, thank you. I mean, I think if you haven't seen that video, please go watch it. I think it's really a critical way of framing the conversation. And I think a lot of us have been pushing back on the language of violence or thinking about what it means to critique people who are resisting of their tactics. I think the reality is that the movement needs a diversity of tactics. I think that people have different gifts to contribute to this movement. And I think we also have to acknowledge that the changes we're seeing now in Minneapolis, the openness of public officials of literally dismantling their police force, it could not have happened if we didn't see those police cars on fire. So I think that that's really important that sometimes these tactics work.

Florencia R.: And again, I don't want to summarize too much of what she said, she said it well and from her own experience. But to me, the point is a little ... from how I read that, her point is less about how are there different roles of protesters and movements? And she talks about there's protesters who go and they're upset and they want to speak truth to power. There's rioters who are angry and may be anarchist and who are maybe more destructive. And then there's looters who are framed as opportunists. But to me the point that she made, which was most important was to shift us from thinking about the what, in other words, what are people doing to the why, of why are people doing what they're doing? And what are the conditions that would drive someone to do

that? Both in terms of strategic resistance, whether that's strategic resistance as labeled as violence, and to build off of what Dr. Hunt was saying earlier, what we're labeling as violence has a lot to do with the US's commitment to private property as the most important as this sacred thing, right? Rather than people's lives and Black lives.

Florencia R.: So again, that's an important distinction when we're talking about something like labeling an act as violent versus as forceful or destructive or powerful. But again, she says even people who are framed as looters, people who may not even be participating actively in a protest, what are the conditions that they're in, that drive them to think of that moment as an opportunity? And to me, that's the most important piece of what she's saying for the rest of us to be reflecting. And what is your position? Are you in a position to judge tactics? Are you an organizer on the ground? Are you someone who has been subjected to this level of state violence, commonplace violence, policing from ... anyone who is White and feels that they are entitled to police you. Again, the protests sprung up not only because of the killing of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, but also because of the simultaneous event that happened in New York City at Central Park, where a White woman felt entitled to basically use her Whiteness against a Black man, use his blackness as a way to threaten him.

Florencia R.: That is an act of policing as well, to reiterate what Dr. Sawyer was saying about the act of policing. So to me ... again, I don't know that I have a lot to add to her incredible video, but I do think it's important for us to think about violence a little bit differently. What is violence enacted against people and peoples? What's violence enacted against a statue, a target is that violence? Can we really call that violence? Or is that something else? And again, focusing instead on why are people doing what they're doing? Why are people responding in this way? I mean, the drivers of violence are social isolation, shame, exposure to violence, inability to meet your economic needs.

Florencia R.: I mean, this all comes from Danielle [Sared 00:49:21] who does fantastic work on restorative justice. What are the institutions that we are cultivating, nourishing, feeding that address those issues? How do the systems of policing, criminal justice, incarceration and immigration enforcement do precisely the opposite? They exacerbate all of those conditions. So in terms of thinking about protesters, rioters, looters, the important thing is that we're in a critical moment where people are saying, "We've had enough," and that manifests in many, many ways. And we have to think of how are we going to contribute. what are our gifts, what is our lane in the movement? And are we in a position, as Dr. Sorace said to judge the tactics of the people who are leading these movements?

Manya W.: Thank you. That's an excellent segue into another question an audience member submitted. And here they write, "It seems clear to me that addressing racism will require radical change. Should we issue incremental change that seems immediately possible or somehow try to combine incremental and radical change? And if so, how? What about the risk that standing for ideals and rejecting lesser solutions might require more staying power than the populace has traditionally delivered or conversely the risk that we will get stuck with small incremental changes that make no difference?" Dr Sawyer, what do you think?

Michael S.: I mean, I think this is a classic question of the political in a certain way, right? The notion of politics as a practice rather than politics as an ideology. And I think for ... and much of this speaks to what we've said along in this talk, right? Black people in this country have had to exist under conditions of almost unspeakable violence and limitations of the horizons of possibility for almost 400 years, right? So when we try to reverse 400 years of oppression with the election of Obama on January 29th of ... everything was supposed to change, right? And so the notion of incrementalism, or radical change to me seemed like, not necessarily binary propositions, right? These are steps along a road that have to be taken to get to some place. Now what we're seeing now, and I think this is to Christian's point about how the acceleration temporarily can happen in certain movements, right?

Michael S.: So things begin to happen rapidly and it appears as if we're catching up to moments that already should have happened in the past, right? These conversations, 1968 these exact same demands are made to police departments 50 years ago, right? Then now we're hearing again 50 years later. So the question becomes, and as a very practical matter, if we can make large structural change over time, that's fine. But also we need to focus on the small things that can change that can affect the direct lives and safety of people as they operate on a day to day basis.

Michael S.: We're not in a position ... Oftentimes you'll hear this from often White liberals, they'll say things like, "Let the entire system collapse, and then we'll just deal with it." Well, that's fine to say from your gated community, but if you're living in 115th Street in Chicago, the complete collapse of the system is not something that you can accommodate, right? If you're on the border right now, and your children have been taken from you and they're living in a cage and you have no idea when or if you're going to see them, the notion of allowing that system to continue towards some type of political dystopia is completely ridiculous to imagine. So we need to be in a position to do both, right? We have to have a type of a political ambition that trends towards radical change that then understands the steps that it's going to take to get there.

Michael S.: And I don't think that that's an accommodationist position. I think that's Black people actually saying in real sense that they don't trust White people. Because at the end of the day, Black electoral politics is only the tale of a larger system of White electoral politics. And what we saw in the last election is the phony notion of that we could trust educated White suburban women to do the right thing and not go with the most ignorant, dangerous misogynistic person since roughly Governor Wallace to run for this office was proven to be false. So now Black people are in a position to say, "We're going to take to the street, we're going to demand these kinds of things, and now you won't have to do your job, but we're going to guardedly protect ourselves and know that this will not be the first time that we find ourselves left in the lurch by White politics in the question of what a larger type of Black politics means."

Manya W.: Well, one of the proposed reforms that maybe fall somewhere between incremental and radical is to rely more heavily on social workers instead of police. But yet there's a large body of literature documenting the many ways in which Black indigenous people of color are disenfranchised within social services. So how can we make certain we are not replacing one White supremacist institution for another? And I'll start with you Dr. Sorace.

Christian S.: Okay. I hope my answer to this will also be responsive to what Dr. Sawyer just said, which I strongly agree with. The demand to abolish the police is a very appealing one. But for me, I've been thinking a lot about it and the demand to abolish the police only makes sense if you restructure the entirety of society because there is no magic flip of a switch or change overnight. You take money from the police, and you reinvest that money in social welfare, in public infrastructure and that will bring about the change. But I want to bring up that what I've been starting to think more about is that there's a little sinister aspect that one doesn't really talk about when we talk about community policing or community protection, which is, we don't need to imagine because we know the historical record of White vigilantism and protection of communities. So we can just think about what happened after Hurricane Katrina when Black people who were disaster refugees were stopped on the highway by a blockade, led by a White sheriff in Gretna, Louisiana and turned back.

Christian S.: And also perhaps little known to be very honest, I didn't know about this until I was looking up on the internet yesterday to make sure I had the facts right about the blockade. And then I read an article from the Nation in ProPublica that there were White vigilante and militia groups shooting at Black people after Hurricane Katrina with impunity, protecting neighborhoods from the fantasized specter of Black violence and looting. So when Dr. Sawyer talks

about policing as a verb and the deputization of White people beyond the police, well, we can look at what happened recently in Albuquerque when one of the militias shot at protesters. In Colorado Springs, there have been, as I think Dr. Rojo mentioned, there have been right wingers, armed with AR's who have shown up at the Black Lives Matter protests in downtown Colorado Springs, and you know what they say they're doing, "We're just protecting the community." Well, whose community?

Christian S.: Or are they protecting property or whose lives? So before we start to fetishize the notion of community, we should ask ourselves, what do we mean by community self policing if the community itself is racist? Which also speaks back to the question that Dr. Whitaker posed, that one of the audience asked, that if institutions that have been instrumental in the reproduction of White privilege and Black dispossession which have to always be thought together, if those institutions aren't also transformed, then just shifting money from one structure to another might help in a certain way but doesn't ultimately get at the problem. Another thing we don't want to end up with, with this call to abolish the police is, we don't want to end up with a form of anarcho-capitalism, with the rich hiring private security and living behind gated communities, all of which will be exacerbated by climate change, which is already and will continue to generate forms of apartheid.

Christian S.: So I mean, I don't want you to misunderstand me here. I'm all for abolishing the police but it's not a magical solution that as Dr. Sawyer put it, will happen overnight, but needs to be thought of as the first step in a project of Black liberation. And I know maybe some might disagree with me but in interlocking project of socialist transformation as well. I don't think they're reducible to each other. I think there are different problematic but I think they're also interlocking and mutually reinforcing. So as a political scientist, I'll just say to transform how violence is organized in a society also means then, transforming that society in a way that will become unrecognizable to us and how it is now. So we should have the courage to live up to our imagination of a new world, but that will mean following through on all of its implications and what that entails, rather than leaving it as a utopian slogan of police abolition. The work ahead of us is long and hard.

Manya W.: There we go. Very well said as we wrap up this conversation. I want to invite the panelists to share any final thoughts that they may have about racism, policing and protests. (silence).

Michael S.: I'll try first and get out of the way. I think one of the things I think ... one that we've seen in this talk is that language is so important here, right? And I want to caution people, and I even catch myself doing this, right? The notion of the unarmed Black man, right? When we say this, as the first thing we

talk about the killing of these people, it's to say that to the extent that he was armed and maybe strangling him to death would have made sense, right? And in America, armed means something like White, right? And to Professor Sorace's point, armed men means over here at a peaceful protest by vigilantes with assault rifles, right? But they have the privilege to be armed. And part of the second class citizenship and marginalize existence of Black people in this country presupposes the fact that we have to strip away the possibility of protection, right? This is [inaudible 01:00:33] the notion of everything that Black people do is considered violent, right? If you're too quiet, you're violent. If you're too loud, you're violent. If you walk too fast, walk too slow, if you sleep in your own home you're too violent, right?

Michael S.: So I would caution us in our language to just get away from this notion of the unarmed person as being somehow the perfect victim for police violence, when in fact, it's just the opposite of that. The person should be able to enjoy the protections that is offered by this country and armed is actually part of the American project. So that's why it seems so ridiculous to me for Americans to be concerned about violence, when this is literally the most violent culture on planet Earth. We spend all of our time preoccupied with violence. All you have to do is go to a movie theater and watch the movie trailers and count the number of people who get murdered before the actual scene comes on. So that's just one thing I would like to say. And I wanted to raise that point because I get exhausted by hearing unarmed innocent Black person George Floyd, or unarmed person sitting around killed, it doesn't matter whether they're armed or not, the police need to do better.

Manya W.: Thank you. Dr. Rojo, you get the final word today.

Florencia R.: Well, then I want to do what I usually do in these conversations, which is to remind us that the people we honor who were killed by police are much more than the way that they died. Their families are mourning and every time one of these instances comes to the national forefront and as part of the national conversation, and we see these videos over and over again, and we hear these stories over and over again, all of the families mourn all over again. And I know this because of my close relationship with many families of Latinos killed by police in the Mission District. And keep in mind that most of these cases don't become part of the national imagination and don't become part of the national conversation. And so there are people who just live with this day to day and have to be constantly reminded.

Florencia R.: And so I just want to honor those families. I want to name that and just the one person one of the ... well not the one person, but one person that we hear about a lot here in Colorado Springs is Devon Bailey. And it's his cousins and it's his friends who have been organizing and leading a lot of the protests in

town, folks who are also criminalized after he was killed in order for the city to justify its use of force. So I just want us to remember that we're doing this for those families. And that each one of these cases are people who lived full complex, complete lives. And that includes Devon Bailey. So wherever you are in the country, whatever city you're in, or wherever you are in the world, look up some of those cases, look for the names of people in your city. Think about the people who maybe haven't been part of the national conversation but whose families are grieving, and lift up their names.

Manya W.: Thank you. And I want to thank all the panelists for joining us today and thank you all for tuning in and watching. Please do keep an eye out for future CC conversations on so that you can submit your questions ahead of time. Thanks, everyone, and have a great afternoon. (silence).