

Reflections on whiteness

Jeff Hawkes

Community Mennonite Church of Lancaster

Spring 2021

Lift Every Voice

As a kid, I was a product of America's public education system and found myself on the receiving end of a shallow approach to history that amounted to indoctrination. I sat in a classroom and was fed uncritical information about Columbus and the age of discovery, the heroics of Captain John Smith, the religious fervor aboard the Mayflower, the yeoman gallantry at Lexington and Concord, the brilliance of Thomas Jefferson and so on. I was marinated in a narrative of triumphalism and American exceptionalism, and I was made to believe that I lived in the greatest country there ever was, a land that guaranteed liberty and justice for all.

For some Americans of my generation, then, it's jarring to be confronted with an alternative history, one that refuses to flinch from understanding the full picture of America's wretched, centuries-long entanglement with slavery and systems of oppression.

• • •

America, frankly, is a mess, and has been ever since white people started arriving, started warring against indigenous peoples and started bringing ashore enslaved people. In August 1619, over 400 years ago, even before the Pilgrims stepped onto Plymouth Rock, the Jamestown colonists bought 20 to 30 Africans from pirates. As Nikole Hannah-Jones writes in

an essay for the New York Times' 1619 Project, "those men and women who came ashore on that August day were the beginning of American slavery. They were among the 12.5 million Africans who would be kidnapped from their homes and brought in chains across the Atlantic Ocean in the largest forced migration in human history until the Second World War."

The only word for that legacy is criminal. Instead, we have for generations acted as if we were innocent. Do we not teach our children to sing, "America, America. God shed his grace on thee"?

• • •

There is a counterpoint to "America the Beautiful."

It is "Lift Every Voice and Sing," often referred to as the Black National Anthem, and it, too, evokes a spirit of hope for a blossoming of liberty. But, importantly, it is a hope grounded in the bitter pain of struggle.

"We have come over a way," go the lyrics, "that with tears has been watered."

"We have come, treading our path through the blood of the slaughtered."

There is a tension throughout American history that remains unresolved. How can we see ourselves as the world's greatest democracy, a beacon of hope to oppressed people, when cruelty has been a continuous thread, from

the landing of the first slaves in 1619 to Derek Chauvon's knee on George Floyd's neck 400 years later?

Again, "Lift Every Voice and Sing" embraces that tension and holds out hope that resolution is possible.

"Sing a song full of the faith that the dark past has taught us," it says.

"Sing a song full of the hope that the present has brought us. . . .

"Facing the rising sun, of our new day begun.

"Let us march on, 'til victory is won."

Birth of a Nation

"Go back, and get what you forgot."

Pastor Susan has chosen that phrase as the theme for her sabbatical next year.

It's the definition of the West African word "Sankofa."

"Go back, and get what you forgot."

It suggests that we should look to history for it will remind us of what came before and how we got to where we are.

Today, then, let's consider an uncomfortable moment in Lancaster history from the last century, one that illustrates both the way racism operated in Lancaster County and the courage it took to resist.

The year was 1916, a time when the country's first blockbuster movie, "The Birth of a Nation," had been playing to packed houses across the country. The silent movie, which vividly depicts the Civil War, concludes during Reconstruction with the Ku Klux Klan riding to the rescue of a white family trapped by sexually predatory Blacks. The movie has been called three hours of racist propaganda. Roger Ebert said it "did more than any other work of art to dramatize and encourage racist attitudes in America."

In January 1916, the owner of the Fulton Opera House advertised the movie's premiere in Lancaster. But that showing never happened.

Why not?

The movie features a dastardly Northern politician who tramples on Southern whites. The character was loosely and inaccurately based on Lancaster's own Thaddeus Stevens, and that portrayal deeply offended Lancaster's congressman and GOP political boss, W.W. Greist because Griest's father had been a close ally of Stevens. Griest convinced the mayor to stop the Fulton from showing the movie. The Fulton objected, but in the end an attempt to get a judge to lift the mayor's ban was abandoned.

• • •

But the story doesn't end there. The film promoters simply moved Lancaster County's premiere to Columbia, which at the time was a thriving manufacturing town. People lined up at the Columbia Opera House, leading to unprecedented ticket sales for the five showings there. Many people hopped on the trolley to Columbia to see the movie.

Among those who traveled to Columbia was a delegation of Black men, who were members of the Negro Waiters Association. They went to object. On the day of the movie's first showing, Sanderson Detwiler, Columbia's mayor, met with the delegation, but he had no

patience with their objections. According to a newspaper account, the mayor told the group, "I've seen the picture. I approve it. It'll be shown here." He then told them that "the members of your race" should watch the movie and "be made better men."

The delegation left, but didn't give up. They went to the Columbia newspaper office, hoping for an article about their objections. But their request fell on deaf ears. The editors said they were too busy. Come back next week. The delegation returned a bit later seeking to place an ad explaining their objections. They were told the paper couldn't accept late ads.

That night, just before the movie started, Columbia's mayor summoned the police chief and his officers. He told the chief, "The people of Columbia are peace loving and law abiding and will give you no trouble. But if any of those Lancaster Negroes come down here butting in," you know what to do.

To which the chief replied, "I always obey orders." And he and his men kept watch, billy clubs in hand.

The newspaper said peace reigned that night. But it was a peace with no justice.

Eyes fixed to the silver screen, white Lancaster Countians thrilled to a fiction in which actors in black face portrayed people of color as ignorant, lascivious and dangerous.

White Lancaster was not ready in 1916 to see Black people as equals.

• • •

But let's draw inspiration from the men belonging to the Negro Waiters Association. When they went to Columbia, they likely knew they were on a futile mission. But with resolve and courage, a half century before the Civil Rights movement, they made that trip to Columbia, they respectfully challenged the power structure and they boldly asserted dignity in a world made for whiteness.

Alas, their names are lost to history.

"Go back and get what you forgot."

"Go back and get what you forgot."

For those men, I wish we could go back and get what we forgot.

"We were erased"

Let's get shoes on. We're going for a walk.

Ready? I'm holding the church door open. Everybody out, and let's head into town on Orange Street.

No, we're not stopping for coffee. We've got the Walk signal at Prince Street. Follow me across Queen and up to Duke. Hang a right, past the courthouse, cross King Street. That's it. Keep walking. We're passing the lovely, but ridiculously named, Old Town there to our left. Now

we're crossing Church Street. Be quick. That's one wide street.

And here we are! walking south on Duke Street, into our destination: Lancaster's Southeast.

I brought you here because if we want to understand the socio-economic geography of Lancaster, we gotta understand the origins of Lancaster's Southeast.

I would have loved for Betty Hurdle to have joined us. Alas, she can't be here. But since you're all getting real good this morning at using your imagination, why don't we imagine that Betty is here with us.

Betty?

"Thanks, Jeff. When I was growing up in the 1940s and 1950s, I lived over there on Locust Street. I grew up in a big family. My father worked as a short-order cook and as a hospital janitor and, on Saturdays, he was a shoeshine.

"My mother cleaned a doctor's office.

"Money was still tight, so much so that when holes appeared in the bottom of my shoes, I slid in a piece of cardboard and made do."

• • •

Thank you, Betty. Despite the hard times, Betty's family persevered. They were part of a supportive, mostly Black community here in the Southeast, one that cultivated a culture of hope.

The Southeast was a place where Black neighbors chatted over porch railings, sang in church choirs and patronized each other's businesses, which included corner groceries, barber shops and pharmacies. A dentist and a doctor even had offices here.

It was a hard-working community that wanted better jobs and greater opportunity. Instead, it got change it hadn't sought: Demolition crews in the 1960s razed whole blocks of the Southeast to make way for public housing.

The Southeast's story is a microcosm of the national narrative of segregation, suburbanization and institutional racism.

It's a story that goes back more than 100 years to when Lancaster relegated almost all Black people, both the poor and the middle class, to housing in the Southeast, referred to by white people as "the ward."

In the late 1950s, Lancaster's civic leaders associated the Southeast, not as a cohesive, functioning neighborhood, but they just saw

the junkyards and pockets of blight. Prodded by federal policies playing out in cities across the country, they chose wide-scale demolition and big housing projects as the remedy.

Nearly 1,000 buildings, almost all of them homes and many of them habitable and salvageable, came down in the '60s and early '70s, making way for clusters of subsidized projects of bland, low-rise and high-rise housing that we see here as we walk along South Duke Street.

Betty's house on Locust Street is no longer standing. It's one of those that got torn down.

Urban renewal did, in fact, give some of the poor decent apartments. But the projects corralled the poorest of the poor into an area removed from good-paying industrial jobs in the suburbs while displacing many minorities who either didn't qualify for public housing or who lingered on waiting lists.

The federal government, in fact, required Lancaster officials to find alternative housing for the hundreds of families displaced by demolition. But housing discrimination succeeded in thwarting the mandate.

• • •

A 1966 study for the Lancaster redevelopment authority found widespread discrimination. The only place a Black or Puerto Rican family could buy a home was here in the Southeast.

The study noted that segregation intensified through the 1950s, driven by white flight. By 1960, 94% of the city's 2,600 Blacks lived in the Southeast, up from 83% in 1950. As late as August 1966, only 39 Black families lived outside the Southeast.

With the constraints on where they could live, Black people saw their rents rise in the 1950s by over 70% compared with a citywide increase of 58%.

Betty, do you have something to say about what happened?

“I feel like we lost a community,” Betty says. “I feel like we were just erased.”

For decades, Lancaster practiced what amounted to apartheid.

The southside of Lancaster city continues today to have the highest concentrations of poverty anywhere in the entire county. And it isn’t happenstance that we have this problem. It is the result of official policy. And the impact continues to reverberate today.

Bearing witness

For the past few Sundays, we have been having a conversation about race, a conversation that would not be happening had it not been for those courageous bystanders who bore witness to the murder of George Floyd.

Their names are not well known. Donald Williams, a mixed martial arts enthusiast. Genevieve Hansen, an off-duty firefighter and EMT just out for a walk. Darnella Frazier, 17, a high school student with a job at the mall who happened to be taking her 9-year-old cousin to Cup Foods.

They were ordinary people who could have kept going about their business.

Afterall, who were they to confront four police officers.

But they did.

They could not rescue George Floyd. At least not without getting arrested. But they chose to get involved. They video recorded the officers, and within a day or two, the whole world knew what happened.

“I can’t breathe.”

“I can’t breathe.”

“Momma . . . momma!”

“Tell my kids I love them.”

On a Sunday in early June 2020 a thousand people took over the first block of West Chestnut Street in Lancaster, blocking traffic in front

of the police station in a multiracial protest like those happening across the country.

A line of police officers kept a wary eye on the crowd. Reinforcements from other police departments were called in. A police helicopter circled overhead. Suddenly, agitators threw water bottles. Officers deployed pepper spray and moved in to make arrests. A dozen or more protesters went to the ground clutching their eyes. I retreated, my eyes stinging. Never in more than 40 years of being a reporter in Lancaster had I seen anything like this.

• • •

In the days that followed, I got caught up in magical thinking. The entire country was awakening to a racial reckoning, or so I believed. Black Lives Matter signs were sprouting across the city and into the suburbs. Protesters in Lancaster occupied Art Park and led marches several times a day through the city. Marches also happened in Manheim, Lititz, Columbia, even in a park in Quarryville.

Last summer, almost overnight, white support nationally for Black Lives Matter jumped from 34% to 44%. For about two months, white support was actually higher than white opposition.

Those of us who hope for racial justice were fooled before, back when the nation decisively elected Barack Obama president.

But this felt different. This felt like there would be no turning back. This felt like a watershed moment.

It wasn't.

As summer turned to fall, the protests stopped, and the backlash set in. Now, a year after last summer's protests, white support for Black Lives Matter has fallen to 38%. And white opposition is back up to 49%, about the same level as when Donald Trump was elected.

• • •

I'm disappointed. But not disillusioned.

My hope resides in the young people who came out in support of the movement. Many will look back on last summer as a defining moment.

They include the group who in mid-June last year marched through the city, chanting. They stopped in the middle of South Ann and Green streets for a bit of street theater.

Most took a knee with fists raised.

Others lay on their bellies, hands behind their backs as if handcuffed. And for 8 minutes and 46 seconds, they honored the memory of George Floyd.

Periodically, someone called out, "I can't breathe."

"I can't breathe."

"Momma . . . momma!"

"Tell my kids I love them."

A young mother named Jazcity came out of an apartment house to see what was going on. With her was her 6-year-old son, Tristan. Tristan, who is Black, sat on the curb and watched intently. He didn't understand what he was seeing.

"Why are they laying down?" he asked his mother. "Why are they calling for their mom?"

Jazcity brought Tristan out because she felt it was important for him to have this memory. But she wasn't sure how to answer his questions. She knew that was going to take time.

The reenactment continued into its eighth minute. Tristan watched, his eyes wide. Then, unprompted, he bent his knee. And he raised his fist.

School integration

This is our next to last week spending time with Austin Channing Brown's book and, for those of us who are white, trying to understand what she means when she writes about a world made for whiteness.

It's a challenging, self-evident truth that, to be honest, hadn't been self-evident to me until I read it.

My perspective is that it is a self-evident truth, and if you agree, then don't we have a responsibility to try to remake that world?

Don't we have a responsibility to try to remake the world so that it's no longer oppressive for people who are not white?

If we have a responsibility to remake the world, is there any better place to try than with children?

If we raise them well, children represent hope for a better future.

If we can raise children so that they grow up with fewer prejudices, there is hope. If we can raise children so that they feel comfortable around people who are different, there is hope. If we can raise children so that the social hierarchy that defines our world recedes to insignificance for our children and their children, there is hope.

I submit that integrating schools offers a path to achieving those goals.

• • •

A recent article in the New York Times suggested that “it’s an open question as to how much white liberals and independents would support efforts to truly unwind some of the broader systems—like segregated schools and neighborhoods—that reinforce racial inequality.”

In Lancaster County, that support might firm up if more liberals considered the consequences of the status quo.

Right now, our schools in the Lancaster region represent a stark socio-economic divide, the antithesis of integration. At some schools, most of the children come from middle-class families. At other schools, almost all of the children come from disadvantaged families.

For example, each one of the 13 elementary schools in the School District of Lancaster is classified as a high-poverty school, and all of them get flagged for low scores on standardized tests. White children are a distinct minority in those schools. Young families who have the resources to choose where to live often choose to live outside of the city because they don’t want to send children to schools labeled, unfairly, as “failing.” Our preference for neighborhood schools is, in fact, a systemic barrier to racial healing.

• • •

Now here’s the thing I hope you remember: every one of those 13 schools in the city is at most only three miles, and usually much closer, to a middle-class elementary school in the suburbs, where test scores are considerably higher.

So we have 26 elementary schools in close proximity to each other.

That means it is a geographic fact that integrating those 26 schools so that each one has a more equal blending of children from different backgrounds would be, at least logistically, feasible. By that, I mean bus rides would be short.

• • •

I want to share one more fact.

In those 13 suburban elementary schools I mentioned, there are students from lower-income families. And those low-income students perform, on average, 20% better on standardized tests than the low-income children in Lancaster’s 13 high-poverty schools.

In other words, disadvantaged students do better in integrated schools. The Supreme Court in 1954 relied on studies attesting to that fact in ruling that school segregation was unconstitutional.

Disadvantaged students do better in integrated schools. Research over the decades has confirmed that dynamic.

And what about the middle-class students in those integrated schools? They continue to do just as well as they’ve always done. Plus, and here’s the cool thing, they learn in a setting where they get to know and befriend children who may be different than the children they are accustomed to seeing in their suburban cul-de-sacs.

No one said remaking a world that was made for whiteness would be easy.

But it’s also not impossible.

There are solutions, if we only open our hearts to them.

There are reasons for hope.

Showing up

Lancaster in the early 1960s was not a welcoming place for people of color.

They found decent, affordable housing hard to come by anywhere in Lancaster except the Southeast.

Landlords and real estate agents with properties outside that diverse neighborhood routinely rejected Black tenants and Black people seeking to buy a home.

How do we know this?

We know this because a white congregation investigated.

Members of Lancaster's Friends Meeting stepped out of their comfort zone to document a facet of systemic racism decades before the term "systemic racism" was even a thing.

They showed what being an ally for racial equity means.

Diane Umble recently shared with us a link to a piece in *Sojourners* entitled, "For Our Friends Desiring to be Allies."

The writer, Courtney Ariel, urges people wanting to be allies to listen more, to talk less, to read and to learn.

Ariel also writes that because we were born with white privilege, we owe a debt.

That debt is the pursuit of justice.

Ariel warns that if you do this work, it likely won't get much attention.

But do it anyway, Ariel says, "knowing that a system of white privilege afforded you access to opportunities" denied others.

"You're going to make mistakes," she writes. "But keep showing up."

• • •

Many of us have shown up for this seven-week book study that concludes today. Thank you.

But now what? Where do we go from here? Can we build on what we've learned? Or are we already exhausted with this topic?

We are a congregation that rightly displays Black Lives Matter banners to passersby.

But to be honest, the banners are fashionable in this diverse, liberal town, and displaying them results in few, if any, negative consequences and, just the opposite, probably makes us feel good.

And if that's all that the banners are about, I worry they are an empty gesture.

Because there's nothing about this issue to feel good about.

"Black Lives Matter" is not a hopeful sentiment. It's a cry of pain.

It's shorthand for every injustice wrought over 400 years in this land made for whiteness.

And that should jolt us out of complacency.

Because Black lives matter, we who have benefited from white privilege have work to do.

As we conclude this book study, there is no group hug here. There is no kumbaya.

We are no closer to closure.

• • •

I don't know what Lancaster's Friends Meeting hoped to accomplish by their antiracism work in the 1960s. What I do know is they found out just how entrenched white privilege was in Lancaster.

Whenever they saw an ad for an apartment for rent or a home for sale, they called the landlord or the real estate agent and they asked if they would rent or sell to a Black person.

It was an audacious question.

The Friends' activists got used to people hanging up.

Confronting the ugliness further, they contacted landlords who had a vacancy to confirm whether or not the apartment was still available.

If they were told it was, they immediately sent a Black individual to see the apartment.

And when the Black apartment seeker showed up, seven out of eight times the apartment was suddenly unavailable.

I share this story because 60 years ago important work for racial justice was being done by a Lancaster church.

Their efforts didn't get attention. They probably didn't get a lot of thanks. And they never experienced closure.

Still, they showed up.