

Leviathan and the Airway: Black Lives Matter and Hobbes with the History Put Back



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by Christopher N. Warren



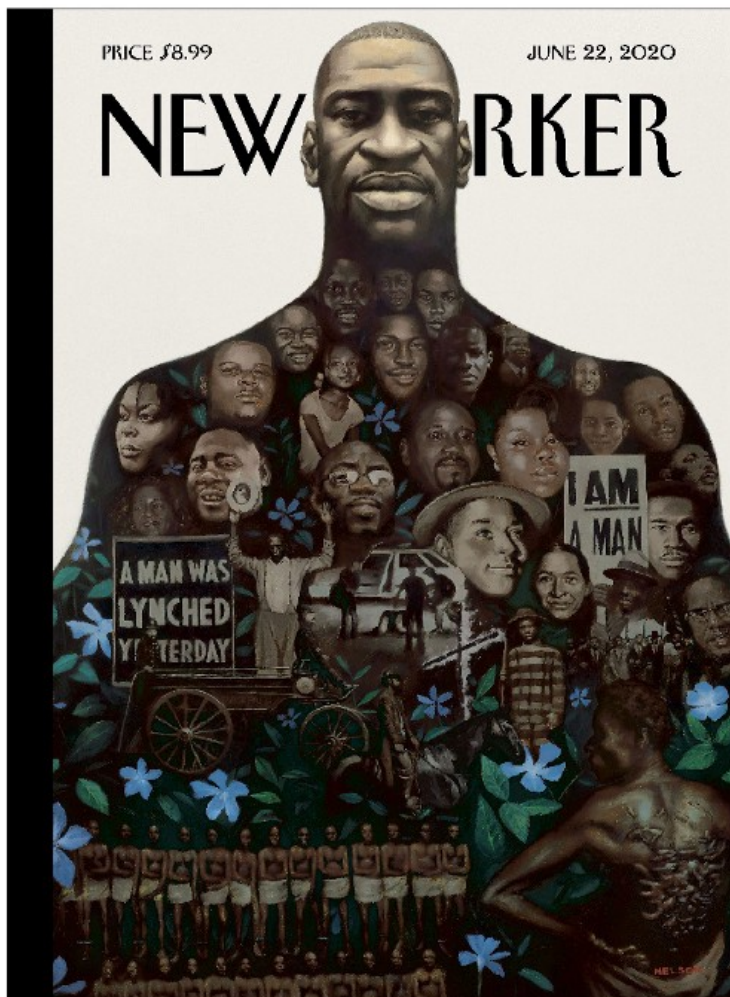
Abraham Bosse, detail of frontispiece to Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan* (1651), courtesy of The British Museum

Racism, Ta-Nehisi Coates insisted in his award-winning 2015 book *Between the World and Me*, “is a visceral experience...It dislodges brains, blocks airways, rips muscle, extracts organs, cracks bones, breaks teeth.” Two years earlier, writing for *The Atlantic*, Coates had embarked on a public reading of Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan* (1651) and found himself “amazed by the hardness — the relentless physicality — of Hobbes’

world.” Calling Hobbes’ description of war and the body “deeply poetic,” Coates observed of Hobbes’ method:

For Hobbes...Reason comes from naming — as precisely as possible — that which we sense, and then using a valid method to connect the names.

Step one: sense. Next, connect the names.



Kadir Nelson, "Say Their Names" (2020)



Abraham Bosse, frontispiece to Thomas Hobbes' Leviathan (1651), courtesy of The British Museum

Kadir Nelson, 'Say Their Names' (2020) | Abraham Bosse, frontispiece to Thomas Hobbes' Leviathan (1651), courtesy of The British Museum

Black Leviathan: Kadir Nelson's "Say Their Names"

“Say Their Names,” Kadir Nelson’s haunting cover painting for last week’s *The New Yorker*, is but one of a torrent of unsettling images from the past month that have helped

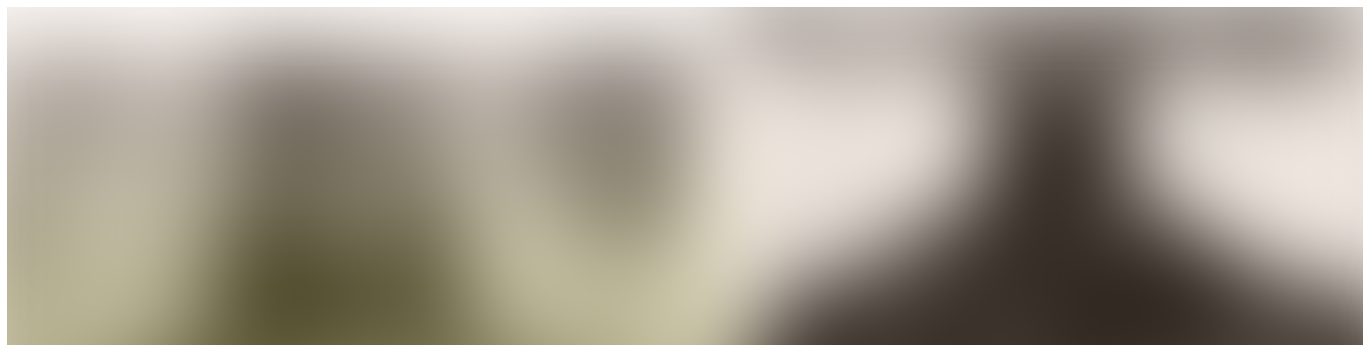
America better sense its legacy of white supremacy. And yet Nelson's painting is also an archive. It's an omnibus image, what Elizabeth Alexander might call an "agglomerating spectacle" of Black lives cut short by white violence that incorporates not only the recent murders of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, Philando Castile, Michael Brown and others but also assassinated 20th-century civil rights leaders Medgar Evers and Martin Luther King, Jr. and before them, millions of unnamed enslaved people whose graves are marked, if at all, by periwinkle alone.

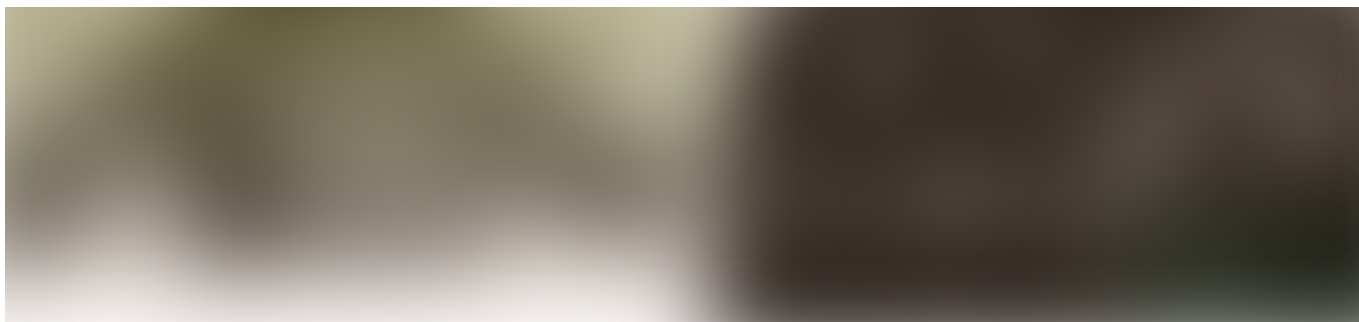
The bodily refrain "I Can't Breathe" was already a *cri de coeur* of Black Lives Matter long before Derek Chauvin's knee came anywhere near George Floyd's neck, but in incorporating hundreds of years of racism's visceral history, Nelson turns George Floyd's body into a corporate body, a body whose blocked airway represents the suffering bodies of literally millions of other Black Americans. In what Nelson calls his "weighted portrait of George Floyd," a multitude of Black bodies become one.

While "Say Their Names" hardly needs 17th-century political theory to make its point, no scholar of the history of political thought can miss Nelson's fraught visual allusion. Along with everything else, "Say Their Names" suggests Nelson's own powerful reckoning with the philosophy of Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679).

Reimagining Hobbes' famous *Leviathan* frontispiece for contemporary politics, Nelson asks viewers to reject the Hobbesian fiction of raceless, faceless, anonymous political subjects and to insert in its place the specificity of Black history, Black lives, and Black vulnerability.

With Coates' reading of Hobbes in mind, it's possible to see in Nelson's "Say Their Names" a Hobbesian impulse to "connect the names." Simultaneously, it suggests how little sense Hobbes' social contract makes for Black Americans regularly subject to police brutality.





Detail of Leviathan frontispiece, courtesy of The British Museum | Detail of Nelson's 'Say Their Names'

For Hobbes, a onetime stockholder in the Virginia Company, state-sanctioned violence is held over from the violent state of nature. Without some police-like authority, according to Hobbes, “every man has a Right to every thing; even to one another’s body.” This is why, for Hobbes, individuals trade their natural rights for peace.

Nelson’s “Say Their Names” evokes what Charles Mills calls “the racial contract,” reminding viewers why Black American citizens who are unequally vulnerable to state violence might never make this deal. With Hobbes’ political iconography in the background, Nelson’s George Floyd rises out of the landscape of Black history much like Hobbes’ sovereign, but Floyd — in stark contrast to Hobbes’ sword-bearing “person of the State” — is, quite literally, an unarmed man.

Just as no 17th-century viewer of the *Leviathan* frontispiece could forget that Charles I had recently been beheaded, neither does Nelson permit viewers to see Floyd’s portrait without sensing, viscerally, the grisly manner and duration of his murder. Since nothing is more important than bodily safety, it only makes sense to drop one’s guard if one feels secure without it. Some Americans feel secure: that’s called white privilege.

Nevertheless, a state whose citizens fear for their bodies has forfeited its reason for being.

While Hobbes in the popular imagination is usually known as an authoritarian, he himself was fully alert to the chasms police violence introduced into the social landscape, and Coates and Nelson are too. As Hobbes wrote in Chapter 14, “no man can transfer, or lay down his Right to save himself from Death, Wounds, and Imprisonment”:

it cannot be intended, that he gave any right to another to lay violent hands upon his person.

A state that terrorizes its own unarmed citizens is no better than an armed gang and, in effect, returns those citizens to the terrifying state of nature.



Detail of Leviathan frontispiece, Courtesy of The British Museum

"The Law Did Not Protect Us"

Coates' *Between the World and Me* arises from just this fear — "a great fear, wide as all our American generations," as he puts it — that Coates feels both for his own body and for his teenage son's. "In America," Coates writes, "it is tradition to destroy the Black body — it is heritage." Popular notions of "whiteness" and "Blackness" arise from this heritage.

Coates speaks poignantly of his fear of the white "syndicate arrayed to protect its exclusive power to dominate and control our bodies" and also of his childhood when

to be black in the Baltimore of my youth was to be naked before the elements of the world, before all the guns, fists, knives, crack, rape, and disease.

“The law did not protect us,” Coates insists. Rightfully wary of the easily-weaponized distinction between “nature” and “culture,” Coates nevertheless reflects on how

fully one third of my brain was concerned with who I was walking to school with, our precise number, the manner of our walk, the number of times I smiled, who or what I smiled at, who offered a pound and who did not — all of which is to say that I practiced the culture of the streets, a culture concerned chiefly with securing the body.

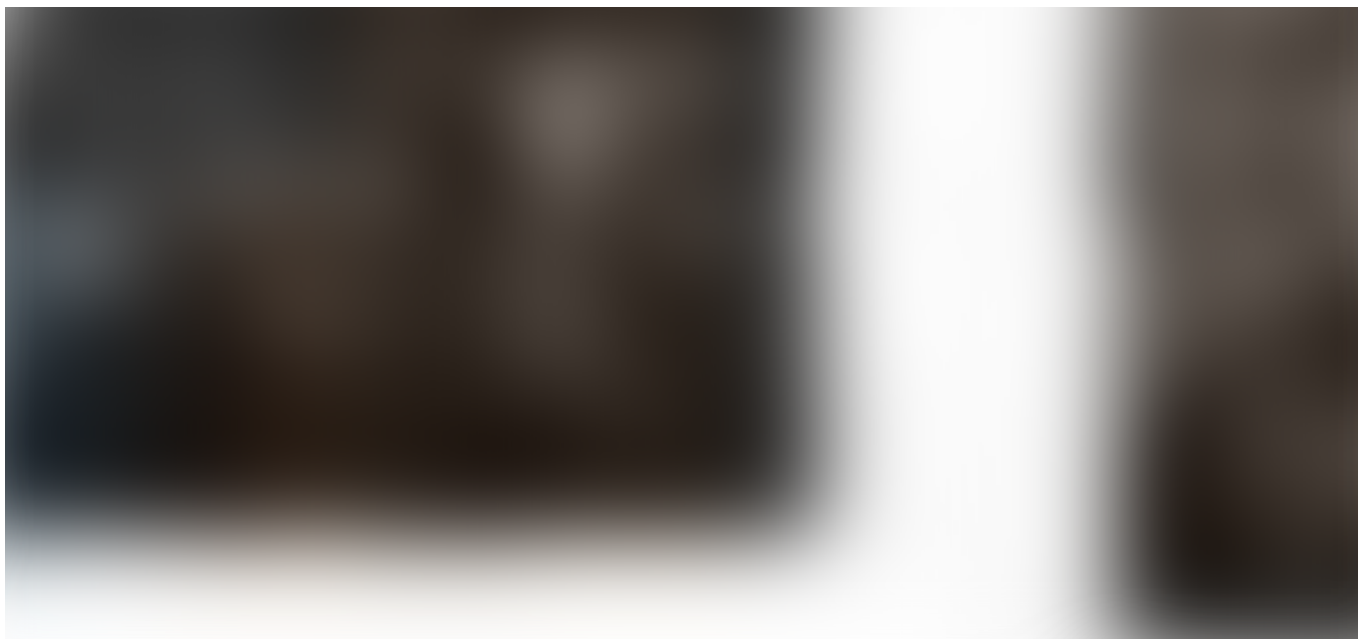
If Coates’ probing analysis of racism grows from the lived sense of bodily vulnerability, as scholar James B. Haile III has pointed out, “Coates, like Hobbes, is attempting to understand the social ‘state’ through an interrogation of the material body.”

Insofar as police violence terrorizes some — but not all — American citizens, the layered orders that result from America’s racial contract might be called the “United States of Nature.”

Say Their Names, See Their Faces

Whereas the *Leviathan* subjects face inward in uniform, anonymous adoration, the Black faces that make up Floyd’s corporate body look outward, demanding accountability and acknowledgment as individuals. Say their names, Nelson tells us, but also see their faces.

The names and faces of Nelson’s Black Leviathan — George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, Tony McDade, Trayvon Martin, Laquan McDonald, Freddie Gray, Eric Garner, Aiyana Stanley-Jones, Botham Jean, Michael Brown, Sandra Bland, Yvette Smith, Alton Sterling, David McAtee, Walter Scott, Breonna Taylor, Tamir Rice, Philando Castile, Stephon Clark, Martin Luther King, Jr., Medgar Evers, Malcolm X, Rosa Parks, Emmett Till, Rodney King, and Gordon (he with the stripe marks) — will neither be subsumed nor annihilated by the United States of Nature.



Detail from Nelson's 'Say Their Names'

And rather than persist in quiet reverence, Nelson's citizens bear signs of protest and dissent. Iconic signs from the long civil rights struggle — the NAACP's "A MAN WAS LYNCHED YESTERDAY" and "I AM A MAN" from the 1968 Memphis Sanitation Strike — bear witness to legacies of activism and voice.

When Coates' wrote that racism dislodges brains and blocks airways, the very next sentence was an address to his son: "You must never look away from this." And indeed, we must never look away. But what may be just as significant about "Say Their Names" is that George Floyd and the generations of Black Americans depicted in his Black Leviathan will never stop speaking — to us.

There are unresolved tensions here; there always are. Most significantly, Hobbes insisted that states are people only in the way corporations are people: through an elaborate fiction. States are scary artworks that natural bodies create to extinguish their bodily fears. George Floyd's personhood, by contrast, was as obvious, material, and elemental as a breath of air.

But what of George Floyd's corporate personhood? Entirely separate from the George Floyd with a momma and an airway, George Floyd as spectacle, as story, as data point, as inspiration, is someone who forges bonds and mobilizes communities, who weaves generations and histories together. *This* George Floyd incorporates publics and changes the dynamics of American politics.

Elizabeth Alexander has written of

the Trayvon Generation. They always knew these stories. These stories formed their world view. These stories helped instruct young African-Americans about their embodiment and their vulnerability. The stories were primers in fear and futility. The stories were the ground soil of their rage. These stories instructed them that anti-black hatred and violence were never far.

In Alexander's telling, diverse, heterogeneous Black Americans are joined together in the fear that they or their loved ones will become another Trayvon Martin or George Floyd. Fear helps make American Blackness one.

Ultimately, this tension between body and spirit, materiality and artifice, suggests one of the main reasons Hobbes has been such a reliable interlocutor for Black Lives Matter. Hobbes makes it possible to see how embodied fears give rise to constructs like "whiteness" and "Blackness" and also the ineluctable, even terrifying potency available when we connect the names in order to create something new.

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