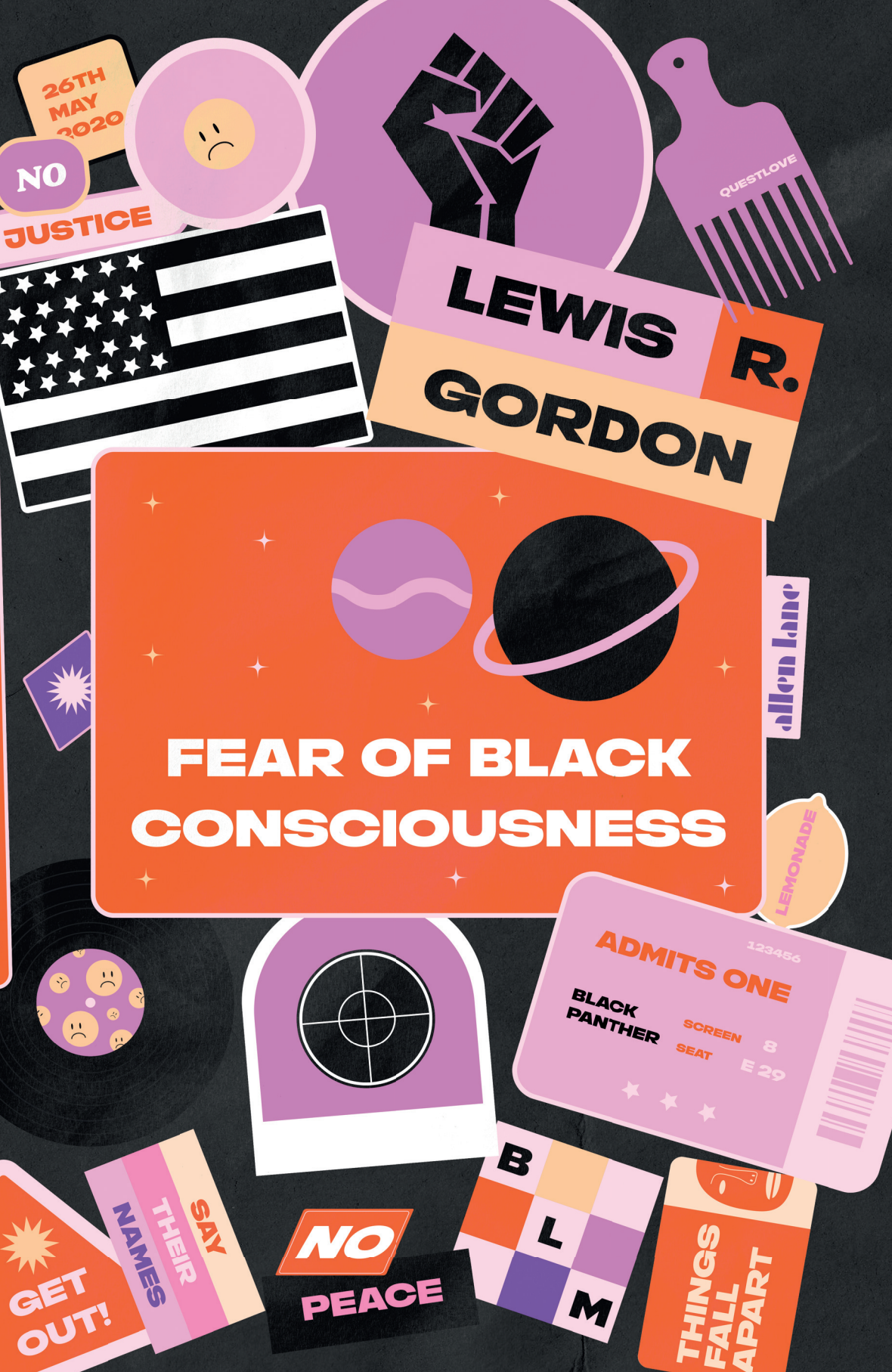




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LEWIS
R.
GORDON

FEAR OF BLACK
CONSCIOUSNESS

allen lane

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Fear of Black Consciousness

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

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LEWIS R. GORDON

Fear of Black Consciousness



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*To Hank Aaron, Colin Abel, Samir Amin, Hugh Becca,
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CONTENTS

PROLOGUE 3

INTRODUCTION: STRUGGLING TO BREATHE 9

PART I. BOUND

1. FEARED 25

2. BLACKENED 39

3. ERASED; OR, "I DON'T SEE RACE" 55

PART II. RACE-MAKING AND RACISM

4. RACE-MAKING 73

5. RACISM INTERSECTED 87

6. PRIVILEGE, LUXURY, LICENSE 103

7. TRANS BUT NOT TRANSCENDED 115

PART III. POLITICAL REALITIES

8. FIVE KINDS OF INVISIBILITY 129

9. BLACK CONSCIOUSNESS IS POLITICAL 147

10. BLACK CONSCIOUSNESS IN WAKANDA 167

PART IV. EVEN WHEN BLACK AND BLUE

11. BLUE 195

12. VALUED 219

Notes 231

Acknowledgments 257

Index 259

FEAR OF BLACK CONSCIOUSNESS

PROLOGUE

Looking within
At times a failure to see
In the face of limitations

Looking within
Grows—intensifies
Implodes

Falling within
Is the heaviest descent,
Physicists tell us

Ask any black hole
—from, of course,
a distance

—Author's poem

I was not born with a black consciousness. I very much doubt anyone could be. The same applies to a brown, red, white, yellow, or any other kind of racialized consciousness. We could go down a long list of identities without which we are born. Yet we eventually learn, and at times are forced into them.

I was born in the island country of Jamaica in 1962, a few months before its legal independence from the British Empire. That meant I was afforded the privilege of a childhood of prime ministers who were all brown or black—or at least of color. Yet we children had no reason to think of them in those terms. They were simply the highest leadership of our country. Similar people were found on our printed currency, and it was not unusual for us to meet a dentist, lawyer, or schoolteacher who looked like most of us. The same applied to journalists and entertainers on television. The people who produced our music were the same, and although we would see very light-skinned people at the beaches or at tourist sites, nothing in them represented limits in us. After all, “we” were there in all walks of life. From the elite to the working class to the mountain or “country” folks, all were “us.” We were Jamaicans. That ordinary form of belonging is something many blacks who live in predominantly white countries don’t experience. When I woke each morning, my aim wasn’t to leave the country of my birth, and as far as I knew and expected, life was about being part of a world that preceded everyone I knew and would continue well after we are gone. We were, in other words, ordinary.

All my childhood images of authority, beauty, and love were of people who, in the contexts of North America and Europe, crossed color lines. The greatest image of authority in my family was my maternal great-grandfather, Uriah Ewan, whom we simply called “Grandfather.” Grandfather was a six-foot-ten, dark-skinned Panamanian-Liberian man in his nineties. Having lost his battle with glaucoma, he was also blind. His words were full of wisdom, and his touch—he had to touch us with his fingers or hold us with his big hands in order to “see” us—was always loving and tender. My other images of authority were my maternal great-grandmother, Beatrice Norton Ewan (“Granny Bea”), who was a Jewish woman of Irish, Scottish, and Tamil descent; my paternal grandmother, Gertrude Stoddart, Chinese and Scottish; and my many aunts, of many hues. My main image of beauty was my mother, Yvonne Patricia Solomon, who was a dark-skinned woman of Jewish ancestry on both sides, as her maternal Irish Jewish lineage was met

with her paternal Palestinian Jewish one. Family, for me, was colorful. It still is.

This is not to say that I was not aware of Jamaica's complexion aristocracy. As the island had become an independent country a few months after my birth, vestiges of British colonialism remained. Light-skinned people were called "beautiful," "decent," and "smart." Dark-skinned people were often called "ugly," "indecent," and "stupid"—even "*renk*" (a patois term for smelly). This posed many contradictions, since my dark-skinned mother received compliments for her beauty and brains wherever she went. There was also that high regard in which we held Grandfather, and nearly every one of my actual encounters with beauty, kindness, and wisdom was from dark-skinned relatives and friends. Yet it was clear that Jamaican society favored light-skinned people. The overwhelming nonwhite professionals were brown and lighter. Despite so much of Jamaican society being on the side of those light-skinned people, it always struck me that pale people were never satisfied. There was always something bothering them.

One dark-color incident stood out to me far above the rest. There was a dark-skinned boy in the junior school I attended when I was six. Some older children constantly teased him and called him "Paul Bogle." The historic Bogle's handsome face is on Jamaica's two-dollar bill. Bogle was one of the country's national heroes. He was hanged for rebelling against the British. Imagine a child in the United States being teased for resembling Nathan Hale, who famously regretted having only one life to give for his country. That little boy should have been proud to look like Bogle, and the others should have been marveling at his resemblance. Yet they teased him, because for them, as it turned out, the dominating feature of Bogle, like that of the boy, was the darkness of his skin. Despite that abuse, no one, including his abusers, took the position that that boy wasn't Jamaican or, even more, of a different "race."

I left the island of Jamaica in 1971, with the aid of two aunts, to reunite with my mother, who had migrated to New York City with only five U.S. dollars in her pocket when she left my stepfather. Her

story and what her three boys faced are now familiar narratives, as stories of undocumented migrants and refugees facing hardship are now well known across the globe. My excitement from being in the city of a country often shown in movies was quickly transformed by the reality of the dirt, grit, and violence of the Bronx, where I would live for nearly twenty years. It was there that I developed a racialized black consciousness.

My first experience of black consciousness was in elementary school. I was seated next to a little white boy named Tommy. I was very enthusiastic about being in school. I read everything and was eager to answer questions when the teacher called upon us. During the second week, Tommy turned to me and asked, with a smirk, “How’s it going, nigger?”

Odd as it sounds, I didn’t know what the word “nigger” meant. What made me suspicious was his smirk. It was clear he was taking advantage of my ignorance and was enjoying doing so. When I asked him what the word meant, he laughed and refused to explain. So during an exercise in breakout groups, I asked other students to explain. They were brown and darker Puerto Ricans and, in today’s parlance, African Americans. The look on their faces made it clear something was awry. They had some difficulty explaining it until one finally said, “It’s a bad name for black people. It means being dirty, stupid—black.”

I went back to my seat.

Tommy smiled. “So, what’d you learn, nigger?”

I grabbed his throat and threw him to the ground and stomped on his face. The teacher pulled me off of him.

Later, in the principal’s office, my teacher—a tall, blond Italian woman whose style was straight out of the late 1960s television series *Mod Squad*—came to talk to me. She said, “You seem like such a nice boy. I didn’t expect that of you.”

I didn’t say anything.

She sighed. “You’ve been so nice. And smart. I really didn’t expect that.”

“Why?” I asked her. “Why aren’t you talking to Tommy about what you expect of him?”

When school was dismissed and we were all heading home, I saw Tommy. He was with a group of white boys. He pointed to me. As they walked up to me with their fists clenched, I broke through them and toppled Tommy over. As his friends descended upon me, I pushed them to the side. Tommy broke free and ran, and I ran after him. His friends stood frozen at what for them was apparently unthinkable. I soon learned that the image of a white boy running away from a black boy was rare in that part of the Bronx—and for that matter, anywhere in the United States. Our school was where the Italian neighborhood on the one hand and the black and Puerto Rican one on the other met as a central point from which each group was to go separate ways. I had not yet learned to see the Italian, Irish, and European Jewish children as white. They resembled some of my relatives back in Jamaica, none of whom identified as white.

I have had many experiences of being called “nigger” over the years. Not tolerating it—even when doing so meant receiving abuse—made it clear to me that the valorization of nonviolence and tolerance I heard throughout my subsequent adolescent years was profoundly mistaken. It’s a recipe for cultivating in black people nothing short of an inferiority complex. Standing up against white degradation, even when we lose, is, frankly, healthy. Deep down, most white people know this. They wouldn’t do otherwise if the situations were reversed. Fighting against humiliation and disrespect enables us to live with ourselves. I spent two grades with Tommy in that elementary school. Not once after that incident did he or any other white student utter the word “nigger” in class. Did they hold that insult in thought? Most likely. But their hesitation to hurl it at us marked a diminution of their power.

Unfortunately, this peace was not the same among the black and the Puerto Rican students. Too many fights attested to the myriad of abasements among us, and in my case—since I was at times taken for Puerto Rican—the experience went across antiblackness, anti-Puerto Ricanness, and anti-nearly-everything-else. For instance, experiencing my first winter, I realized that holding my bag against my chest kept me warm. As I walked down the street, a boy ran up to me yelling, “Look at the fag, carrying his books like a girl!”

Yet despite all those conflicts, many of the white children and those of color in those classes became friends, or at least friendly. As friends do, black children would visit each other's apartments. None of our families owned homes. An Italian boy by the name of Johnny and I became friends, and we would walk through the Italian neighborhood near Arthur Avenue, where the famous scene from the movie *The Godfather*, of Michael Corleone shooting the corrupt Irish cop and the Turkish gang rival, takes place. In fact, come to think of it, Johnny resembled Al Pacino, the actor who played Michael Corleone. Things were fine until we realized that heading to hang out at his home was not a good idea. A wonderful person though he was, his family was another story. That was the end of our friendship.

The years that followed included everything from being spat on and getting attacked by whites with baseball bats to witnessing blood flowing across sidewalks as crowds of whites attacked black students in my middle school, and, of course, the litany of ways in which white children were and continue to be singled out for advancement and black and brown children were—as many continue to be—weeded out. Three decades later, black people knew fully well what President George W. Bush's No Child Left Behind policy meant. No *white* child left behind.

As of the writing of this prologue, people all over the globe are besieged by a deadly pandemic exacerbated by the incompetence on the one hand and the malfeasance on the other of leadership in some countries nostalgic for times in which black people standing up for themselves would lead to their corpses dangling from the nearest trees. Yet, as the gun replaced the rope for white vigilantes against a black man jogging in Atlanta and a police officer's knee functioned as the same for nine minutes and twenty-nine seconds in Minneapolis, people took to the streets in 2020 under the realization of what it means to cry "I can't breathe."

I learned something from my childhood experience of coming into black consciousness: it's a rude awakening.

INTRODUCTION: STRUGGLING TO BREATHE

In early 2020, I went on an errand to New York City. The day after I returned, I felt lower back pains that I attributed to getting too old for the drive back and forth from northern Connecticut. Then I began to experience chills. I was struck down a few days later with full-blown COVID-19. The affliction became my plight as a “long hauler” into the succeeding year.

A few months in, a friend asked me what it was like. I told him I felt like I had been thrown into a pit of biting Komodo dragons, and after managing to climb out, I rolled over onto shards of glass and found that a relief. At the height of the illness, I opened my “death file.” High fevers brought on hallucinations that included visits from deceased loved ones. I found their visits comforting despite being aware it was my subconscious at work. We would have wonderful conversations, humorous even, about their afterlife. Then I remembered that when I used to dream about deceased relatives, mentioning their death had always led to their departure. This time, they weren’t leaving. I began to wonder if I had already taken my last breath. I was fortunately mistaken. It wasn’t my time.

I refused to go to the hospital. Having seen how blacks are treated by medical professionals in emergency rooms, I concluded: black people go in, but most of us don’t get out—at least alive. The terrible demographics of casualties from the disease supported my conclusion. Even where black people may have equal access, it doesn’t follow that there

is no racism involved in the administering of medical services to us. I have spoken to other black and South Asian men who avoided hospitals when they realized they were afflicted. They reasoned that they are alive because they'd nursed themselves at home. I understand, however, that it would be ill-advised to avoid life-saving vaccines and caring health professionals.

I lost friends, students, relatives, and I am in touch with so many who lost loved ones as the pandemic raged on. Their survivors struggle with the fact of not having been able to be with their loved ones in those final moments and the process of their interment or cremation. A good friend in Paris is still in sorrow over a loved one's dying alone because no one had been permitted to visit him in the hospital. She and his relatives were permitted only to stand outside at distances in front of the crematorium. As an Orthodox Jew who survived the Shoah (Holocaust), she experienced multiple levels of trauma while watching the smoke rise into the air as his corpse turned to ash.

I think often of what my maternal grandmother used to say from her late eighties onward when I telephoned her. "How're you doing, young lady?" I would ask her.

Her response: "Still here."

Not all of us understand the significance of being able to say those words. For some starting to feel better, the high from the initial rush of oxygen led them to leap recklessly back into the outside world, not understanding that feeling better is not identical with actually being so. The wreckage on their insides makes racing back out into the world a dangerous thing to do. Many of them report being "reinfected," when they are most likely suffering from a relapse or simply have damaged themselves by interrupting their bodies' effort to mend from the inside out.

I'm still here. History never waits for anyone. There's still so much to do. With humility—because there are so many things greater than us—some of us press on. Being alive, we face the continued opportunity and, as expressed in Judaism, *mitzvah* of living.

The COVID-19 pandemic arrived amid other ongoing pandemics. They include antiblack racism, rapacious capitalism, disguised colonialism, neofascism, and dehumanizing social policies of structured

inequality. This book was written during the convergence of those pandemics—ongoing antidemocratic efforts to effect global disempowerment of all but a small set of elites under the guise of “liberal democracy.” A name for this is neoliberalism, whose mantra is “privatization.” Under that rubric, it valorizes abstract and moralistic notions of “the individual” as though each person is an individual god capable of determining the conditions of their needs by themselves. As human beings depend on one another for our survival, the isolation born from privatization renders most of us vulnerable, as access and institutional support recede from the majority of human beings into the hands of a few global elites. This decline in social services continues the production of vulnerability. This precarious situation inevitably creates, as witnessed throughout the North American spring of 2020, a crisis of legitimacy. Promises of privatized arrangements ultimately benefiting “all” are clearly false; a search for the sources of the misery, ranging from the pandemic to surges in unemployment, follows. The neoliberal response of more privatization, more capitalism, and more deregulation is, at minimum, mystifying.

Another response comes from neoconservatism. The neoconservative response to the crises of neoliberalism is to look back instead of forward. Forward thinking tends toward notions of the “social,” such as democratic socialism in one form and social democracies in another. Democratic socialism involves democratic management of a socialist society. Social democracy involves democratic means of achieving socialism, which makes the achievement somewhere between capitalism and socialism. Rejecting anything with the word “social” in it, neoconservatives focus on the “liberal” in liberal democracy. Eliminating that, however, means exploring what should remain. If what is left is “democracy” by itself, the question is: What kind?

For neoconservatives, what is to be done depends on diagnosing the sources of the crises. For them, the causes are disorder and the *international* reach of the global. The task, as they see it, is to recede into an ordered and contained society. This means propping up institutions of law and order, with the latter as the source of legitimacy. Devoting attention to order requires the elimination of sources of disorder,

which neoconservatives regard as dissent and difference. Thus, groups and ideas that they consider disorderly become targets for containment and elimination. These groups invariably are outsiders and whomever they consider undesirable foreigners. The turn to xenophobia has its bedfellows of racism, misogyny, homophobia, and hatred of all those who are considered outsiders. This reactionary turn rejects the idea of countries such as Brazil, India, the United Kingdom, and the United States as citizens of the world and replaces it with nationalism premised on cherry-picked values from each country's past under the aegis of "tradition." Premised on anti-difference, this appeal expresses notions of purity. The search for the "pure" nation, inevitably racist, means also that, unlike neoliberalism, neoconservatism focuses on groups. The search for the pure nation in a country such as the United States means "white"—specifically, white Anglo-Saxon Protestant—and, as the world saw in Donald Trump's 2016 presidential campaign and subsequent presidency, gives that white-dominated past a coveted adjective, "great," for which some were willing to storm the U.S. Capitol building in January 2021 as Congress certified his November 2020 loss and successor Joseph Biden's victory.

Despite their common agenda of radicalized privatization of power, global economic elites are split between the neoliberals and the neoconservatives. Their shared wealth, however, means they can each invest in the global spread of their agenda. The neoconservative wing does so through investing in authoritarianism and the erosion of government services. This radicalizes inequalities wherever they take hold. The increased crises they generate create more mystification, and as with the neoliberal demand for more privatization and capitalism, the neoconservative element demands *more elimination of difference and services that protect it*. Conservatism and neoconservatism, radicalized, inevitably lead to fascism; however, this form of extremism is no longer willing to admit what it is. Its current adherents prefer terms such as "alt-right" and "white nationalism" or, as stated in India, "Hindu nationalism" or "Brahmanism." In sites of power, they use all the old mechanisms of fascism: misinformation and disinformation, militarization and the use of force to erode the public sphere, racial

scapegoating, valorized masculinity, and the perpetuation of insecurity to legitimate the need for security through militarization and policing.

Racism is already evident in the paths of neoliberalism through neoconservatism and fascism. Neoliberal racism doesn't at first appear racist. After all, neoliberals claim to defend civil liberties and rights, and there are neoliberal politicians of color. The problem is that they recognize only *individuals* as bearing such rights. This is of little help for people who are objects of racial discrimination. No black or Indigenous person is discriminated against *as an individual*. Antiblack racism is against *blacks*. Anti-Indigenous racism is against *Indigenous peoples*. Neoliberalism thus nurtures racism by undermining the conditions of addressing it. It is, in short, reckless.

Neoconservatism and fascism do not defend the individual over groups. They recognize groups. Their racism is direct. They deem other groups "dangerous" and target them for incarceration or, worse, elimination. This is why so-called militias, the military, and police gather to fight Black Lives Matter protestors marching for the rights of black and Indigenous peoples but stand to the side and at times assist white supremacist groups marching with weapons in full view and, as witnessed in the attack on the U.S. Capitol, injuring and killing police, despite having once chanted that blue—that is, police—lives matter.¹

As neoliberalism, neoconservatism, and fascism are promoted by people with extraordinary economic capital, their reach is global, as seen in countries ranging from Brazil to Hungary to India. And their negative effects are one and the same. They are, in a word, pandemics.

Social dimensions of pandemics have been evident since Christopher Columbus landed in the Bahamas in 1492. Not only did he and his crew bring biological diseases from Europe, but they also inaugurated Euromodern colonialism, which includes the production of vulnerabilities through which those contagions could be easily spread. This development—Euromodern colonialism—infected the world and was thus a social pandemic. It set the stage for precarious conditions through which all subsequent pandemics found fertile soil. Its cruelty was, as far as the metropolises or colonial centers were concerned,

quarantined. For those suffering from its symptoms—enslavement, genocide, high mortality rates, ongoing poverty, everyday violence, degradation of spirit—this meant invisibility as an experience of their quarantined suffering. Then, as now, such people were for the most part kept out of sight from those who profited from their misery. There were occasional moments of exposure, such as when the Sharpe Rebellion in Jamaica (1831–1832) led to the British outlawing the enslavement and trade of kidnapped human beings across the Atlantic Ocean. Because the British Empire was at that time global, this was interpreted as the outlawing of slavery on the high seas. Yet enslavement continues.² So, too, do the other social symptoms, which nearly eliminated the Indigenous peoples of North and South America and Australia. The descendants of those people, encountering the COVID-19 pandemic, conclude the obvious: its symptoms of injustice are nothing new.

Black people endure some additional symptoms. Wherever enslavement was outlawed, investments in its maintenance continued. Thus, as W.E.B. Du Bois and many others showed in the U.S. context, policing's focus on black people in effect deputized whites.³ Curtailment of the movement of black people led to the near ubiquitous tagging of crime onto us, which in turn led to the well-known, racially marked system of incarceration and its accompanying economy—the prison-industrial complex. This logic was, and continues to be, the quarantining of black people. In addition to imprisonment, its mechanisms included lynching, economic deprivation, segregation of housing, and a complex propaganda campaign in which degradation of black people was premised on the elevation of white people through misinformation and disinformation of history and other forms of human science ranging from economics to human biology to psychology to sociology to medicine. From birth to grave, this meant for all Americans, from black through white, learning how to evade anything that would expose the contradictions of a system that alleges that black people are the problem, instead of people who face problems imposed upon us by a racist, unjust society.

Black people never took all this without a fight. After all, how can one breathe under such circumstances? This concern with breathing

is one of the hallmarks of black consciousness. How could this not be so when lynching was one of the technologies of black subordination? Frantz Fanon—the great philosopher, psychiatrist, and revolutionary from the Caribbean island of Martinique—wrote of “breath” and “breathing” so many times in his writings that it was inevitable for him to point out how the colonial conditions that placed black people in that situation imposed the same on colonized people in Southeast Asia: “It is not because the Indo-Chinese have discovered their own culture that they revolt. It is because ‘quite simply’ it was, in more than one way, becoming impossible for them to breathe.”⁴

This theme of having to revolt because of the threat of asphyxiation continues into the twenty-first century. Recall Eric Garner’s final words when he was in Staten Island police officer Daniel Pantaleo’s choke hold: “I can’t breathe!” These were also the dying words of George Floyd, uttered as his neck was under the knee of the police officer Derek Chauvin in Minneapolis.

The collective struggle to breathe, which is the mark of all black rebellions from the Haitian Revolution through to the anti-colonial struggles in Africa and the revolts in North America and South America, was hardly a concern of whites beyond the conservative logic of their own protection *from* such revolts. The pandemic, however, offers a rude awakening into the perspective of black consciousness, which for now I will just call black peoples’ points of view. Despite all the efforts of white power, SARS-CoV-2 (the novel coronavirus) doesn’t “see” national borders, race, or any other boundary. It responds only to openings or, more accurately, “preexisting conditions.” The preexisting pandemics of neoliberalism, neoconservatism, fascism, and their accompanying racism created social sites of vulnerability that spread the virus more efficiently in countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, India, and Brazil despite the technological and economic resources at their disposal. The virus’s devastation is most evident among the populations on which those societies devote their technologies of disempowerment—blacks in all four, along with Indigenous peoples in Brazil, India, and the United States. There are many other countries with similar effects, but the hegemonic status of the United

States and the United Kingdom, especially as imperial countries and architects of neoliberalism and neoconservatism, makes them graphic exemplars. Brazil and India follow through their national leaderships' adoption of such policies.

The experience of the pandemic is one in which quarantining also has the effect of mystification. Neoliberalism and neoconservatism see no difference between social distance and physical distance. Because neoliberalism isolates individuals to the point of denying their connection to others, given its disdain for collectives, it marks social reality as its enemy. It thus makes sense that neoliberal governments prescribe *social* distance. The virus is, however, transmitted physically, which means the recommendation should be for *physical distance*. One could be physically close but socially distant and vice versa. Social closeness continues in various forms, though it's primarily through communication technologies such as FaceTime, Skype, Google Meet, Microsoft Teams, Webex, and Zoom. Those who manifest full-blown COVID-19, however, are both socially and physically distant. Quarantined, they are out of sight. When afflicted to the point of being unable to communicate or unconscious, they are also socially distant. Many cannot speak, and when placed in COVID-19 wards of hospitals, they are wrapped up in sanitary materials, sedated, and able to breathe only through ventilator tubes. What are they but passive objects of medical attention? Their humanity is erased in a vast network of radical quarantining. Tucked away, they are invisible, as many succumb to the culminating effect of the disease—ceasing to breathe.

For those who don't treat the pandemic as a hoax, the looming threat of breathlessness makes those without infection or symptoms appear more like survivors or those who are blessed. This view regards the afflicted as marked or, worse, condemned. Old moralistic rationalizations against the contaminated are more easily achieved when the majority of them are among historically outcast and neglected peoples. The invisibility of the disease is also shared by those it marks. Not having it brought into plain sight encourages disbelief in its reality. This is more easily concluded among many on the ideological right be-

cause they are already primed with the logic of their invulnerability—whether with the belief that a divine force such as Jesus is on their side or with the presumption of the system offering them a “right” to whatever they want, including their survival. This thus took absurd forms in spring 2020 in the United States when right-wing protestors did not take preventive measures against infection for the luxury of haircuts and other nonessential activities and through the election season when they attended large, superspreading events such as Trump rallies. As those among them who became infected and passed away fell into the logic of quarantined deaths, they were not seen and thus their demise was not perceived as real as far as their fellow fanatics were concerned. The people of the United States, as history has already shown under Jair Bolsonaro’s presidency in Brazil and others marked by retrograde and racist policies, are not the lone sufferers of the consequences of malevolent and incompetent leadership.⁵

The guiding theme of these pandemics—antidemocracy, colonialism, racism, and a disease—is invisibility. As pandemics of invisibility, they are nurtured by the insistence, whether psychological or ideological, against the appearance of their symptoms. I recall how angry some people would get at me for even mentioning my suffering from my long-term illness. It’s as if much of humanity reverted to the childhood response of covering their heads under blankets when they perceive a bogeyman in their bedrooms. What’s the bogeyman to do? Leave because rendered impotent by a *blanket*? There are, of course, psychoanalytical elements at work in such activities. Closing one’s eyes or covering one’s face is a secret admission of projection. There is a form of responsibility present in all denials. The history of the United States and many other countries marked by white supremacy is a long tale of covering national memory with blankets with regard to colonialism, racism, and the attempted, sometimes successful, genocide of Indigenous peoples. That denial is among the foundations of such countries. So as the death count mounted, and investments in bad science misinformed and disinformed the public—and many people embraced, like a blanket, that misinformation and disinformation—more

energy was required to dissociate from, repress, and suppress truth. The alternatives became implosion or explosion.

George Floyd's murder was not quarantined. Witnessed all over the world, it brought to the fore the reality of asphyxiation. If the people witnessing it had acted like deputies responding to an illegal and immoral activity—attempted murder—and overpowered the police, Floyd would be alive. As only whites have the de facto right to commit citizens' arrest in the United States, this was not to be. Everyone knows the intervening bystanders would have been arrested for assaulting police officers or, worse, killed by the police. Because of Darnella Frazier, then seventeen years old, recording the horrible event despite police threats to her, many across the globe became witnesses to an incident permitted by structural complicity, political impotence, injustice, and social ill-health.⁶ Floyd's murder is emblematic of a failure to address these converging pandemics. The police, many have come to see, are structurally agents of social asphyxiation. Humanity existed for nearly three hundred thousand years without police forces, and the truth of the matter is—beyond the fantasies of cinema, television, and literary fiction—that most people are rarely in need of police for anything other than directing traffic or filing reports after car accidents or burglaries.⁷ *Protecting* people is rare, and investigating and bringing to justice those who perpetrate crime even rarer. Surely humanity can find a better way to live together than to divert so much of our economy to forces that, in defending the need for such investments, produce violence and, in addition, crime as de facto managers of them. As the violence of the police reminds us of what it means not to be able to breathe, it becomes emblematic of these converging pandemics. The masked people who have taken to the streets against them bring to the fore the significance of breath; their protests are social masks against a contagion.

Although black consciousness is a rude awakening, another type of consciousness can grow out of that awareness: the need to become actional, to fight against oppression. This kind of consciousness, Black consciousness, is distinct from (lowercase) black consciousness; it is a political consciousness that addresses the choking contradictions

of antiblack societies. For fear of seeing their negative reflection, these antiblack societies often attempt to break their mirrors. To suppress this consciousness requires suppressing not only black possibility but also political life. Antiblack societies are therefore fundamentally anti-political and antidemocratic—because they are devoted to blocking black people’s access to citizenship—and thus fight also against their own members who fight against black disempowerment. This struggle reveals a feared truth of black empowerment: the fight against antiblack racism is ultimately a fight *for* democracy.

Humanity must continue fighting against antidemocratic forces because, from the assaults on the environment to those on the services by which human beings could live in a humane world, everyone needs to breathe. Fighting against them requires an unwavering struggle for democracy. Brought out into the open, such an effort is a desperate reach for air, what Fanon so aptly phrased as “the oxygen that invents a new humanity.”⁸ This is true. Provided, of course, there remains a humanity to invent.

This book is an exploration of black consciousness and *Black* consciousness. Briefly, black consciousness is mostly affected and sometimes immobile; Black consciousness is effective and always active. Both are feared in antiblack societies, although the second is more so than the first. This fear ultimately leads to disrespect for truth, and antipathy to the ethical and political implications of admitting that truth, which is the realization of what is actually revealed about claims of white supremacy and black inferiority when seen through the eyes of Blacks. That revelation is the set of lies on which the avowed legitimacy of antiblack societies is built. That all antiblack societies today claim to be democracies makes this hypocrisy stark. Those lies include the societies’ avowed celebration of freedom while waging war against it through blocking actual democracy.

I will show that there is a movement from a suffering black consciousness to a liberatory Black consciousness in which revelation of the dirty laundry and fraud of white supremacy and black inferiority is a dreaded truth. In a world premised on having the moral high

ground for political legitimacy, this makes many whites who have governed a good portion of the planet over the past few hundred years morally and ultimately politically bankrupt. A retreat into individualized moral redemption is what many accused of this failure seek. This effort, I argue, is one in which a fear of Black consciousness is also a flight from reality and political responsibility.

The path I take will be first working through the mist of white narcissism and the varieties of consciousness it perpetuates. I will then move on to the study of specifically racial consciousness, racism, and the kinds of invisibility they produce. That analysis will be followed by discussions of the many ways in which antiblack racist societies try to evade political responsibility for antiblack racism. I will conclude with a meditation on political and creative responses of Black consciousness that does not apologize for black and Black lives having value.

One may wonder what intellectual reflection and political responsibility offer for the struggle against antiblack racism, which requires taking on the task of building a humane world of dignity, freedom, and respect.

Many years ago I found myself in a dispute with a community activist who learned I was a doctoral student of philosophy. My activist friend declared: "I have no time for abstractions. I work with the concrete."

"You do know 'the concrete' is an abstraction, don't you?" I replied.

My point to that friend from long ago was that communicating, reflecting, and thinking play important roles in struggles, and they require appropriate forms of generalizing. Although there is a slippery slope from generalizing to *overgeneralizing*, one must nevertheless generalize in order for something to be understood by those other than oneself. If the ideas that follow are useful, they of necessity must reach beyond *me* to the general *you*.

Generalizations will always have their limits. I will use many examples from the news, history, and even popular culture (films and music) to transcend those limitations.

Another caveat: despite my efforts, some readers may not see themselves in this book and, worse, may even be angered at what I say and