MIT Community Vigil

June 2, 2020

My name is Malick Ghachem and I am a member of the MIT History Faculty and a criminal defense lawyer who teaches in the area of race and criminal justice.

It is profoundly discouraging to consider that who gets to breath in America circa 2020 is a matter of race. We have seen that this is true in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic in recent months, and the murder of George Floyd shows that it is also true in relation to our policing practices, which must change in radical ways. Such change will require white Americans and indeed all of us to make sacrifices of the kind we have been generally willing to make in the face of COVID-19 but seem unwilling to make in the face of structural racism. And that is because policing practices are so deeply embedded in our economic organization, in how we think about cities and property, in longstanding doctrines of criminal law and procedure, and many other factors too numerous to mention here. If you can muster the fortitude to watch the extended video of the murder of George Floyd, you will see that at the very end, well after the police have come on to the scene and done their damage, a team of emergency medical personnel from the fire department arrives to try to save Floyd. I do not know whether overcoming police brutality requires the wholesale abolition of police departments, but if we had police departments that acted more like fire departments – seeking to heal or to put out fires rather than to apply force and escalate tension – we would almost certainly be in a better place.

This past week I received an email from Kaijeh Johnson, a junior at the Peabody Institute, the music conservatory of the Johns Hopkins University. He wrote as follows: "It

saddens me to see the divide between the leaders of this country, and their citizens of color, continue to grow as weeks go by. Each day I grow more afraid of the world we live in and more afraid of the people I believe are supposed to protect me. I believe there needs to be a change in the system. I believe the voices of America's black and brown citizens need[] to be heard and their messages taken to heart. I believe it is time for a united front against the injustices that plague our communities. / Though I know these things are necessary, I have no clue where to begin." And so he asked me: "With your knowledge of the past and your knowledge of the present, what is the most effective way for young people in 2020 to present [a] united front and achieve results, as our ancestors did during the civil rights movement?"

I want to share with you a modified version of what I wrote back to Kaijeh. For starters, I urged him to make music that would capture this moment and his feelings about it. I told him that he could help to mobilize people of color to vote in the November elections. And that he could work to make his own institution resemble the kind of country he wants to see.

But Kaijeh was particularly interested in what the past could teach us. And so I told him also that change happens on both small and large scales, and that we don't really understand what happens on the large scale. No historian or sociologist has yet developed a scientific model of the intersecting forces that make for something as big as the Civil Rights revolution of the 1950s and 1960s. Some observers of the opening days, weeks, and even months of the French and Haitian revolutions were aware that they were living through a very unusual time, but none of them could have foreseen the scope of what was to come, and not all of them would have liked what they were going to see. For example, the free people of color who mobilized for political rights at the start of the Haitian Revolution were entirely unaware that

their claims would set in a motion a process that would lead to the abolition of slavery, a result few of them sought because many of them were themselves slaveholders. The violent white mob that destroyed the property of the British East India Company in Boston Harbor in 1773 was unaware that it was setting in motion the American Revolution, which upset almost every notion of law and order then prevalent in the British Empire. There is no catechism for revolution; every large-scale change is the product of many small changes.

Looking back at the French Revolution in the middle of the nineteenth century, the French political philosopher Alexis de Tocqueville wrote that he saw more continuity than change at the end of it. He would have recognized the American dilemma with racism, which seems to hold constant even when it is said to be changing. But even Tocqueville may have undersold the role of continuity in a revolution. Making an impact almost always involves working in teams. Teamwork means looking for the particular gifts that different individuals bring to the table. It also means learning to rely on others when your own energy and availability begin to fade. A social movement of the kind that Kaijeh is thinking of almost certainly needs something like a business continuity plan. This is, arguably, what was missing when the Arab Spring of 2011 faded into the Arab Winter.

Finally, I urged Kaijeh to remember the lessons he learned under the COVID-19 lockdown, so that when residential university life and normal economic activity resume, he could find ways to stand up for these lessons when he encounters others trying to slip back into old habits and patterns, as they and we undoubtedly will. We can remember, for example, that people are in fact capable of making great sacrifices and undertaking great risks, but also that the distribution of sacrifice and risk in America is very uneven. How to figure out the right mix

of compassion and confrontation that will move others to level the playing field before the next crisis hits is a difficult balancing act, especially so for people of color. But increasingly it seems that we will need more of an appetite and tolerance for productive confrontation in this new era, and so I told Kaijeh to cultivate both the skill and the art of that practice.