

ANTOINE  
LOUETTE

## Creating Racial Structural Solidarity: The Example of the George Floyd Protests

**Abstract:** This article draws on the recent transnational protests against racist police brutality to advance an understanding of robust intersectional solidarity which aims to improve over Mara Marin's Iris Young-inspired 'structural solidarity' view. The latter view helpfully grounds robust intersectional solidarity in the racial structure, but it neglects the fact that racial domination exerts such a segregative influence on social groups that whites and middle-class blacks tend not to frequent the social milieux that would help them develop the required sense of solidarity with working-class blacks. To address this problem, the article hypothesises that the conditions for robust intersectional solidarity against racism are not inherent in the racial structure but created by social movements, as exemplified by Black Lives Matter: to the extent that white and middle-class black participants in the George Floyd protests experienced something like the racist police brutality they were denouncing on behalf of the black working class, these protests functioned as non-segregated milieux that could ground the robust solidarity of the former with the latter at the national and transnational levels.

**Keywords:** *antiracist protests; police brutality; racial structure; robust intersectional solidarity; transnational solidarity*

I began thinking about this paper in the wake of the recent transnational protests against racist police brutality. As is well known, they were organised by Black Lives Matter (BLM) in response to the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis on May 25, 2020. Originating in the United States, they quickly spread across several parts of the globe: to focus on the most attended ones, major demonstrations took place regularly for a month in London and Paris, and over an even longer period in the US, particularly in Minneapolis and Portland.<sup>1</sup> Such protests render more salient than ever the need for robust antiracist unity, understood as motivation for antiracist collective action between actors from different backgrounds. But how should we conceive of the foundations of this kind

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<sup>1</sup> See Milman et al. (2021). Other protests involving over a thousand participants took place in several parts of the world, from Europe to Australia and New Zealand through Brazil or Japan.

of solidarity?

In 'Foundations of Black Solidarity' (2002) and in 'We Who Are Dark' (2005), Tommie Shelby has argued that such antiracist solidarity is to be grounded, not in black identity, but in racism itself, the 'common oppression' suffered by black people. Some years later, taking issue with Shelby's understanding of racism as a unified phenomenon affecting a single group, Robert Gooding-Williams has offered instead a non-foundational conception of this kind of solidarity, arguing that it is constituted through politics understood as action-in-concert (2009; see also Arendt, 1972).

Yet Gooding-Williams's 'non-foundational' view has itself been the object of criticism. In 'Racial Structural Solidarity' (2018), Mara Marin has insisted that an account of antiracist solidarity cannot be non-foundational through and through, because agents must be motivated to act together before they can develop solidarity through collective action. Adapting Iris Young's (1994) account of gender as seriality to race, Marin went on to suggest that we should conceive of robust antiracist unity as grounded in the material and social reality of the racial structure, without assuming with Shelby's 'common oppression' view that the relevant agents all stand in the same relation to this reality.

In this paper, however, I suggest that this cannot be the end of the story. For while all agents positioned within the social structure of race may be united at some highly abstract level, it is unclear how its concrete divisions can allow it to ground robust antiracist solidarity across different backgrounds. In particular, segregating processes mean that whites tend not to frequent the social milieu that would help them develop a sense of solidarity with the oppressions of blacks (see DiAngelo, 2011). The same goes, though perhaps to a lesser degree, for black groups suffering from different intersecting oppressions, e.g., class- and gender-related ones.

Drawing on Lea Ypi's discussion of the grounds of cosmopolitan solidarity (Ypi, 2010), I argue that the foundations of robust antiracist unity are not inherent to the racial structure, against Marin, but rather laid out by progressive social movements that disrupt the segregating processes that characterise this structure. The BLM movement created such foundations, I suggest, by organizing the George Floyd protests mentioned at the outset: as white participants and black middle-class participants of different genders experienced something like the very racist police brutality that they were denouncing on behalf of the black working-class, the protests functioned as social milieux capable of grounding their robust solidarity with the black working-class in this respect.

Indeed, I argue, these protests laid the groundwork for a form of transnational – or trans-structural – antiracist unity: national specificities notwithstanding, European and US protesters experienced forms of racist police brutality similar enough to unite them in a series susceptible to form the basis of antiracist collective action across the Atlantic.

I make this argument as follows. First, I examine Shelby's and Gooding-Williams's debate. Then I turn to Marin's take on this debate and to her Young-inspired, alternative conception of the foundations of antiracist solidarity. In the next section, I voice my own criticism of Marin's conception and suggest an amendment to her view. Then, I argue that the George Floyd protests may illustrate the amended view. The last section considers three objections and concludes.

### **Shelby's Foundationalism and Gooding-Williams's Non-Foundationalism about Solidarity**

Shelby's impressive efforts with respects to the concept of solidarity – in 'Foundations of Black Solidarity' (2002) and later in 'Black Solidarity After Black Power' (2005) – have mainly been directed to defending a conception of 'robust' antiracist solidarity, understood as solidarity which, far from being limited to 'mutual sympathy', proves 'strong enough to move people to collective action' to the extent that it involves identification between group members, shared values and goals, group loyalty, and mutual trust (2002: 237–39).

To this account of 'robust' solidarity, Shelby adds two further requirements: antiracist solidarity must include 'all other blacks', on the one hand, while, on the other hand, respecting black 'cultural and ethnic diversity' (2002: 266; 2005: 155). That antiracist solidarity must respect diversity is required to avoid either excluding or constraining the freedom of those who only marginally fit the alleged cultural or ethnic prototype (2002: 252). That antiracist solidarity must include all blacks is required to avoid the instability of coalition politics and thus lay 'the foundation needed for continuous endeavour' against racism (2005: 153).

Shelby's solution to meet these two requirements is to ground antiracist solidarity in racism itself, the 'common oppression' suffered by all black people because they are black, no matter their cultural or ethnic background. To be black, on this view, is thus not to share in any single black culture or ethnicity (this would be 'thick' blackness), but only to bear the perceived physical markers which trigger racial identification ('thin' blackness), and, further, racism, understood as 'an ideology': i.e., 'a set of misleading and irrationally held beliefs

and assumptions’, such as ‘the belief that blacks are intellectually inferior’, ‘that serve to bring about and reinforce structural relations of oppression’, and which is itself reinforced by these very relations (2005: 142–3 and 156, emphasis removed).<sup>2</sup>

Like Roberts Gooding-Williams and Mara Marin, I share Shelby’s view that antiracism’s success depends on cultivating strong ties between people from different backgrounds – indeed, different ‘races,’ as Marin suggests – and it is with the foundation of this form of solidarity as robust ‘unity’ (2005: 153) that this paper is concerned.<sup>3</sup> But as Gooding-Williams (2009) has forcefully argued, drawing on the black feminist work of Dorothy Roberts (1997), among others, Shelby’s contention that racist ideology can forge robust solidaristic bonds between all blacks is a ‘doubtful’ one, ‘for it rests on the disputable assumption that antiblack racism is a unitary phenomenon and that it indifferently targets all blacks’ (2009: 230).

On the contrary, Gooding-Williams argues, the concept of intersectionality that we owe to black feminist theory ‘suggests that antiblack racism is best conceptualized as a set of overlapping clusters of antiblack beliefs and stereotypes, some of which target black women, but not black men; some of which target poor black women and/or poor black men, but not middle-class black women or men; some of which target black men, but not black women, and so forth’ (2009: 231). For instance, as Roberts has argued, racist stereotypes of black women – as mammy, matriarch, jezebel, lady, welfare queen, and so on – ‘should not be taken to be so many instances of various, generic antiblack stereotypes, but as stereotypes that are intrinsically gendered’ (Gooding-Williams, 2009: 231; see Roberts, 1997). In the same way, the stereotype of the ‘aggressive’ working-class black man (see, e.g., Morales, 2014) may not be a working-class, masculine instance of some general ideological view of black people: it may be

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2 For Shelby (2005: 142–3 and 156), these relations include those that do not affect all blacks, such as those caused by past racist ideology (e.g., comparatively low levels of educational advantages among black populations), and those that affect black indirectly as they result from social processes to which racist ideology is foreign (e.g., market processes disproportionately rewarding people with a college education). Note that Shelby’s definition of racism is a narrow one since, on his view, these forms of racial disadvantage do not count as racism – and cannot ground all-blacks robust solidarity as they are not typically experienced by middle-class blacks

3 Put differently, like the other parties to this debate – themselves following Martin Luther King, Jr. and A. Phillips Rudolph (see Clemons, 2022), and in line with activists involved in BLM (see, e.g., Shemon and Arturo, 2020) – I am not primarily concerned with weak solidarity as mutual sympathy between people from different (or the same) backgrounds (or series, as I will say later), nor with robust solidarity between people from the same backgrounds (or series).

intrinsically tied to gender and class, and as such target neither black women nor middle-class black men.<sup>4</sup>

Gooding-Williams takes this problem to signal the need to move away from foundationalist analyses of antiracist solidarity. For if it is doubtful whether there is such a thing as a racism which is experienced by all blacks, then we had better understand black unity as ‘a differentiated enterprise, upbuilding itself from, at bottom, a differentiated, disunified African American experience, not from a unifying ground’ (*ibid.*: 237).

More precisely, Gooding-Williams argues, drawing on Frederick Douglass’s political autobiography *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855), antiracist solidarity is not given *before* politics begin, but self-constitutes *through* politics, where politics is understood as ‘action-in-concert’ (Gooding-Williams, 2009: 189; see also Arendt, 1972). This much is clear, Gooding-Williams suggests, from Douglass’s account of the ‘band of brothers’ that he came to form with other slaves who, though from different backgrounds, were thrown together on the plantation of a Mr. Freeman – and from which they attempted to escape together. As Gooding-Williams reads Douglass, the tyranny of Mr. Freeman does not ground the band’s solidarity. Indeed, one of the slaves, a certain Sandy Jenkins, ‘betrayed the plot to escape’ despite facing the same condition (*ibid.*: 188). Rather, Gooding-Williams argues, the band’s solidarity ‘is a function of [their] concerted speech, action, and mutual commitment’ (*ibid.*: 187).<sup>5</sup>

On Gooding-Williams’s view, then, it is not a philosophical foundation that Black politics or antiracist solidarity requires. Rather, it is ‘to identify the social forces that now function to inhibit the re-constitution of a black counter-public, or, indeed, to prevent multiple black spaces from flourishing’ (2009: 242). The remark is largely programmatic, and Gooding-Williams limits himself to secon-

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4 One might think that this is unfair to Shelby, insofar as he does not need racist ideology to be experienced in one way: all he needs is that it be real, regardless of whether it is multiply realised or not. But this does not seem right: if racist ideology is multiply realised/experienced, then it is unlikely to be motivating and, as such, conducive to the kind of robust unity which is at stake here. I return to this point below, but it is worth noting here that the history of African American political association – fragmented as it was, after the Civil Rights movement, by ‘economics realities’ and ‘identity formations’, among other factors – does not disprove my analysis (see Glaude, 2007: 148). Thanks to Avery Kolers for helpful discussion on this point

5 Here as for Shelby, antiracist solidarity is not grounded in thick blackness, ethnic or cultural. But neither is it grounded in thin blackness, against Shelby (Gooding-Williams, 2009: 239).

ding Eddie Glaude's suggestion that 'nostalgic longings' for the black community of the civil rights movements 'obscure the complex experiences that inform the varied political commitments and interests of African Americans, blocking the way to the formation of a black public more reflective of current conditions of living' (Glaude, 2007: 148; see Gooding-Williams, 2009: 242). As I read Gooding-Williams, however, his analysis of the 1998 documentary *The Two Nations of Black America* (Gates and Cross, 1998) suggests at least another relevant social force: the 'difficult-to-bridge rift between the black poor and the black middle-class – the two nations of the film's title' (*ibid.*: 243) – with what Gooding-Williams denounces as the authors' own uncritical 'brandish[ing]' of middle-class norms 'against the Ghetto poor' a good example of the form which such a rift might take (see *ibid.*: 245).<sup>6</sup>

I will return to this rift in a subsequent section. Before that, however, let me turn to Mara Marin's take on the debate I have summarised in this section.

### **Marin's Structural Foundationalism**

Is Gooding-Williams's non-foundational view how we should 'conceive of solidarity for an effective anti-racist politics?' (Marin, 2018: 587). Not quite, it would seem, if we accept Marin's argument to this effect.

In Marin's view, an account of antiracist unity cannot be non-foundational through and through, against Gooding-Williams, because agents can only develop solidarity by acting in concert if they are already motivated to act in concert by some common purpose – which turns this purpose into a pre-political foundation for solidarity (2018: 592–93).

This seems right. But it might appear as though Marin's argument, summarised in this way, makes too much of one aspect of politics as Gooding-Williams conceives of it, namely action-in-concert, and neglects the role of the other two constitutive parts of politics that we saw him mention earlier, namely concerted speech and mutual commitment. For one might think that they are, by themselves, capable of motivating agents to act in concert, in which case antiracist solidarity would really be non-foundational through and through: it would be self-constituting through action-in-concert itself motivated by concerted speech and mutual commitment, all through a self-standing political process.

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<sup>6</sup> Glaude also emphasises (in his discussion of Michael Dawson's *Black Visions*) the 'deepened class divisions within African American communities throughout the [US]' (2007: 146; see Dawson, 2001).

Marin, however, has a come-back: concerted speech and mutual commitment are not, by themselves, capable of motivating agents to act in concert. Indeed, Marin suggests, nowhere is this clearer than in Douglass's band of brothers' attempt to escape the plantation of Mr. Freeman. Jenkins the traitor did participate in the band of brothers' political arguments and mutual pledges, but he did not try to escape with them – indeed, he betrayed them – precisely because his goal was not that of the other slaves, namely resisting slaveholder tyranny (see 2018: 592–3). More generally, Marin argues, 'Douglass's band of brothers could not be said to act-in-concert with those who have fallen prey to "the slaveholding priestcraft", the view that slavery is God's will', even if 'the two groups could engage in debate and argument': '[t]his shows that the acting in concert aspect of politics requires agreement around common purposes, even though politics has a deliberative aspect, one that is marked by deep disagreement' (*ibid.*: 593).<sup>7</sup>

Understood in this way, Marin concludes, Gooding-Williams's conception of solidarity 'is not crucially different from Shelby's': both rely on pre-political common purposes (2018: 593). In other words, we are back where we left Shelby: robust antiracist unity needs a foundation, but the diversity of black lives and concerns makes it seemingly impossible to find. Yet Marin has a solution. Drawing on Iris Young's (1994) Sartre-inspired attempt to offer an account of gender that respects the diversity of women, she argues that robust antiracist unity, on the model of the Sartrian notion of 'seriality' (2004 [1976]), can be grounded in the socio-material reality of the racial structure.

For Sartre, a series, like a group, is a collective, but one whose members, contrary to those of a group, do not mutually acknowledge each other as sharing a common project (see Young, 1994: 724). Rather, '[t]hey are united in an impersonal way, through particular constellations of material objects and structures or norms that constrain or enable their actions' (Marin, 2018: 595). To illustrate this form of impersonal unity, Sartre (2004 [1976]: 256; see also 221) takes the example of bus riders: they are conscious of themselves as a collective, but as an amorphous one, made up of anonymous others only united by their bus riding practice and its material apparatus (bus, bus stop, bus tickets, and so on).

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7 In fact, Marin continues, concerted speech and mutual commitment may not even be necessary to motivate agents to act in concert, as agents sometimes adopt their shared purposes 'independently of political encounters' (2018: 593), based on their social experiences only. Indeed, Gooding-Williams seems committed to this view himself, judging by the fundamentally private account he offers elsewhere of the process through which people who are 'classified as black' come to self-identify as politicised 'black persons' (1998: 22–24; see also Marin, 2018: 593).

On this view, importantly, robust solidarity arises from series, as some members of a series actively take up the ‘practico-inert’ reality that lies as the background to their actions and organise towards it as a group (Sartre (2004 [1976]; see also Marin, 2018: 598; Young, 1994: 725; 2011: 54). While socio-material reality is practical in that it is the result of past actions and might be changed by future actions, it is also inert in that it is not usually experienced as such by the individuals who are serialised by it. Yet insofar as these individuals are aware of themselves as (passively, anonymously) united by it, this common background provides them with a basis from which they can identify with one another, develop trust and loyalty, and collectively attempt to remedy what may be wrong with it. Think, for instance, of bus riders whose bus is late and who may decide to share a taxi, or to protest the bus company (Marin, 2018: 595; see also Young, 1994: 725).

Much like the series ‘bus riders’ – only much more complex – Marin draws on Young to argue that the series ‘race’ is ‘a structural relation to material objects as they have been produced and organised by prior history’ (Young, 1994: 728; Marin, 2018: 597–98). More precisely, it is a relation to bodies, neighbourhoods, and jobs, among other objects, as they have been and are still organised by unjust social practices that disproportionately affect blacks, directly or indirectly (see Haslanger, 2004: 113–17). Such practices include practices of residential segregation, biased schooling and hiring practices which relegate blacks to low-skilled jobs, post-industrial capitalist economies with little rewards for such jobs, or practices of mass incarceration and police brutality (see Marin, 2018: 597–98).

The impersonal unity of the series ‘race’, Marin argues, can ground antiracist solidarity despite the diversity of black lives and concerns. ‘This way of understanding unity’, she writes, ‘is [...] compatible with the diversity of black political life’, provided we understand ‘[t]his diversity [as coming] from the self-conscious groups that can be created on the basis of the series’ (2018: 598). Just as different groups of angry bus riders form themselves as their corresponding buses are late, so ‘[d]ifferent antiracist groups will take on different parts of the complex reality of the series, and as a result will pursue different goals and aims, and will use different means’ (*ibid.*: 598).

Indeed, she insists, ‘[u]nderstood in this way, the unity of race brings together not only black Americans, but all Americans, because they all share the ‘practico-inert’ reality of the series race, as a common background for their actions’ (2018: 598). As a result, she concludes, it can ground ‘racial structural solidarity’: ‘the series race can be the basis of solidarity for action across the racial



division between black and white Americans' (*ibid.*: 598).

### Creating Racial Structural Solidarity

But can 'the unity of race' really ground anything like racial structural solidarity? In this third section I argue that the racial structure cannot bring together all black Americans, not to mention all Americans, unless it is suitably modified by activists. In other words, racial structural unity is not inherent to the current racial structure: it must be created.

As I see it, the problem with Marin's proposal is that, while all agents positioned within the social structure of race may be united at some highly abstract level, it is unclear how its concrete divisions can allow it to ground robust anti-racist solidarity across different structural positions: the social structure of race appears to be home not just one to one single series, but to different ones.<sup>8</sup>

In particular, segregating processes mean that whites tend not to frequent the social milieux the serialised experience of which is necessary, in Marin's argument, to ground their motivation to struggle alongside blacks against the oppressions of blacks. As Charles Mills insists, 'white domination [...] has continued in more subtle forms past the ending of de jure segregation', with important 'consequences [...] for the social cognition of [...] agents', 'the advantaged' ones in particular (2005: 175 and 169). Indeed, according to Elizabeth Anderson, '[s]patial segregation', in particular, 'entails that whites will [...] interact mostly with other whites', so that '[t]he shared interpretations of the social world that they build with their peers will tend to exclude blacks' experiences' (2010: 46–7) – chief among them the experience of police brutality, it being well established, for example, that the police uses (perceived) blackness 'as a proxy for criminal propensity' while no such connection is made in the case of (perceived) whiteness (Weitzer, 2000: 135; see also, e.g., Harris, 1997).<sup>9</sup> In fact, according to Robin DiAngelo, this and other forms of segregation is 'the first factor leading to [what she famously calls] white fragility', this 'state in which

8 Marin's account draws on Young's, and one might find the same problem there. Young's account of seriality, like her discussion of the 'social connection' model of political responsibility, which she also links to the 'practico-inert' reality of social structures (2011: 54; see 1994: 725), sometimes appears to be as abstract as Marin's account in its insistence that 'women' refers to a single series. This suggests that the argument I make here might also be made in relation to Young's account of gender (but see her discussion of 'multiple genders', 1994: 719–21).

9 Echoing Weitzer's findings, Didier Fassin writes that 'police violence [...] almost exclusively affects male individuals, mainly young, from working-class backgrounds, living in disadvantaged neighbourhoods, most often of immigrant origin or belonging to minorities' (2015: 218, my translation). Fassin focuses on France here, but the US context suggests he might be overstating the case regarding the male dimension of the phenomenon: as testified by the '#SAYHERNAME' movement, 'black women are killed by police too' (African American Policy Forum 2020; see also Brugère et Le Blanc 2022 and Haslanger 2017b). Thanks to Guillaume Le Blanc for alerting me to this issue.

a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves' (2011: 58, 57) – the very opposite of solidarity.<sup>10</sup>

Marin's proposal, therefore, does not seem to work when it comes to solidarity between blacks and whites. Does it work between different black collectives? I do not think it does. For intersecting segregating processes separate not just whites from blacks, but blacks from blacks. To focus on class, recall Gooding-Williams's suggestion that Black politics today requires struggling against the social forces that inhibit the re-constitution of a black counter-public, and in particular against the 'difficult-to-bridge rift between the black poor and the black middle-class' (2009: 243).<sup>11</sup>

Here as well police brutality is a good example: as suggested by Ronald Weitzer's qualitative analysis of racial policing in three U.S. neighbourhoods, policing is more benign in middle-class black neighbourhoods than in lower-class black neighbourhoods, some residents of middle-class black neighbourhoods even identifying with white neighbourhoods in this respect (2000: 151).<sup>12</sup> In fact, it is precisely this kind of rift between the black poor and the black middle-class which motivates Shelby to focus on racist ideology as the ground of black solidarity, rather than on other forms of black disadvantage: while he failed to do justice to the variety of experiences of racist ideology, he did see that other forms of racial disadvantage do not affect the black middle-class (2005: 155).

More generally, for Marin, the diversity of black and white lives and concerns obtains only at the level of groups: it is not rooted in what should be recognised as the diversity of black and white series – that is, in the diversity of the racial structure's intersecting structural positions, some of which are segregated from one another. In this respect, and contrary to what Marin suggests, the racial structure is not like the bus structure: unlike the bus riders, who are all united

<sup>10</sup> See also Ines Valdez (2019), who notes 'the tragic effectiveness of the color line at curtailing [W.E.B. Du Bois's attempts, between 1919 and 1947, to create solidaristic "openings toward other oppressed subjects, including white workers, immigrants of all races, and Southern Europeans"]' (2019: 174–175).

<sup>11</sup> As Glaude notes, drawing on Dawson (2001), this rift is primarily due to 'the success of the civil rights movement' and various 'transformations in the political economy [of the 60s and 70s] – in particular, a 'decline in manufacturing jobs', 'the primary vehicle for many African American to achieve middle-class status' (2007: 146).

<sup>12</sup> According to Weitzer, this difference in police treatment occurs 'largely as a result of different law enforcement demands on officers', which he suggests are themselves partly the result of '[n]eighborhood conditions' such as 'well-maintained houses and yards' in the middle-class neighbourhood versus the existence of 'crack houses' in the lower-class one (2000: 151).

by the same kind of buses, all of which face delays at some point, the different agents dealing with the racial structure do not all face similar problems: they may have quite different serialised experiences of this structure, depending on their position in it.

As things stand, then, it is doubtful whether the segregated racial structure can ground anything like robust solidarity across series, other than at a highly abstract level unlikely to have much political import: the diversity of groups is rooted in the diversity of serialised experiences. To ground robust inter-serial solidarity effectively, I argue now, we should realise that its foundations are not inherent to the racial structure, against Marin, but created instead by activists and social movements.

Here I take inspiration from Lea Ypi's discussions of the grounds of cosmopolitan solidarity (Ypi, 2010). Ypi seeks to defend the ideal of global distributive justice against the charge that, absent a transnational equivalent to the national solidarity that supports redistributive schemes at the domestic level, this ideal has weak motivational force. In response, she emphasises that solidarity, both at the national and transnational level, is in the process of being created by 'grass-roots organisation and [...] advocacy networks [...] persuading fellow citizens on the exclusionary nature of specific political practices and creating political occasions for protesting and modifying them' (2010: 121 and 124).<sup>13</sup> Solidarity is, for short, 'politically constructed' (ibid.: 126).<sup>14</sup>

In the same way, I argue, we should conceive of racial structural unity as being created by activists – specifically, by activists bridging, consciously or unconsciously, the rifts in the racial structure that prevent it from grounding robust antiracist solidarity across its different series: across whites and blacks, and across working-class blacks and middle-class blacks, or again across black women and black men, and so on.

Indeed, I suggest in the next section, the BLM movement went some way towards doing just this, as they organised the George Floyd protests.

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. Gooding-Williams on the need to rebuild 'multiple black spaces' (2009: 240-242, op. cit.).

<sup>14</sup> Or as Valdez puts it, it is a matter of 'political craft' (2019: e.g., 19, 118, 151).

### The George Floyd Protests

We already saw how these protests, ‘spearheaded by a Black avant-garde’, as philosopher-activist Idris Robinson puts it (2020), lasted for about a month in London or Paris and often longer in the United States.<sup>15</sup> Participants did not protest every day, or indeed every week, but the protests’ material and symbolic effects – from scarred squares (Walters, 2020) to injured bodies (Dupuis, 2021) to toppled statues to ‘soul-searching’ minds (Wall, 2020) – spanned the whole period.

For my purposes, three further features of these protests are worth highlighting. First, they were organised in the milieu of the dominant racial groups, in a racial context where, as we saw above, the segregating processes that characterise the racial structure mean that such groups tend not to cross segregation lines, so to speak, in the way that dominated racial groups often do if they are to find jobs in ‘white-dominated econom[ies]’ such as France or the US (Young 1990, 141). Thus in Paris, for example, the three large protests of June 2, 6, and 13, 2020, were all organised across the circular motorway that separates the city from the surrounding disadvantaged neighbourhoods and their largely working-class, racialised inhabitants. Likewise, as reported by the *New York Times* and other news outlets, protests in the US centred on, or at least went through, similar districts: the wealthy areas along Minneapolis’ Lake Street on May 27 or Los Angeles’ Civic Center business area on May 27, for example, or again, on May 29, Atlanta’s Centennial Olympic Park, New York’s Lower Manhattan, and even the White House in Washington (New York Times 2021; see also Star Tribune 2020). This, of course, is a common strategy when defining march routes or negotiating them with the police (see, e.g., Graeber 2009, e.g., 80, 174, 293).

Second, the protests were mixed, along lines of ‘race,’ class, and gender, with some predictable tensions among the different series. Reports from participants emphasise this point. New York activists Shemon and Arturo write that ‘[w]hile this uprising was initiated by young black people, people of all colors and genders quickly joined in’, which in the case of working-class whites was met with suspicion by ‘Blacks militants’ waiting to see if they were ‘serious’ (2020). In the same vein, Houston organiser Ashton P. Woods rejoices that the protests reached ‘a critical mass’ involving whites, even if he believes that unlike blacks,

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<sup>15</sup> The BLM movement was created by three black women in 2013, following the acquittal of George Zimmerman, the neighbourhood watch volunteer who killed black teenager Trayvon Martin in Sanford, Florida. The George Floyd murder set off a new, unprecedented cycle of protests, largely organised through the ‘digital infrastructure’ the movement had developed (see Milman et al., 2021: 3).

they ‘don’t really understand’ who they should be ‘mad at’ (in Kirby, 2020). Robinson offers a similar analysis: ‘[i]f you were out on the street, you know you saw people of all different kinds’, but also ‘boundaries’ between them, as ‘bourgeois’ protesters wanted whites to go to the front and blacks to stay back (2020; see also McAdam, 2020). European participants tell a similar story of diversity and tensions across ‘race’ and class. As a protestor in Paris reports: ‘[w]hile [during the demonstration on] 6 June there was already a relative social and racial mix, on 13 June, a wide range of profiles were present on the *Place de la République*’, even if here as well one could notice an initial ‘rupture’ among them, as illustrated by this ‘young black protestor’ urging his friend not to ‘mix with those I don’t know what, antifas there’ (2020; my translation, here and below; see also Milman, 2021, on, e.g., Italy at 16).<sup>16</sup>

Third feature: protesters from different series were widely repressed by the police, as often with antipolice protests (Reynolds-Stenson, 2018), with police charges, teargassing, and ‘kettling’ documented in several demonstrations. Witness here the various video compilations and reports from investigative journalists, themselves the target of police violence (see, e.g., Thomas et al., 2020). For the US, a *Wikipedia* page has been created (Wikipedia, 2023), as well as an interactive database (Bellingcat and Forensic Architecture Research Collective, 2020). No such internet resources seem to have emerged in Europe but reports from newspapers and participants appear to conclusively establish widespread police repression (for France, see, e.g., Delouche-Bertolasi, 2020; *Le Média*, 2020). Thus one report, for instance, speaks of ‘the systematic installation of a climate of tension and violence on the part of the police when supervising the protests’ (*Paris-Luttes.info*, 2020).

If it important to emphasise these three aspects of the protests – the targeting of dominant neighbourhoods, diversity, often tense, and widespread repression – it is because they suggest the following analysis. First, whites, middle-class blacks, and working-class blacks joined the protests out of robust solidarity *for their own series*: most felt sympathy for George Floyd, no doubt, and perhaps for members of other series, but in view of the tensions I highlighted above, and in line with the analysis of the rifts between series I offered in the previous

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16 A survey from the Pew Research Centre in Washington confirms the experience of diversity in the US context: of the 6% of North Americans whom the survey estimates participated in a ‘protest/rally focused on racial equality’ in June 2020, 17% were Blacks, 22% Hispanics and 46% Whites (Barroso and Minkin, 2020). So does *Le Monde* regarding the June 2 demonstration in Paris (see 2020).

section, they certainly did not seem to identify with, feel trust or loyalty for, or indeed share the same goals as members of other series.<sup>17</sup> Yet second, and insofar as they subsequently experienced a form of repression similar to the very police brutality that typically affects only the black working class, it is plausible to suggest that the protests enabled them to develop a new sense of seriality, one capable of grounding robust antiracist solidarity across *their respective series*.<sup>18</sup> And third, this was largely made possible by the fact that the protests were organised where members of dominant racial groups would join them, insofar as many whites and middle-class blacks would not have participated if they had been staged in the disadvantaged milieux they rarely frequent.

In other words, the protests organised by BLM functioned as social milieux that disrupted the rift in the serialised experience of police brutality that prevents the racial structure from grounding the robust, inter-serial solidarity of white and middle-class black participants with working-class black people against racist police brutality. Though harmful in other respects, the racist brutality displayed by the police during the protests was close enough to the racist brutality which working-class black men and women experience in their everyday life to serialise whites, middle-class black and working-class black participants into a single robust solidarity-grounding series.<sup>19</sup>

More precisely, if in Sartre's bus example, dissimilar commuters are 'brought together', in Young's words, 'by their relation to a material object, the bus, and the social practices of public transportations' (1994: 725), so here black working-class participants, black middle-class participants, and white participants were united, across their dissimilarities, by their relation to lines of riot police, tear gas shots, and the racist practices of police brutality. Of these participants as well one can say that '[t]heir actions and [political] goals [were] different, and [that] they ha[d] nothing necessarily in common in their histories, experiences, or identities' (Young, 1994: 725), but that nevertheless they eventually

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17 Recall that, on the distinction between mutual sympathy and robust solidarity that I borrow from Shelby (2002: 237–39), mutual sympathy is not motivational for collective action and so could not have motivated participants to join the protests.

18 For an argument that, under current neoliberal conditions (in the US), white solidarity with blacks tends to be limited to sympathy, see Clemons (2022).

19 The racist brutality of the police at the protests is of course not identical to everyday racist violence. Thanks to Théophile Lavault and Livia Von Samson for helping me clarify this point.

experienced each other as constituting an impersonal collective – a single series – in their ‘common inability’ to deal with the ‘utterly hostile urban landscape’ created by police squads and flying gas canisters (Sartre 2004 [1976]: 277 and Graeber 2009: 160).

If this is right, then the BLM movement, by organising the George Floyd protests, contributed to laying the foundation of a form of robust inter-serial solidarity rooted in the serialised experience of social milieux structured by police violence.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, one might even suggest that the protests’ quasi-worldwide spread laid the foundation for a form of transnational – or trans-structural – antiracist solidarity between US protestors and others abroad.<sup>21</sup>

To focus on Europe and the US: while it is clear that European protests did not just refer to the US but also ‘adapted [their] anti-racist messages to the local contexts’, as Milman et al. insist (2021: 2; see also 30), many of them faced similar forms of police repression. In the US, the UK, Germany, France and Belgium, protestors were arrested (Narsee, 2021: 2). In France, the UK and the US, protestors were ‘kettled’ by police in riot gear, and in France and the US they were blinded by tear gas (compare, e.g., Paris-Luttes.info, 2020; Walters, 2020; CIVICUS, 2020; or Bolger and Speri, 2020).

National specificities notwithstanding, therefore, European and US protestors seem to have experienced forms of police brutality similar enough to unite them in a series capable of forming the basis of transnational collective action against racist police brutality. Thus in Italy, for example, ‘[a]fter the protests of June 2020’ various local groups ‘claimed to organize protests in solidarity with BLM (US)’, sometimes even ‘buil[ding] contact outside Italy and directly with BLM in the US’ (Milam et al., 2021: 16).

In this respect, it might be worth regarding BLM – the ‘Black avant-garde’ mentioned by Idris Robinson – as an instance of the kind of ‘avant-garde “cosmopolitan” movement’ which, as Ypi reminds us, has often proved instrumen-

<sup>20</sup> It might seem as though it is the police, not BLM, who are responsible for the transformative work here. But the police only reacted to BLM’s organising, and it seems more natural to say that BLM created the conditions for a serialising process in which the police took part. Indeed, the police was often little more than a feature of the socio-material environment, ‘the point where structural violence takes tangible shape’, as David Graeber once said of ‘[t]he line of riot cops’ (2009: 520, my emphasis). Thanks to Kerri Woods and Joshua Hobbs for inviting me to clarify this point.

<sup>21</sup> One might think that this is stretching the concept of a series too far. But while it is useful to distinguish between degrees of serialisation, ‘the unity of the series is’, as Young insists, ‘amorphous, without determinate limits, attributes, or intentions’ (Young, 1994: 726). Thanks to Xenophon Tenezakis for discussion.

tal in constructing transnational solidarity (Ypi, 2010: 121).<sup>22</sup> For in ‘connecting their local struggles’ to a transnational network of advocacy against racism understood as a global issue, antiracist activists on both sides of the Atlantic have been implementing what she calls ‘one of the most successful strategies for politically constructing solidarity’ (Ypi, 2010: 127) – one to which the International Women’s Suffrage Association of 1904, the recent #MeToo movement (see e.g., Pavard et al., 2020), and many other ‘transnational counter-publics’ (Valdez, 2019: 174) owe much of their achievements.<sup>23</sup> As such, the construction of a robust form of transnational racial solidarity against police brutality may already be underway.<sup>24</sup>

### Objections and Conclusion

It should be emphasised again at this stage that police brutality is only one dimension of the multifaceted segregation that characterises racial structures in Europe and the US. The experience of biased hiring processes is another, among many, and the protests did nothing to bridge this and other such rifts. But if the “police brutality” rift was bridged, if only for a time and to some extent, as many participants of different ‘races,’ classes and nationalities faced the symbolic-material apparatus of similarly repressive police forces, then the protests went some way towards modifying different racial structures in ways that can ground robust antiracist solidarity across them and the structural positions they define – or, to put it in Sartrian terms, in ways that can serialise different series, national and transnational, into a single one.

By way of conclusion, let me consider three objections one might put forward against my argument. The first goes as follows. I have argued that some racial structures cannot ground robust solidarity against racism if they are not modified in the right way by activists, for example by organising protests. But then what grounds the robust solidarity that motivates activists to modify these structures and to organise these protests? Or indeed the robust solidarity that made whites, middle-class blacks, and working-class blacks participate in these protests to begin with? Is it not their racial structure, prior to any modification

<sup>22</sup> The term ‘avant-garde’ need not have elitist implications, in keeping with Robinson’s claim that ‘[w]e were not leaders of the revolt’ but only ‘spearheaded’ or ‘initiated it’ (2020; see also Ypi, 2010: 128).

<sup>23</sup> In Ypi’s argument, cosmopolitan avant-gardes primarily aim at getting states to enact their favoured policies (2010: 125, but see 127), but I take her argument to apply more generally. For an account that departs from the usual (Kantian) focus on nation-states, see Valdez (2019; see also Çubukçu, 2018). Thanks to Jared Holley for pointing me in this direction.

<sup>24</sup> One might think that this is stretching the concept of a series too far. But while it is useful to distinguish between degrees of serialisation, ‘the unity of the series is’, as Young insists, ‘amorphous, without determinate limits, attributes, or intentions’ (Young, 1994: 726). Thanks to Xenophon Tenezakis for discussion.



by activists? And if it is, aren't the foundations of robust solidarity at issue in the debate I have been concerned with inherent to this racial structure, as Marin argues? This is an important objection: if successful, it would have us conclude that the protests did not lay the groundwork for the robust solidarity at issue but only made it more robust than it already was.

Yet this objection can be met. While the foundations of the robust solidarity that prompted activists to organise these protests and participants to join them are indeed inherent to their racial structure, it is not this robust solidarity whose foundations are at issue in the debate I have been concerned with. To see why, the first thing to recall is that, as we saw Marin argue in the third section, robust solidarity typically arises within series, not across them, as individuals organise into groups by taking up the socio-material environment that serialises them. But second, as I argued against Marin in the third section, whites, middle-class blacks, and working-class blacks do not belong to a single series, as if there were a single background common to all within the racial structure, but rather to different series, corresponding to structural positions segregated from one another. Third, this suggests that the robust solidarity that motivated them to organise or to join the protests was intra-serial, typically connecting them to people from their respective series, not to people from other series: as I argued in the fourth section, most whites or middle-class blacks felt sympathy for George Floyd and the black working-class, no doubt, and perhaps this sympathy was reciprocated, but they did not at this stage identify with one another, share the same values and goals, or develop a sense of trust and loyalty for each other.<sup>25</sup> Yet if so, fourth, it follows that while the robust intra-serial solidarity that prompted activists to organise the protests and participants to join them was indeed inherent to the racial structure, this is no threat to my argument: as I emphasised in the first section, robust intra-serial solidarity is not what is at issue in the debate I have been concerned with, all parties agreeing that effective antiracist politics require robust solidarity to come as close as possible to 'unity', or inter-serial solidarity. In this respect, far more is at stake in the pro-

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25 This allows for solidarity to arise absent any experience of a common socio-material environment, at least insofar as weak solidarity is concerned. Perhaps this may occur through the kind of political responsibility which Young takes to be based in our awareness of our social connection with others in relation to structural injustice (2011). But note that Young appears to take political responsibility to depend on seriality: she takes it to be grounded in participation in 'the social processes that we understand produce injustice', processes which she conceives in terms of the same 'practico-inert' reality that we saw above was central to her account of series (see 2011: 121 and 54; see also 105). Thanks to an anonymous reviewer from *Global Justice: Theory, Practice, Rhetoric* for altering me to these questions.

tests than the mere strengthening of the robust solidarity that prompted activists to organise them and participants to join them: the protests probably did strengthen this form of intra-serial solidarity, but they also laid the groundwork for it to become inter-serial, if only with respect to police brutality. Yet perhaps one might want to object as follows: if what motivated organisers and participants in the first place was robust intra-serial solidarity, then wasn't it this kind of solidarity that laid the groundwork for the robust inter-serial solidarity at issue, which would make the latter inherent to their racial structure after all, if indirectly so? This, however, strikes me as imprecise: short of their common exposure to police brutality at the protests, protestors from different series could not have begun to develop inter-serial solidarity – it is the organisation of this exposure by BLM that did the work there, indeed, the organisation of it in dominant neighbourhoods, not the features of their racial structure prior to BLM's modification. So insofar as we are concerned with robust inter-serial solidarity, or unity, then the first objection can be met: while the robust intra-serial solidarity against police brutality that explains why differently positioned actors organised or joined the protests in the first place is indeed grounded in the racial structure, the robust inter-serial solidarity at issue in the antiracist solidarity debate cannot be so grounded – unless the rifts in this structure are disrupted by activists, as I have argued the 'police brutality' rift was disrupted during the protests.<sup>26</sup>

The second objection worries that this "police brutality" rift might recur precisely where it is meant to be bridged, namely, at the protests. I have argued that, while, in general, whites and middle-class blacks are unlikely to stand in robust solidarity with working-class blacks against police brutality because, unlike them, they do not tend to face police brutality, they did at the protests, which therefore laid the groundwork for this kind of solidarity. But one might think that a segregated racial structure in which white and middle-class blacks do not tend to face police brutality also guarantees that, during the protests, they did not experience police brutality in the required way for them to develop a sense of seriality with working-class blacks. Perhaps whites did not experience police brutality as racist. And perhaps middle-class blacks and whites found a way to justify police brutality, say by blaming other (working-class?) participants for 'starting it' (this, after all, seems to be the default narrative of the mainstream, middle-class media; see Graeber, 2009: 453).

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<sup>26</sup> Thanks to another anonymous reviewer from *Global Justice: Theory, Practice, Rhetoric* for encouraging me to clarify this point.

But I think this objection can be resisted as well: a segregated racial structure does not imply that whites and middle-class blacks failed to experience the brutality of the police in the way working-class blacks do (and did). First, whites did appear to experience police brutality as racist, in both the individual and structural senses of the term: why would they suggest that blacks should go to the centre of the protests and they themselves to the front, if not in an attempt to minimise blacks' exposure to violence whose racist character puts them disproportionately at risk, both structurally speaking and at the protests themselves? (Robinson, 2020). Now, here one might insist that the violence from which they themselves suffered was qualitatively different from the harm inflicted upon black participants. But while the individually-racist violence inflicted by racist members of the riot police on black participants was indeed qualitatively different from the violence from which whites likely suffered, the structurally-racist violence of those members of the police who were only 'doing their job' (Young, 1990: 42) was arguably identical in relevant respects: as noted in the third section, structurally racist violence, like other forms of structural racism, often affects blacks indirectly, in the sense that it does not explicitly target them but happens to disproportionately harm them nonetheless as a result of a history of injustice towards them, and in this sort of cases nothing in the violence itself need distinguish being brutalised as white and being brutalised as black. Second, even if the socially tutored schemas of middle-class blacks (and whites) did incline them, prior to the protests, to justify police violence (against protestors specifically, rather than in general (or against blacks), for otherwise they would not have joined the protests in the first place), chances are that the behaviour of the police at the protests went a long way to challenge these schemas: after all, as David Graeber writes in his ethnography of direct action, 'people who wander onto the scene of an action [...] tend to be first startled, then outraged, on witnessing the conduct of police' (2009: 439). Granted, this response does assume that the influence of agents' experience of the material environment on their schemas is stronger than the opposite influence of their schemas on their experience of the material environment. But such an assumption is at the heart of the well-established method of ethnographical fieldwork, and while fieldworks do tend to last longer than the few weeks during which the protests 'shifted' the material environment of the racial structure (for this term, see Haslanger, 2017a: 10), there is reason to believe that the protests led white and middle-class black participants to at least begin to challenge whatever dispositions to justify racist police brutality they had (Louette, 2022), thereby preventing them from getting in the way of their incipient sense of seriality.<sup>27</sup>

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27 Thanks to Andrea Sangiovanni, Jelena Vasiljevic, Hope Bachmann and Joshua Hobbs for pressing me on these points.

This brings us, finally, to the third objection. Do I not overplay the transformative potential of whites and middle-class blacks' experience of being subjected to police brutality during the protests? Perhaps their experience of it at the protests was too short to enable them to develop any sense of seriality with working-class blacks – or, at any rate, any lasting sense of seriality.<sup>28</sup> This is another important objection, but one which I believe can be met as well.

As I noted at the start of the fourth section, the protests were more than discrete, one-off events. While participants did not protest every day, or even every week, the protests' material and symbolic effects lasted for a whole month in Paris and London, and longer in the United States: streets and squares, toppled statues, injured bodies and traumatised minds, all retained traces of police brutality in between the different protests, while the 'digital infrastructure' developed on Twitter by BLM, and extended by further media coverage, both alternative and mainstream, ensured that their meaning was not 'forgotten' (cf. Sewell, 1992: 13). Indeed, one should not forget the role played by memory in group and series formation: as Sartre notes regarding the gathering responsible for the storming of the Bastille in 1789, former 'skirmishes and repressed uprisings [...] had remained inside the gathering itself as an *exis*': 'a collective memory was passing into the common structure' (2004 [1976]: 358). In this passage Sartre is discussing the genesis of a group, but it seems to me that the same goes for the series from which such groups arise: as memories of police brutality remained actualised in the urban environment, and in the very bodies of the participants, long after the protests were over, they enabled white and middle-class participants to continue developing their sense of seriality with working-class blacks. What this suggests, then, is that whites' and middle-class blacks' experience of riot police brutality was not too short to unite them in a single series with working-class blacks. As I suggested in the fourth section above, however, we should be cautious not to overstate the case. Unlike working-class blacks, whites and middle-class blacks did not, and do not, experience police brutality on an ongoing basis, and their sense of seriality is likely to fade with time if it is not occasionally 'validated' materially (cf. Sewell, 1992: 13). But this seems to me to be a reason to organise (and attend) more protests

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<sup>28</sup> Thanks to Kerri Woods for raising this objection.

– not to neglect the transformative potential of the experience of police brutality they brought about.<sup>29</sup>

More needs to be said, of course. In particular, the temporally bounded serialisation processes which I am suggesting took place during the protests stand in need of further empirical examination.<sup>30</sup> But this is enough, I hope, to motivate the main claims of this paper. To wit: i) robust, inter-serial solidarity (unity) against racism is not inherent to a segregated racial structure, against Marin; ii) such a racial structure can only ground such antiracist solidarity if its rifts are bridged, if only temporarily, by activists, a necessary condition to serialising agents from different series into one; iii) the George Floyd protests went some way in this direction by bridging, to some extent, what I have called the “police brutality” rift, including transnationally.

If these claims hold, then perhaps – to leave the last word to activist Idris Robinson – ‘[we] saw how to end racism in the streets the first weeks after George Floyd was murdered’ (2020).<sup>31</sup>

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29 Two further remarks. First, one might wonder why I mention organising more protests rather than, say, screening documentaries on the issue or setting up more BLM-related twitter accounts. The answer, I have suggested elsewhere, is that the transformative potential of direct experience may be greater than that of the media, at least when what is to be transformed – say, one’s tutored dispositions, or one’s sense of seriality – is itself grounded in direct experience (Louette, 2022). Second, is it morally permissible for BLM activists to aim for the organisation of whites’ and middle-class blacks’ exposure to police brutality? While this question falls outside the scope of this paper, the answer will partly depend on whether doing so is a form of defensive harm, and in particular on whether it is ‘the least harmful available means’ of grounding robust solidarity (see Pasternak, 2019: 386). The first remark is relevant in this respect. Thanks to Avery Kolers for raising this issue.

30 For example, while the findings of the literature on the ‘opinion-mobilising effects’ of antiracist protests (e.g. Mazunder, 2018), including the George Floyd ones (Reny and Newman, 2021), tend to support the claim I have made in this paper (at least when it comes to white liberals), they focus on ‘protest exposure’, which includes but is not limited to protest participation.

31 Robinson is commenting on the fact that during the protests ‘[racial] boundaries began to dissolve’ (2020).

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