

Opinion

Minnesota Values White Comfort More Than Black Lives

As I walk around my hometown, I see so many boarded up buildings. Who is really being protected?



“White Noise, 2018” Chase Hall is an artist born in St. Paul, Minn. His colorful strokes on cotton canvas aim to create a visual language of resilience and empathy, in hopes of a racial literacy to better understand the painful inheritances of the past and its resonance with the present. Chase Hall

By Justin Ellis

Mr. Ellis, a Minneapolis native, is writing a book about how Black families in his hometown endure the racism they experience.

April 16, 2021

This story has been updated to reflect news developments.

MINNEAPOLIS — The morning the murder trial of Derek Chauvin, the former Minneapolis police officer charged with killing George Floyd, began, I was visiting my mom at a hospital just blocks from the courthouse. I remember noting that it was unseasonably warm for late March in this part of the Midwest. But that wasn't the most striking part of the day. Nor was the long line of satellite trucks or the reporters from around the world surrounding the Hennepin County Government Center. Instead, what gave me pause was all the plywood that encased the ground floor of the hospital's emergency department.

I came back to Minneapolis late last year to work on a book about how Black families have endured racism in the city where I grew up, and to support my mom during her cancer treatment. I've been keeping a mental list of the spaces that, since video surfaced of George Floyd's final moments beneath Derek Chauvin's knee, have become barricaded versions of their former selves. You can't move through this city without noticing the hardware stores with floor-to-ceiling wood coverings, the shuttered restaurants that didn't survive Covid or last summer's fires, and the brunch spots and boutiques that have hired local artists to soften their fortifications with strained messages like "In This Together," "Know Justice, Know Peace" and "Love Is All Around," which reads like a

cringeworthy homage to the theme song from “The Mary Tyler Moore Show.”

But there was something especially crushing about the plywood surrounding a building meant to give aid and care to people suffering in the city, leaving just enough room to expose signs reading “EMERGENCY” and “TRAUMA CENTER.”

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In the lead-up to Mr. Chauvin’s trial, city officials and business owners often talked about “bracing” for the public reaction, their focus seemingly on protecting the city’s buildings from any harm that might come from a repeat of the demonstrations against police violence that took place last summer.

More on racism and Minnesota

Examining the state where George Floyd and Daunte Wright were killed.



Opinion | David Lawrence Grant
What ‘Minnesota Nice’ Sweeps Under the Rug

The beloved stereotype about our state’s cult of politeness would have you believe that there’s no toehold for white supremacy here.

April 16, 2021



Opinion | Samuel L. Myers Jr.
Minnesota Is One of the Best Places to Live in America. Unless You’re Black.

The state’s reputation belies some of the country’s largest racial disparities.

April 16, 2021

Even before the verdict in Mr. Chauvin’s trial, the Twin Cities were pulled into fresh grief and rage over the killing of yet another unarmed Black man at the hands of the police.

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When Kim Potter, a police officer in Brooklyn Center, a town some 10 miles north of Minneapolis, shot and killed 20-year-old Daunte Wright last weekend, history repeated itself in Minnesota: the fences and barricades to keep protesters away from the Police Department, the tear gas used to disperse crowds, the nights of anger and destruction giving way to curfews imposed by local and state officials. Across the metropolitan area, contractors drilled plywood into place, all to protect structures from violence being done to — and in the name of — neighbors. All to protect the city from the unyielding reality facing its Black citizens.

I’m part of the third generation of my family that was born here. My great-grandparents joined in the great migration to land in Minneapolis, and over the years we’ve all seen how our neighbors choose to ignore the suffering of those of us who don’t look like

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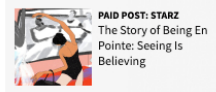
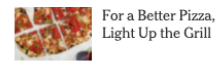


Beard Crusader

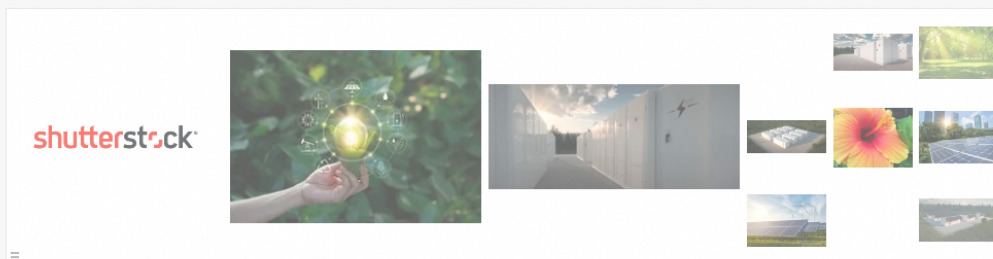


them. The ubiquitous yard signs saying, “All Are Welcome Here,” “Love Is Love” and “Black Lives Matter” don’t change the fact that sections of this city have been hiding behind barriers for a long time, since before the trial started, before Mr. Floyd was killed, and before Mr. Wright was gunned down. Through history, the barricades have taken many forms, like federal boarding schools that [forcibly separated Native American children](#) from their parents and deeds that kept Black families out of neighborhoods in Minneapolis and St. Paul. Today they are temporary barriers made from the materials needed to build a shed.

Brooklyn Center, where Mr. Wright was killed, is one of the more diverse cities in Minnesota, with Black, Hispanic, Asian, Indigenous and immigrant residents making up the majority of the population. That’s one city of roughly 30,000 people. This is where it’s important to note that in 1970 Black residents were still less than 1 percent of Minnesota’s total population; by 2019, that number had risen to only 7 percent. There are more Black people in the city of Detroit than in the entire state of Minnesota.



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Still, Black drivers [account for the majority of traffic stops and searches](#) by Minneapolis police. Officers use force against Black people at a [rate seven times greater than against whites](#). According to a Minneapolis Star Tribune [database of police-related deaths](#) of Minnesotans since 2000, Blacks account for 27 percent of the deaths in police encounters.

Whether you call this the result of white supremacy, or a white majority, the consequences are the same. The state has its boot on the necks of the Black people who make up less than 10 percent of its residents. When you are left at the mercy of the state and given no option to heal, fury becomes your voice and your only tool. And in preparing for the Chauvin trial and protecting property against the reaction to whatever verdict is announced, those who have power in Minnesota made clear to us, yet again, what matters most to them.

[Gov. Tim Walz, announcing a curfew](#) for the counties covering much of the Twin Cities the day after Mr. Wright was shot, directed his comments at those who planned to “exploit these tragedies for destruction or personal gain,” warning, “You can rest assured that the largest police presence in Minnesota history in coordination will be prepared.” Judging by the growing number of National Guard members I’ve seen occupying the corners of my neighborhood — just miles away from Brooklyn Center — in recent days, that’s not an understatement.

Law enforcement made a plan for managing security around the Chauvin trial, a massive team-up between Twin Cities area police departments, state police, local sheriffs’ deputies and Minnesota National Guard members capable of flooding the region with thousands of officers at a moments notice.

The goal, as the Hennepin County sheriff put it [in an op-ed for The Star Tribune](#) was “to preserve the First Amendment rights of

[New York](#), was to preserve the constitutional rights of those who wish to protest while, at the same time, fulfilling our mission of protecting property, ensuring public safety and guaranteeing the sanctity of the judicial process.” Naturally they named it Operation Safety Net. It’s not subtle. They want to offer comfort to those they deem worthy of saving, rather than the Black and brown residents who are subject to relentless brutality.

They’ve lived up to that promise almost every night outside the Brooklyn Center Police Department for the past week. In their quest to maintain order they’ve met demonstrators with increasing numbers of police officers and National Guard members, armed with tear gas, flash bang grenades and rubber bullets. All these defensive measures have upended the lives of families living across the street from the police headquarters at the Sterling Square Apartments, a complex filled with Black and immigrant families. It should be the safest place in Brooklyn Center; now residents are [evacuating into area hotels](#).

For the second time in less than a year, a Minnesota police officer will face manslaughter charges for killing a Black man. Ms. Potter has resigned. Brooklyn Center’s police chief, who has said he believes Ms. Potter mistook her gun for a Taser, has also stepped down. But that doesn’t change the fact that another Black child has been left without a father because of a police officer’s actions. In Minnesota, we’ve had two cases and two sets of all-too-familiar facts: Daunte Wright and George Floyd died from over-policing. They’re not alone. At George Floyd square, the monument that has grown from the scene where Mr. Floyd died, the names of those killed by police are written on the pavement. At the protests in Brooklyn Center those names have been read aloud in exasperation and rage.

As the city awaited a verdict in Mr. Chauvin’s trial, Minnesota’s leaders postured for peace while fortifying against the cries of the most vulnerable. It’s an act of desperation — if not outright cowardice — to spare no expense in military might while investing in the cheapest plywood, all in an effort to protect this state’s investment in whiteness. If power has to be maintained through overwhelming force, or even hastily built barriers, those of us standing in trauma on the other side have to wonder who’s really being protected.

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