## Black Lives Matter in London, June 2020: Patrick Hutchinson, Instant Celebrity, and Changing Discourses of Race and Class in British Media

'On Saturday 13th June 2020, Jamaine Facey, Lee Russell, Chris Otokito and Patrick Hutchinson's lives turned upside down.' (opening lines of 'About UTCAI' [the charity *United to Change and Inspire*], UTCAI website.)

Some of the most resonant and widely viewed images generated by the wave of Black Lives Matter activism in the spring and early summer of 2020 showed Patrick Hutchinson, a personal trainer from Wimbledon in South London. On 13 June, following violent clashes between police and right-wing anti-BLM protesters, Hutchinson was photographed carrying to safety a bewildered-looking white man later identified as 'ex-undercover policeman and Millwall [football club] fan Bryn Male'. After the image was disseminated on social media and via news channels, Hutchinson was hailed as a 'Black hero' in the leftleaning Mirror (Kitching and Shadwell 14 June 2020), and as a national hero by a spokesperson for the UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson and on the website of the centre-right newspaper the Daily Mail. This heroic status was subsequently confirmed by, among many others, Michelle Obama, Prince Harry, American Civil Rights leader Rev. Al Sharpton, Mayor of London Sadiq Khan, and GQ and Vogue magazines. The power and meaning of Hutchinson's image were widely discussed in the immediate aftermath of 13 June and in later attempts to reckon with the apparent success of the Black Lives Matter movement in changing mainstream attitudes to 'race' during that Spring and Summer. In year-end retrospectives, viewers of CNN rated the incident the 'Most Inspiring Moment' of the year during the network's annual 'CNN Heroes: An All-Star Tribute' (Torgan 2021), while the Observer newspaper celebrated Hutchinson's rescue photograph as a 'defining image of Black Lives Matter' (Iqbal 2020).

But how far did the terms of that definition reflect changing discourses of 'race,' masculinity and class? In the *Observer* article, journalist Nosheen Igbal noted Hutchinson's discomfort with the terms of his 'lionisation' - 'as one that proves the strength of unity over division, of human kindness over brutality' (Iqbal 2020). This was a pointed summary of how Hutchinson's heroism was read in much mainstream media, and it does have some progressive aspects. Inherited dominant terms of racial discourse are inverted and reconstructed, such that blackness is figured through Hutchinson in terms of kindness, and a human solidarity that transcends racial difference, while through Male, whiteness is associated not only with division and brutality, but also with an embattled sense of racial particularity itself (and hence differentiated with the historical passing-off of white middle-class experience as racially unmarked, or 'universal'). Yet it is uncomfortable to see black heroism being constructed in terms of a black person's apparently choosing to disaffiliate from racial identity, especially when that person is being interpolated as an icon of the Black Lives Matter movement. I argue that Hutchinson was initially interpolated as a 'black', 'national' hero in June 2020 in large part through an incipient mainstream discourse of racial celebrity that, at best, in its primary focus on selected individuals, most powerfully perhaps the Obamas, tend to preclude a systematic and institutional understanding of racism (see Cashmore 2012). At worst, that discourse perpetuates a highly problematic stereotype of black selflessness in the 'assimilationist manner' that has been subjected to extensive critique (see West 1990,

p. 29). Crucially though, as Iqbal was able to point out, by December 2020, with a PR, a manager and a publisher, and through a book *Everyone Against Racism: A Letter To My Children*, and a charity *United to Change and Inspire*, Hutchinson was 'in a realm of modern fame and influence that he hopes to spin for good' (Iqbal 2020). Patrick Hutchinson therefore should be seen as wielding a form of 'celebrity power'; that is, 'discursive and ideological power' within the 'spectacular economy' of celebrity (Howell and Parry-Giles 2015, p. 610). Taking up the hope that this might be 'spun for good,' my aim is to show how his progressive anti-racist agenda can be mapped on to the formal terms in which he has inhabited celebrity, for example how in the aftermath of June 2020 audiences were presented with insights into his 'authentic' feelings and motivations (Gamson 1994, pp. 142-49; 169-171, and Turner 2013, pp. 123-4). Not simply an icon, Hutchinson is significant for his apparent success in using his instant and unsought celebrity to fight racial inequality, making interventions to clarify his own motivations and affiliations, and to shape and contest the uses to which his image has been put.

The beginnings of Hutchinson's unsought instant celebrity bear out the continued importance of Cornel West's call to 'investigate and interrogate the other of Blackness – Whiteness' (West 1990, p. 29). Much of the affective power generated by the photograph of him carrying Male must have derived from the parallels between this very physical incarnation of cross-racial humanitarianism and the horrific video of Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin kneeling on George Floyd, taken by teenager Darnella Frazier and widely disseminated in the days leading up to 13 June. The framing of both sets of images emphasized the close physical relation of two racially differentiated males, relegating to the periphery other police officers and witnesses, and a packed crowd including Hutchinson's fellow activists, respectively. Here though the prone, limp, and semi-exposed body of the white male rescuee symbolically renders abject a subject position that might be read as white (racist) middle-aged masculinity. That body was further particularised in subsequent reporting via Male's identification both as an ex-policeman (a retired officer in the British Transport Police), and as a supporter of Millwall F.C., a club popularly and historically if perhaps unfairly regarded as being associated with violent fans. These identifications might sustain a range of perspectives and investments. (At one extreme, sculptor Hector Guest has produced a bronze statue of Hutchinson, inserting his own image in place of Male, 'as this has been an introspective journey for me' [Guest 2021].) In the wider context of June 2020, readings of Male as a policeman 'gone rogue' and then shorn of privilege resonated with the holding of Chauvin to account and his subsequent conviction for murder in the second degree. At the same time, the widely disseminated image of Hutchinson carrying Male in his arms offered to a potentially global audience a redemptive counterpoint to images of police brutality culminating (so far) in the murder of George Floyd, that had widely circulated since Floyd's death on 25 May. Within a specifically British context though, key to the image's immediate meaning was its occasioning by the right-wing backlash against Black Lives Matter, one that had already been focalised in the media by another working-class white male fall-guy.

After a spring in which the Black Lives Matter movement was treated sympathetically in mainstream media, when statements of support for its aims were becoming expected from corporations, celebrities, politicians, and in social media, 13 June witnessed the first really visible backlash (although a few days later it was belatedly reported from Bristol that the grave of an enslaved person known as Scipio

Africanus had been vandalised.) Early June saw anti-racism protests across the UK, a small number of which (principally in Oxford and Bristol) targeted monuments to historical figures implicated in the slave trade. Subsequently, plans for Black Lives Matter demonstrations in central London on 13 June were challenged by government warnings over public order and the COVID-19 lockdown, and by a counter-demonstration under the slogan 'Save Our Statues', organized by right-wing groups drawing on loose networks among men's football supporters. After the BLM protests were strategically scaled down in response, it was the counter-protesters who clashed violently with police, in Whitehall and near the Houses of Parliament, the seats of political authority in central London, resulting in more than one hundred arrests. Social media and news sites showed violent scenes of groups of white men fighting with police.

As the right-wing counter-protesters started to disperse from central London, Andrew Banks, a 28 year-old white male, was photographed urinating outside the Houses of Parliament, beside a plaque commemorating PC Keith Palmer, a policeman murdered in a terrorist attack in March 2017. Within hours, Home Secretary Priti Patel had tweeted the incriminating photograph with a one-word caption: 'Shameful' (Patel 13 June 2020). Almost as much as Hutchinson would become a prominent face of Black Lives Matter, Banks's image, rather than videos of street fighting, became a visual shorthand for the counter-protest. On the BBC news website, for example, a page on the counter-protests led with a short video of the violent clashes, and its condemnation as 'racist thuggery' by Prime Minister Boris Johnson, before reproducing the photograph of Banks urinating next to the memorial (BBC 14 June 2020). Explication was hyperlinked to a separate page and accompanied by condemnation of Banks specifically from Home Secretary Priti Patel, Metropolitan Police Commander Bas Javid, and Conservative MP Tobias Ellwood.

If the focus on Banks implicitly trivialised and directed attention away from the far-right's use of violence, it also offered a convenient scapegoat for the historical failures to address racism that the Black Lives Matter protests were highlighting. Within two days, Banks was tried for outraging public decency and sentenced to two weeks in prison. Addressing him, the presiding judge, Chief Magistrate Emma Arbuthnot pointed out that 'The irony is rather than protecting the monuments, you almost urinated on one' (BBC 15 June 2020 [1]). This widely-reported observation helped to shift public attention from debates over a racially-conflicted national heritage to one white man's disgrace. But not just any kind of white man. If Arbuthnot, Baroness of Edrom and spouse of a Conservative peer, was an impeccably Establishment figure<sup>1</sup>, Banks was portrayed as a generic example of the white working class.

Beyond his identification as a Tottenham Hotspur supporter from Stansted in Essex, and that he had turned himself in under pressure from his father, almost nothing was said about Banks's personal life. This contrasts sharply with otherwise similar cases differentiated from Banks in class terms and

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> In 2019 Arbuthnot attracted some criticism for initially refusing to recuse herself from presiding over the hearings concerning the extradition of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange. Shortly after the Banks case, in October 2020, she was appointed to the High Court.

unconnected with the charged racial and violent context of June 2020.<sup>2</sup> Banks's generic identification with white working-class masculinity by the BBC and others meant that his punishment did not challenge white privilege as such, but rather performed its strategic withdrawal. The swift justice meted out to this particular bad white guy was therefore not so much a blow in the fight against racism as the politically loaded assurance that the judicial system (not protest or reform for example) was already engaged in winning that fight. This was consonant with the claim from the Prime Minister's Office on 8 June that Britain was 'not a racist country' (Johnson 2020). Locking up Banks meant locking down a more systematic challenge to British institutions.

Banks's story was supplanted as the dominant narrative of the day by the Hutchinson/Male incident, which took place a few hours later, a mile or so across London on the South Bank of the Thames. In the immediate context of 13 June though it completed a circuit from the shameful behaviour of white working-class men, to a moment of national redemption achieved by the selfless act of a black man possessed of 'instincts ... that ... represent the best of us' in the words of a spokesperson for Prime Minister Boris Johnson (quoted in Courtney-Guy 15 June 2020). Some of the problems with this description can be indicated by reference to an existing stereotype of Black masculinity described by sociologist of race Michael Hughey as 'an explicitly positive, but latently racist character in Hollywood film—the "magical negro" (Hughey 2009, p. 544). Elaborating a critique initiated by film-maker Spike Lee (Gonzalez 2001), Hughey points out that films such as *The Green Mile* (1999) and *The Legend of Bagger Vance* (2000) portray black men with extraordinary powers, but

these powers are used to save and transform dishevelled, uncultured, lost, or broken whites (almost exclusively white men) into competent, successful, and content people. The MN ['magical negro'] is a product of white culture for white viewers, maintaining racial subordination. (Hughey 2009, p. 544).

Despite the evident differences in cultural and national location, British media news discourses paralleled this American racial construction precisely in its white-centrism and depoliticization of 'race' in which histories of exploitation are rewritten in terms of cross-racial individual male bonding that border on the mythic. The Hutchinson/Male image was framed by the UK government and many of the mainstream media so as to isolate Hutchinson as a heroic individual instinctively choosing a wider human and civic responsibility one that transcended the history of racial injury against which Black Lives Matter orientated its protest. Coverage and commentary emphasising his extraordinary strength, and 'quiet gallantry', belongs within this possibly well-meaning but still white-centred discourse – the kind of thinking that for example presents Rosa Parks as a nice lady whose feet were tired, rather than a lifelong campaigner participating in strategic actions.

(Wainwright 26 November 2009).

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> For example, one Philip Laing, a student caught urinating on the war memorial in Sheffield city centre in 2009, was presented as a highly individuated member of a middle-class family, whose education, potential career, and parents' occupations, were all not only cited as mitigating factors in his legal defence (and successfully so, as he escaped a custodial sentence), but also reported in detail

Incidentally, but not merely by coincidence, Boris Johnson's statement exemplifies how mainstream media representations made a crucial revision to the 'magical negro' narrative. Bryn Male was no Tom Hanks. 'Dishevelled' and 'lost' as he appeared, Male might have been rescued but he was not going to be redeemed. His identification as a former undercover cop gone rogue fully scripted him according to the same declination narrative of white masculinity through which Banks had been represented. Similarly, this partial symbolic address to racial injustice left major bastions of white privilege out of the picture entirely.

There are a several good reasons then for being critical of the terms in which Hutchinson's image became so resonant. Importantly, however, in the days that followed, that image was recontextualised in ways much more consonant with both longstanding traditions of the Civil Rights movement, and the Black Lives Matter movement's 'ongoing counter-hegemonic discursive construction of blackness as powerful and politically engaged' (Duvall and Heckemeyer 2018, p. 402). In a succession of interviews, Hutchinson's 'authentic' perspective was revealed, in a way that implicitly contested the framing of his actions in terms of a spontaneous sense of civic duty transcending racial specificity, and on the contrary, explicitly embedded his heroism in a communal, planned action taken on with friends to help maintain safety at the Black Lives Matter demonstration, to safeguard the reputation of the movement and above all, to prevent black youths becoming vulnerable to racially skewed policing.

In mainstream UK media, Channel 4 television's News programme, shown daily at 7pm, took the lead in disseminating and amplifying this consciousness of the traditions of black community organisation. After Hutchinson was initially identified via social media, he was featured heavily on Chanel 4 News on broadcast television and online over the next several days. In a seven-minute segment first aired on 14 June entitled 'Man who saved protestor at London rally speaks out', Hutchinson was filmed with a group of friends involved in the rescue (Jamaine Facey, Lee Russell, and Chris Otokito) in an extended discussion, parts of which were subsequently broadcast by various other media, including the BBC. These interviews made it clear that, in the words of Facey, 'I wasn't protecting him [Male]. I was protecting our kids' (Channel 4 News 14 June 2020). Hutchinson pointed out that 'We' (my emphasis) he said, 'stopped somebody from being killed' (Channel 4 News 14 June 2020, and BBC website 15 June 2020 [2]), adding that had Minneapolis police acted the same way, George Floyd would still be alive. The voiceover went on to contrast the men with the Conservative government's facile response to BLM, asserting that 'actions speak louder than words.' The following evening, Channel 4 News carried an interview with Rev. Al Sharpton, veteran campaigner for civil rights and in defence of black victims of police violence, who served as a symbolic connection to international Civil Rights struggles, and made explicit the links between Hutchinson, Black Lives Matter, and historical campaigners such as Martin Luther King Jr and Mahatma Ghandi. Through knowledge of Hutchinson's being embedded in grassroots community protest and organisation, his actions could be seen as thoroughly in keeping with black traditions of resistance, while no less a product of 'common' decency and civil responsibility. Starting with the Channel 4 interview, Hutchinson continually emphasised that he had acted not alone but as a member of a group of men who came to be known loosely as 'the fathers', who had deliberately attended the Black Lives Matter demonstration in an unofficial role of stewardship.

These and further struggles over the significance of the Hutchinson/Male image continued through 2020, reflecting its power but also its capacity to elicit contesting investments. When murals of the image went up in several locations in London, they attracted criticism as aspects of gentrification, or had their intended meaning turned around. In South London one was graffitied with the text: 'WE DON'T RESCUE RACISTS IN LEWISHAM/WE RUN THEM OUT'. Such interventions prompt viewers to recognise the premature nature of the universal/transcendent ideological framing of the Hutchinson/Male image, while articulating the sense of resistance that, in his initial comments, Hutchinson deliberately set out to channel into peaceful protest. That self-characterisation as setting out to safeguard order has always been at odds with views that the power of Black Lives Matter lies in its insurgent nature, and for some this has made him an unlikely 'face' of the movement. But the extension of Hutchinson's celebrity beyond news media has become a site where these tensions are played out sympathetically, contributing to the centralisation of BLM in public debates about race and racial history, and working to resist tendencies in the Conservative government and parts of the media to stigmatise BLM by associating it with violence and disorder (the difference between mainstream US and UK media is striking here). While the iconicity of the original images continues to rebuke attempts to characterise Black Lives Matter as a threat to public order, Hutchinson has professed himself unsurprised by the graffiti on the Lewisham mural (White 2020) and he has continued to intervene to clarify his own motivations and the strategic context for the 'rescue', telling Nosheen Iqbal that

Some people have asked me why I bothered saving him [Male], and I understand their frustration [...] But my natural instinct is to protect the vulnerable. If that man had died, the whole Black Lives Matter movement would have been torpedoed. Young black men would have gone to prison and had their lives ruined. I wasn't just protecting that guy – I was protecting us. (Iqbal 2020)

Among other things, what is particularly persuasive about this comment is how it signifies on the race-erasing 'humanistic' discourse of the Prime Minister and the *Mail Online* ('my natural instinct is to protect the vulnerable'), while insisting on a systematic and institutional understanding of racism as one of the root causes of much human vulnerability. Along the way, what is 'torpedoed,' or countered, is not BLM but the very twenty-first century discourse of a 'bad' whiteness personified by white working-class male figures, which serves to distract attention from the rootedness of the established judicial and political order in racial power.

It is worth finally turning to consider how the public persona developed by Hutchinson since June 2020 contests not only that racial power, but also the mediated processes by which 'accidental celebrities' or 'quasars' circulate 'as an effect of the contemporary operation of the news media' (Turner 2013, p. 24). From his debut as a speaking subject on Channel 4 News, Hutchinson has resisted reduction to 'a discursive effect' or a 'commodity' (Turner 2013, p. 10), going on both to prolong his celebrity power and put it in the service of the institutional contestation of racism, via public appearances, his book, and the charity he co-founded, UTCAI (United to Change and Inspire). From the first statement on its homepage, quoted as an epigraph above, UTCAI presents itself as a group activity and contests mainstream media's construction of Hutchinson as a lone hero.

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Still, it is not yet apparent that UTCAI's emphasis on community organisation is fully recognised in the mainstream news media that brought Hutchinson to prominence, and indeed discourses of celebrity seem to remain essentially individualistic, precluding the recognition of communal and organizational forms of agency. It is salutary to note that it did not take long for he and his allies to be supplanted by coverage of a different kind of black hero. Only one day after Hutchinson's Channel 4 interview, on Monday 15 June, the England international footballer Marcus Rashford won a campaign to reverse government policy on providing meals for children in poverty during the summer school holidays; his photograph appeared on almost every newspaper front page the next day. No doubt Rashford better fitted the discursive regime of celebrity, while his moral appeal, launched from the position of an elite sportsman, in the name of social solidarity rather than racial justice, was also more easily assimilated than BLM into mainstream discourses of race and class.<sup>3</sup>

However, such a pessimistic observation may be predetermined by an overly narrow conceptualisation of celebrity power which positions it as an object of analysis within the spectacular economy. The UTCAI website is a model of making links in and through that economy. On the one hand it offers for sale mugs and hoodies featuring Hutchinson's most famous comment and essential message: 'IT'S NOT BLACK VERSUS WHITE. IT'S EVERYONE VERSUS RACISM.' On the other hand, profits from such sales are channelled into its promotion of four 'Pillars' of anti-racism: Education, Youth Development, Mental Health and Wellbeing, and Criminal Justice. In the final analysis, what the example of Patrick Hutchinson shows more than anything, is how the spectacular economy can (still) be disrupted by traditions of community organisation and leadership associated with the 'classic' phase of the Civil Rights movement, updated in the moment of Black Lives Matter.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> In comparison with mainstream celebrity, see the work of organisations such as Black Cultural Archives, the national heritage centre dedicated to collecting, preserving and celebrating the histories of African and Caribbean people in Britain. (Black Cultural Archives, 2020).

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> That hybridity is also evident on the Black Lives Matter website, which mixes a 'traditional' emphasis on community resistance with an explicitly intersectional framing of identity formation.

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