

Take a Knee

By Genny Lim

Like everyone else I was thrilled by Amanda Gorman's stunning poetry performance at the Inauguration. Her youthfulness, confidence and eloquence was inspiring to most of us who watched in horror at the Capitol insurrection just two weeks before. Gorman's spellbinding delivery aside, however, we might do well to pay attention to her message.

We all know no poet gets invited to the podium to recite, unless it's a feel good performance about how hope makes us so great because look how some nobody like me got to upstage one of the most important moments in our country's electoral history. Gorman says this country is "not broke, just uncompleted." Many of us would disagree and argue that it IS broke and no amount of grandstanding or back-patting is going to change our atrocities at home or abroad from detention cages, police brutality and the pandemic tragedy to wars and regime changes against foreign, sovereign, democratically elected governments. What the AG phenomenon tells us is that propaganda, not truth, especially uncomfortable truths, is what our founding and present fathers, left or right, will tolerate and reward. Amanda was and is a bright light and it is not her fault that the country is in the shape it's in, but I hope she and other artists don't get used to whitewash the glaring problems that persist, because this is definitely not the moment to think we've overcome darkness.

Every four years we get to resurrect the dream of the republic and polish the rust off its thin veneer with symbolic gestures, like putting Harriet Tubman on 20 dollar bills, electing the first African-Asian woman as Vice President or selecting an African American youth poet laureate to deliver the Inaugural poem before all the world. Are these historic firsts aimed to placate looming discontent and cynicism with a show of diversity, inclusivity and hope to the world? Or do these anomalies, signal real social change?

Gorman's Cinderella transformation from 'skinny little brown girl,' to national Style Icon, (whose inaugural red headband is flying off the shelves), reaffirms the American Dream is still very much alive. Gorman's is a modern-day Black rags to riches, Horatio Alger story. A duckling who became a swan overnight right before our very eyes. A most unlikely candidate to reach the pinnacle of success, she proves to the rest of us ducks on the sidelines that all it takes is talent, drive and belief in the inherent goodness of the system, to be rewarded. Armed with skyrocketing sales for advance copies of books rushed to print, a modeling deal with IMG and a coveted featured appearance at the opening of the NFL Super Bowl, such success is indeed the stuff of fairy tales and childhood dreams.

And yet, I'm bothered. What's wrong with this picture? Something doesn't feel right. I'll have to try and put a finger on what I find disturbing. At risk of stealing Gorman's thunder, we have to question the symbolism of foisting Amanda centerstage at the most American and most celebrated of all national spectacles, the Super Bowl. At a time when the NFL is still smarting from charges of racism for firing Kaepernick and marking

him persona non grata for taking a knee against racial violence, we might construe its gestures of Black acknowledgement as hollow and calculated P.R. attempts at damage control. NFL's partnership with Jay Z to provide live entertainment for the league in its stated effort to promote social justice was a big PR move to avoid boycotts from its sizable Black and Brown audiences. If NFL was really committed to social justice, wouldn't the most simple and logical step be to reinstate Kaepernick? But they didn't and won't, because it would set a precedent for other athletes to speak out. And that would be anathema to the league's plantation system worth billions.

But the systemic racism in the NFL is so sinister and mendacious that even its own expert clinicians are confessing regret for participating in its practice of "race norming selection," which utilizes a different pair of cognitive and scoring standards to test white and Black athletes. The apartheid system assumes that Black players have lower levels of cognitive functioning than their white counterparts so in order for them qualify for injury compensation, they must be required to show larger cognitive declines than their white counterparts. Former players, Kevin Henry and Najeh Davenport have sued the NFL for "explicitly and deliberately" discriminating against Black players in dementia-related claims. NFL's concussion settlement policy is blatantly racist and has to be changed. But it won't, if prominent Black celebrities and artists continue to act as their tools.

If Gorman doesn't want to play into the NFL's hands, she ought not ignore its glaring, unresolved racist issues. Either she addresses the mistreatment of Kaepernick and other harmed players by the NFL for its exploitation of Black athletes with little regard for their humanity or respect for their right to free speech and equal treatment or she glosses over or ignores the politics altogether. Which is what I understand she will be doing, by delivering a safe tribute poem for victims of the pandemic. Any sin of omission, however, diminishes her credibility as a poet spokesperson and could reduce her image to that of a token or worse, a sell-out, before a large segment of the youth, progressive and BLM activists, to many of her literary peers and to a significant swath of communities of color on the frontlines in the fight for social justice. Poets fancy themselves, after all, not as entertainers, but as the griots, truth tellers and voices of conscience for their communities.

Amanda Gorman is in a uniquely precarious position. With all eyes in the nation on her she has to walk a fine line. How she manages her role as national spokesperson will attest to her integrity and ultimately, her moral relevance. Given her youth, she will be excused for some pitfalls, but she will have to weigh her choices with the implications and consequences they bear. Celebrity comes at a cost and all power presumes responsibility. Gorman echoes Biden's plea to heal and unify in her description of a country that is "not bruised, but whole." But what does this unity look like? We need to look beyond the rhetoric and symbolism and press for substance in meaning, not window dressing of lies.

For those of us Bernie supporters, who felt swindled by the DNC, first with Hillary in 2016 and then with Biden, in 2020, the duopoly of change with no change that's locked

us into the interminable status quo of endless wars and Corporatism, Biden must prove to us that he, being the lesser of evils, was worth fighting for. He has to show us progressives, who have lost all faith in the Democratic Party, that he will close loopholes that have resulted in an obscene wealth gap with Billionaires reaping over a trillion dollars during the pandemic at the expense of suffering Americans. He must address racial profiling and racism in the U.S. criminal justice system and in law enforcement. A federal audit of acquittal cases for killer cops under grand juries as well as a federal review and investigations into policing tactics and training of police throughout the country is desperately needed.

The Biden/Harris victory after Trump was a great relief. Indeed, a godsend, after the catastrophic four years of Dixiecrat reign. Never had we experienced such brazen and unabashed attacks of White Nationalism on our nation, since Jim Crow days, than under Trump. The Apprentice host, business-man cum cult leader, sowed racial hatred, political division, xenophobia, police violence against Black and Brown citizens and 400,000 Covid deaths due to criminal neglect, incompetence and corruption. His failure to organize any national health infrastructure, policy or plan to manage and tackle coronavirus and his continued denial and cover-up of the gravity of the virus left the country in what some say in even worse shape than it was during the Depression. Given what I would describe as the cruel and unusual punishment we were subjected to these last four years, can we really just chuck it all to bad experience and move on?

Biden's immediate call for unity and harmony after the armed insurrection and attempted coup to abort the Biden presidency on January 6th leaves many questions unanswered. What does unity and harmony mean? Biden's message of healing comes as a humble and welcome change from the narcissism, lies and incompetence of his predecessor, but for those of us who watched aghast on television at the violent mob storming through the Capitol right before our eyes, waving Trump, Confederate and Israeli flags and wearing Nazi and White Supremacist symbols, calling to assassinate government leaders and demanding the return of Trump, it might smack as a bit of a cop-out or sign of weakness.

Four years of Twitter indoctrination and lies, prepared Trump's loyal cult followers for their final day of reckoning on January 7th. One cannot unite with violence. These extremists are now emboldened by the attack on the Capitol and have triggered a Homeland Security National Security Alert against possible attacks on lawmakers in revenge for Trump's defeat. Until the hypocrisies, contradictions and double-standards of our criminal justice system, which allow white domestic terrorists, like Kyle Rittenhouse, who after killing two protestors and wounding one, could not get arrested for the life of him, even with an assault rifle slung over his shoulder as he walked past police tanks with his hands raised, are addressed.

There can be no true or lasting unity or harmony without accountability. Healing and unity are noble ends, but they should not be political expedients. With positive signs on the horizon, we must not relinquish our demands or let up on our vigilance to hold our government accountable. This goes for artists as well, because they have the capacity

to reach and influence the masses with what they say. This is a defining moment in our nation's history. What we say and do matters.

Will we allow White Supremacists to rewrite our history books to say that the 2020 Election was stolen from Trump? Will we allow the color of our skins, our gender, our poems, our art, our hopes and dreams to be paralyzed or parlayed into political capital for the ruling elite? If we are to ever unlearn racism, we have to unlearn its lies. We have to unpack the myths that founded this country and we have to expose its insidious narratives by replacing the falsehoods with truth and facts. We have to out the mythic heroes from Columbus to Andrew Jackson and Alexander Hamilton, by not glorifying such Conquistadores, Indian killers and slaveowners. We have to have the moral courage and critical stamina to break free of the shackles of indoctrination and misinformation so we can shatter the entire iconography of oppression.

We cannot sugarcoat, downplay or cover up the reality. We must tell the truth. We can't afford to backslide and lose ground or succumb to the blandishments and temptations of the very system that has broken the backs of our people. Rather than dancing for the gatekeepers and basking in the glory of their adoration, we need to take a knee in solidarity with our truth tellers, our real heroes, like Colin Kaepernick, who unapologetically and courageously, took a knee, against all odds, for real social change.