Did COVID-19 Make Me an Afro-Pessimist? A Conversation in Three Parts

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Abstract: As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to rage and disproportionately affect BIPOC, we keep count of the death toll around the world, in the U.S., in our own communities and in our own families. How can we have a “wish to live,” while so many around us die? Does a space exist between fateful (faithful) optimism present in Aretha Franklin’s, “Mary Don’t You Weep?” and the ever-present power structure, that as Reverend Al Sharpton noted, has always had its knee on our necks? More concretely, how do we reconcile what Aisha Durham discusses as “weathering and wounded,” as we sit in the space of being both and not wanting to endure much more. This piece articulates some of the conversations that we have stumbled upon, worked through, and raged against from the space of our collective homes and fatigued spirits. It addresses notions of Afro-Pessimism and the intersection of Black Feminist Theory, the role that grief plays in Black Feminist praxis, the role of Diaspora in the historical imagination, and asks the question, “Did COVID and the state sanctioned killings of Black people make us Afro-Pessimists?”

Keywords: Afro-Pessimism, Covid-19, Black Feminist Theory, Pan-Africanism, slavery, Africana Diaspora, Women, Gender, Third World Feminism

“...the professional “freedom” to flesh my experience is colored by a dim reality that the academy has also served as a place of slow death for Black women like me.”
— Aisha Durham

Oh, Mary, don’t you weep, don’t you mourn
Oh, Mary, don’t you weep, don’t you mourn
Didn’t Pharaoh’s army got drowned?
Oh, Mary, don’t you weep
— Aretha Franklin

“Survival is not the end goal for liberation. We must thrive.”
— The Nap Ministry

“...Black employment is a catastrophe for narrative at a meta-level rather than a crisis or aporia within a particular narrative.”
— Frank Wilderson

1 Durham 2020.
2 The Nap Ministry on Instagram (@thenapministry).
3 Wilderson 2015.
The inception of the NOMMO writing collective and the space provided by the organizers has provided necessary moments of collaboration. For us, it meant reconciling that we were sheltering in place in two cities where COVID protocols were “iffy” at best, and death was ever present. Atlanta’s Mayor Keisha Lance Bottoms encouraged BLM protestors to “go home.”

Their presence in the streets was dangerous (to themselves) given the presence of law enforcement, the National Guard, and the outbreak of COVID-19. At the moment of this writing, Orange County, California currently leads (with Los Angeles County to the north) with the largest outbreak of COVID cases nation-wide. Compounded with our own academic responsibilities and issues of personal safety, we both have family beyond the US borders — borders insurmountable given that the unthinkable has happened--many parts of the world now have the power to say “no” to Americans. What does it mean then for fugitive intellectuals if their safe space (in this case the power and privilege of a US passport) is rendered useless? How do we help students deal with the global pandemic when training, zoom meetings, and more trainings about how to teach when the pandemic leaves us fatigued? Where do we find refuge and when “the work” is THE healthy distraction from countless video streaming sites, closed gyms, and no contact with other people?

As we struggled to make sense of the real-world implications of our lives during a period of pandemic and continued Black death, we realized that our personal struggles were also as much about praxis as it is about pedagogy. Not a novel concept but was rendered flesh in the very literal sense. We, like so many others, were attuned to the limits of what Deirdre Cooper Owen’s describes as our own black super bodies. Yet this moment, also necessitates further interrogating (and interrupting) the often-contradictory spaces that our super bodies occupy be it theoretical, corporeal, and communal. How can we have a “wish to live,” while so many around us die? Does a space exist between fateful (faithful) optimism present in Aretha Franklin’s, “Mary Don’t You Weep?” and the ever present power structure, that as Reverend Al Sharpton noted, has always had its knee on our necks?

More concretely, how do we reconcile what Aisha Durham discusses as “weathering and wounded,” as we sit in the space of being both and not wanting to endure much more. Below we articulate some of the conversations that we have stumbled upon, worked through, and raged against from the space of our collective homes and fatigued spirits.

As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to rage and disproportionately affect BIPOC, we keep count of the death toll around the world, in the U.S., in our own communities and in our own families. Counting has become part ritual remembrance of the dead and part making an offering to Oya beseeching her to remember what is owed to her when she blows her winds to make everything new. In my deepest sorrow I (Chamara) think of June Jordan’s book, Some of Us Did Not Die. The introduction (by the same name) is adapted from a keynote address she gave at Barnard College on November 9, 2001, where she opens thinking about the events of September 11th and its aftermath. She writes, “It’s not easy to remember or recognize any power we continue to possess. Understandably we shrivel and retreat into stricken consequences of that catastrophe.  

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4 CNN 2020.  
5 Owens 2018.  
6 Brown 2012.  
7 Sharpton 2020.  
8 Durham 2020.  
9 Jordan 2003.
But we have choices, and capitulation is only one of them. I am always hoping to do better than to collaborate with whatever or whomever it is that means me no good.”

This is not Jordan’s soliloquy about the tragedy that has befallen America with the events of September 11th, but rather a soliloquy about all the ways that violence (in all forms) destroys us and even kills some of us. Her words are ripe for this moment. We have seen and continue to witness corporate/individual greed while others lose jobs, homes, businesses, and their lives. While BIPOC and women are those most likely to be employed in essential worker jobs, their wages have been the least protected by government economic programs. Our obsession with mass incarceration saw some reform in relationship to the pandemic as some states and local governments moved to release non-violent offenders to reduce the spread of COVID in jails and prisons, however not before the infection rate of incarcerated people was three times higher than that of the general public, and the mortality rate double. Hope seems to be on the horizon as there are currently two approved vaccines to potentially prevent COVID-19 with three more vaccines in Phase 3 clinical trials. However, a recently published chart of U.S. state distribution of the vaccine shows that the majority of those vaccinated are White, while Black Americans and Black healthcare workers have made up a disproportionate number of coronavirus cases and deaths. This is what state-sanctioned violence looks like: economic fallout; collapsed healthcare system and death.

We come to this piece humbled by the violence of the pandemic, that this atrocity against so many thousands of people, here and all over the world, to express our collective rage, our terror, our seared consciousness and our inconsolable longing for loved ones lost and our already fragile sense of safety lost—we repeat the idea that Jordan recalls she learned from Auschwitz survivor Elly Gross, we “guess it was our destiny to live”...Indeed some of us did not die.”

**Part 1**

**What are the Intersections between Black Feminism & Afro-Pessimism, What are the Departures?**

*Chamara:*

“What shall we do, we who did not die?
What shall we do now?”
—June Jordan

After the deaths of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor and George Floyd, watching the subsequent protests around the world, the massive deaths from COVID-19 and the toll it was taking on members in my family and the larger Black community, I tell you sometime in the Fall (2020) that “COVID has turned me into an Afro-pessimist.” I say it partially in a moment of levity, but mostly because of my deep feelings of hopelessness in the face of white supremacy. There has been no accountability for those involved in the deaths of Ahmaud, Breonna and George and no

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11 Kaiser Family Foundation 2022.
accountability for the US Government and its failed response to the public health and economic fallout of the ever-worsening pandemic.

“What shall we do, we who did not die? What shall we do now?”

To help me move through my familial and collective grief I decide to explore the connections between Black Feminism and Afro-pessimism. The intersections between Black Feminism and Afro-pessimism as I see them is the believed premise that white-supremacy destroys everything it touches (humans; the environment, built or natural). However, neither explicitly centers that premise squarely in their analysis. As a field, Black feminism centers theory and praxis as paramount. While Afro-pessimism centers the theoretical as paramount and therein lies the departures between the two. To learn more about Afro-pessimism I read Frank B. Wilderson III work, the preeminent scholar on the subject. With his essay, “Afro-pessimism and the End of Redemption”, I find language to what I feel in the wake of Arbery, Taylor and Floyd’s death (especially after seeing the footage of their final moments). He writes, “Afro-Pessimism offers an analytic lens that labors as a corrective to Humanist assumptive logic. It provides a theoretical apparatus that allows Black people to not have to be burdened by the ruse of analogy—because analogy mystifies, rather than clarifies, Black suffering.”13

For years I found myself preoccupied with the burden that Wilderson eloquently names “the ruse of analogy” to describe Black suffering. I naively believed the more analogies I used in explaining Black state-sanctioned death, the closer the audience (in most cases the students I teach) would be closer to understanding the depth of Black suffering. Afro-pessimism allowed me to start with and to state plainly that “human life is dependent on Black death for its existence and for its conceptual coherence.”14

That allowance is freeing and it allows me to return to June Jordan’s questions, “What shall we do, we who did not die?”15 in the essay (with the book of the same name) Some of Us Did Not Die. If I am now able to begin conversations with the premise that humanity is dependent on Black death and suffering, I can now freely and rightly be skeptical of all normative categories that are freely conferred to (White cis-heterosexual) humans yet dependent on Black death and suffering.

“What shall we do, we who did not die?”

Six people in my family have died during this time, what am I going to do now as I have not died? No other normative category has permeated my thoughts during the COVID-19 pandemic than family. COVID-19 has taken the life of my 16-year-old cousin, Q, my Godmother, Ingrid and has left two of my cousins, Roy and Gary with continued damage to their lungs. It has seen my cousin Miya, an addict that suffers from bi-polar disorder, schizophrenia, and PTSD, finding herself in jail instead of a mental health facility, where she also caught and thankfully recovered from COVID-19. The loss of work caused my cousin, Danky, a military veteran with PTSD, to die by suicide after being laid off and unable to provide for his family. I also lost my grandmother Felicia

13 Wilderson 2015.
14 Ibid.
15 Jordan 2003.
and two aunts Nana Yaa, Nana Ama, during the pandemic to other illnesses (breast cancer, heart attack). My grief is stretched from California, to Texas, to Wisconsin, to Arkansas, to England and Ghana, while being in Georgia. And these are just the losses of those in my family. Watching friends lose their loved ones to COVID-19, other illnesses, and violence, or hearing them wail and sob as they recap their last goodbyes over video or phone calls is heartbreaking. The compounded loss of family with the loss of our ability to be physically present with each other to mourn has deeply affected me.

“What shall we do now?”

To think through re/conceptions of Black family, Black feminism, and Afro-pessimism, I turned to the work of scholar, Tiffany Lethabo King. In the article, “Black ‘Feminisms’ and Pessimism: Abolishing Moynihan’s Negro Family” she uses a Black Feminist Abolitionist framework in which to revisit the Moynihan report while imagining new possibilities of articulations of family to Black people. Written fifty-six years ago, by Daniel Patrick Moynihan under the Lyndon B. Johnson administration, the report argues that the rise of Black single mothers was not because of a lack of job opportunities but a deficiency in Black culture. The Moynihan Report has had a long impact on policy and scholarship. To abolish the “Black family” that the report centers, King asks readers to focus on Black abolitionist critiques that denaturalize the family as a normative and humanizing institution to which people should aspire to belong. She argues the western notion of the family functions as a site of violence and dehumanization that threatens to engulf Black sociality. I think of my family as I read Q, Danky and Ingrid, are not my family by Western notions (sharing blood or a common ancestor) but they are family. Each showing up time and time again when needed to celebrate, to mourn, to love, to laugh, to give; each touched by state sanctioned violence that made it impossible to live solely by Western notions of family. We live(d) because we belong to each other. King calls for us to think of new ways of being as it relates to family given the precarity and sociality of Black life. Reminding us that “the Black praxis of family as an everyday lived experience has the potential to ground people, provide material and emotional support and affirm the spirit of many Black people who feel vulnerable in the world.”

However, she is justly leery of the ways the family emerges as a category of violent forms of humanism for Black people. King attends to both theory and praxis as she asks us to be critical and innovative in our world-making traditions and envision life outside of the current categories that blunt efforts to re-craft what it means to be human and closes with the poignant reminder that there are other ways to name each other as our relations. She gives me a way to remember, grieve, mourn and celebrate those that died while urging me to know and remember that because I did not die I am free to envision and create more affirming relationships.

Afro-pessimism (which is deep conversation with Black feminist scholars Sylvia Wynters, Saidiya Hartman, Hortense Spillers) allows for a strict naming of Blackness and its relationship to the state, but Black Feminism gives us the possibility of imagination and the power of creativity to survive in places that are always trying to kill us.

16 King 2018.
17 Ibid: 84.
Jessica:

*Whither the Slave in Civil Society? — Covid Edition*

Prior to the publication of *Afro-Pessimism*, I read Frank Wilderson’s “Whither the Slave in Civil Society.” It read like the chapter on the inescapable hegemonic function of the law in Eugene Genovese’s classic, *Roll Jordan Roll: The World the Slaves Made*. This is not surprising given that both Genovese and Wilderson enter a dialectic with Gramsci. And just like Genovese’s piece, I was at the center of two forces that were inescapable. I did not want to be an Afro-Pessimist because I did not feel like it allowed for black “life” and survival. And just like Genovese’s take on Marxism, I could not unravel Wilderson because the framework of Marxism did not allow me a space to do so. More concretely the rhetoric did not allow a space for where the enslaved wanted to take me when I told their stories. Moreover, I did not understand/overstand how one could cite Black Feminist Theory AND be an Afro-Pessimist. It has taken almost 14 years to understand that Afro-Pessimism itself does not provide a tool to how people survived, but Black Feminist theory does. Afro-pessimism and its description of anti-blackness and Black Feminist Theory can be held separately from one another but the functionality of the two theories TOGETHER allow us the freedom to open up other channels for the complexities of black life and the implicit anti-blackness in the western system.

I came to understanding the interdependent nature of Afro-pessimism and Black Feminism as a result of social circumstances. I am an Associate Professor of History and a core faculty member of the African American Studies Department at UC Irvine. I live quite literally in the house that Afro-Pessimism built. Frank Wilderson currently serves as the department chair of African American Studies; and for the record, he is a fantastic colleague. Students revere him and often quote and (mis)quote the tenets of his arguments. I have been reluctant to embrace Afro-Pessimism and I guess that fact is well known. Scene: my graduate seminar on Race and Slavery. The word on the academic streets is that Wilderson’s grad students should come prepared for my courses. They should bring with them all the evidence, charts, and graphs related to Afro-Pessimism as “Millward would come for you.” I did not come for people—or maybe I did. I was really trying to understand Afro-pessimism and what if any space it left for black optimism. And I always got tripped up on the undeniable presence of anti-blackness. With anti-blackness as the lens, there are two important intersections and departures between Afro-pessimism and Black Feminist Theory that I can concretely grasp. That is how they related to slavery vs. enslavement, and social death (and life) through the black woman’s body.

In the introduction of *Afro-Pessimism*, Wilderson speaks of writing from the position of the “slave.” It is within a larger intellectual battle between “slave” and “enslaved,” where I see Afro-pessimism yielding ground to Black Feminist theory. If a “slave” was kinless and outside of civic authority, Black feminist thinkers and writers of black women’s history provide the opposite. Precisely through the entrance point of the Black woman’s womb.

During slavery planters ensured that they profited from the reproductive capacities of enslaved women. Enslaved mothers, on the other hand, contended with the reality that there was

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18 Wilderson 2003; Cunningham 2020.
quite literally a price on their children’s head. The realities of enslavement left many mothers without children. Children were sold. Children ran away. Children died. And children were killed. Rather than the stereotypical callous matriarch devoid of feelings, enslaved women existed in a constant state of mourning.\textsuperscript{19} Darlene Clark Hine’s classic assessment about the Culture of Dissemblance is no less important in slavery.\textsuperscript{20} There are examples of enslaved women who refused to have children and those who simply walked away from their children. Failure to develop a bond with children was a way to manage the inevitable grief associated with losing that child in the future. And though it could lend itself to the notion of kinlessness, enslaved people understood themselves to be part of a community of kin and fictive kin.

Black women could always make a way out of no-way, and this is where I stumble with Afro-Pessimism as a theory of understanding anti-blackness. Black Feminist theory is a way to move beyond, reframe, refuse to accept the conditions before black people. Black feminism is not tethered to Afro-pessimism; rather, Afro-pessimism is tethered to black feminism.\textsuperscript{21} Bodies once meant to repopulate the enslaved population were attached to women who refused to bow down to a patriarchal system that could be anti-black and to be sure, anti-black women.

Afro-pessimism relies on the positionality (the non-being/the slave.) The use of the word, “slave,” is grounded in a particular legal category. Nonetheless, scholars of slavery argue that individuals were enslaved vs. “a slave.” This movement to ensalve is an intellectual jump that is more than simple semantics. By moving from “slave” to enslaved, it opens the space for (in this case) African Americans to transition from that of property back into a person/into a person in the eyes of the law. Ava Duverney’s, movie \textit{13th} influenced many in the public sphere to think about the prison pipeline. Given the prevailing nature of anti-blackness, it would make sense that the process of being a “slave” simply moves the line of containment from the plantation to the prison. I, however, do not propagate in there being a line from the 13th amendment to incarceration. I situate that linear move from the 14th Amendment. It is in this moment of black citizenship that anti-blackness, Afro-pessimism, and I can dance. What rights can Black citizens expect from this democracy?

Well before the murders of Latasha Harlins, Treyvon Martin, Mike Brown and well after our allies go on to something else, Black Americans/citizens/enslaved have been /will be looking for freedom and justice. To those who were trapped and confined on the plantation, those trapped and confined in prison, those trapped and confined in the back of police van and having their spine severed, to those trapped in their bodies by COVID--- all their experiences hinged not upon not being a “slave” but of being emancipated with the promise of something better. Alas, anti-blackness is prevalent even as so many are still hoping for freedom to say nothing of justice.

The relationship between enslavement, freedom and justice was lost on the majority population during COVID. It seems that only in the US, the “free-est” country in the world that people do not heed regulations to self-isolate, avoid crowds and wear masks. Some believed wearing a mask was the equivalent to the stripping of liberties promised in the Declaration of Independence. In fact, some protestors suggested that wearing the mask was the equivalent of slavery. In fact, wearing the mask had little to do with slavery. The ability to protest the mask was privilege in

\textsuperscript{19} Millward 2016.
\textsuperscript{20} Hine 1989.
\textsuperscript{21} Malaklou and Herard 2018: 8.
and of itself. What the dominant culture was afraid of is that federal and government orders would rob them of *their* liberty. That would liken them to being enslaved but more importantly, the pervasiveness of anti-blackness was as simple as choosing not to wear a mask. The fact that others may be put at risk was not a concern. But NEVER did anti-mask advocates fear being robbed of their humanity.

Thankfully to date, I have only lost two people during the pandemic: my aunt to Covid and a longtime friend to other conditions. Of course, in each case, the funeral and grieving were done over zoom. I admit that I have been numb to the death tolls. I have parents who are high risk, my sister works in a hospital, and my partner and his family contracted Covid. Still, I am numb. As a scholar of slavery, I see the horrific every day. My MA thesis was on enslaved women who were offered no choice to protect their children but to murder them. I worked for a year at the Simon Wiesenthal Museum of Tolerance and Holocaust Museum in Los Angeles. I gave tours every day recounting the experiences of those who lived through, died in, and despite it all, survived the Holocaust. Certainly, I understand the horrific nature of human behavior based on what history teaches us. Yet, that does not mean I can process violence and death in real time. I think that my mind refuses to communicate to my spirit the loss of life happening around me. So, when I talk about next steps for survival, I am also speaking about myself.

**Part 2**

**How do we Make Space for our Grief, the Rituals that they Necessitate and the Hyper-Production and Labor Extraction of the Neo-Liberal University?**

*Jessica:*

What does it mean then when Yemoja and Frankenstein meet? For scholars of the enslaved it means that in honoring lost souls means that one has to contend with an archive of the unimaginable—some of which is man-made. Did we all watch (or refuse to watch) the last eight minutes and 45 seconds of George Floyd’s life? Were traitors to the US Constitution, --secessionists-- walked out of the Capitol building in handcuffs, and not shot down? Did that happen? And the “peaceful” transition of power? That was a debacle. The exit of the 45th president should not even appear on the B reel of the *Apprentice* much less on the cutting room floor. Did New York and later Los Angeles run out of spaces to store those deceased from COVID? Were those in my university neighbor and community asked to help set up triage tents? Did this happen? Did the passing of so many people become commonplace that there were updates by the hour—worldwide? In his press conferences Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti made it a point to note the number of “souls” lost each day. Beyond this, very few spoke about the deceased beyond their corporeal existence. And this, “the greatest nation,” could not contain a virus. There were very little coherent plans to administer a vaccine. Yes. This happened. It all happened. And it happened when some people were on the front lines and the rest of us were literally sitting in our pajamas watching the world fall about. Yes. It. All. Happened. And we need to grieve.

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22 Millward 2020.

23 Mustakeem 2016.
In grieving, we give ourselves permission to turn off the news or refuse to provide commentary to the endless news who suddenly realize that Black Lives Matter. Grieving is part of that radical self-care that Angela Davis named. Martial arts instruction was necessary to many revolutionary communities. Though not necessarily considered “self-defense,” yoga serves as the place to center oneself against white supremacy. Angela Davis practices yoga. Mumia Abu-Jamal practices yoga. And as Stephanie Evans, forced us to remember, Rosa Parks was a Yogi. My self-defense arsenal against grief was not limited to yoga. Naps became a sanctuary. The permission to nap made it possible to turn away from the news, the work, and whatever energy was draining and not replenishing. Naps were once a way for me to avoid the world. Naps and rest have become some of the only ways that I can function in the world. The importance of rest as espoused by Tricia Hershey, creator of The Nap Ministry, names sleep deprivation as a racial and social-justice issue. That so many find solace in The Nap Ministry should tell us how tired we truly are.

Chamara:

I am alive because of the labor of Black women and femmes. I am thankful that I was trained by and continue to be in a relationship with people that remind me that I do not have to separate pieces of myself in order to be well in any setting, including academia. I would not be surviving this moment without those lessons and relationships. To make space for all my feelings, at the outset of the pandemic I began to jot down thoughts and collect sayings (in my journal) that would help me process ongoing anti-Black violence as well my grief. It became a go to ritual as I could not gather at a funeral to mourn my loved ones and could not burst into tears while in a virtual meeting with colleagues or while teaching (without the awkwardness that capitalism dictates when human emotion surfaces). In addition, rather than fall into the hyper productivity that the neo-liberal university dictates, I am deeply committed to a rest practice. I am indebted to poet, philosopher, and Black feminist Tricia Hershey for her work on The Nap Ministry. She is the first person I read to put the words rest practice together. Hershey’s dedication to making a Black feminist abolitionist praxis deeply backed by Black feminist, anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist theory has singlehandedly forced me to consider the power of liberation in resting. I suffer from an auto-immune disease that is exacerbated by stress. Additionally, I was diagnosed with unrelenting fibroids in July 2020. Thus, my body demands rest even when I want to treat it like a machine. To ensure that I do right by myself and those I love and that love me, I work each day at being good to my body by napping, drinking water, being outside, reading for pleasure, laughing with friends, and scheduling as few (extra) meetings as possible to name a few. While this has not been a remedy for structural oppression and state sanctioned violence, it has allowed me to enjoy being alive on some of the darkest days and make my visions and praxis for liberation clearer each day.

I am still grieving, still processing and still exploring the depths of my feelings, however, below is an excerpt list from my journal. The list points to my clearest rituals for grief and living.

— “There is no work life balance in white supremist capitalist society and pretending there is may

24 Evans 2021.
25 Social Distance Podcast 2020.
kill you faster.”

— “Teach for Justice from a hunger for Justice.” (M. Jacqui Alexander)

— “Cry so that the people you love can make it to the other side; there they can protect you.” (My Aunt)

— “Remember to remember to never forget.” (Ruth Nicole Brown/Lorraine Hansberry)

— “You are exhausted physically and spiritually because the pace created by this system is for machines and not a magical and divine human being. You are enough. Rest.” (The Nap Ministry)

— “Yemaya, Queen of the sea, free us of fear. Protect us with your hands. We pray, that through your intervention, we receive what we ask from you in prayer. Ashe”

— “The only way out is through, feeling everything.”

— “Oya, you are the keeper of the wind, the one that carries the machete to clear the path, the one that helps spirits transition to the next world. I ask that you carry my loved one to the next world safely and allow the wind of my grief (both gentle and rough) clear a new path of growth and clarity like the sky after the storm, Ashe.”

What Oya destroys we no longer need.

— “Our creation of a liberated world depends on our collective rest.”

Part 3
Conclusion

Chamara:

Did Covid and the state sanctioned killings of Black people make us Afro-Pessimists? No, I don’t think so. What it gave and continues to give us is an opening to explore the depths of our pain, our joy and our resistance. All things we could not have explored in this way without this moment. I did not feel the depth of how I needed to collectively mourn my loved ones at things like funerals, wakes, and repasses until I could not go. That Angelus funeral home to Inglewood Park Cemetery would not be a pilgrimage that any of us would make together. We would not share our favorite stories of our loved one over pieces of lemon jello cake or collect as many obituaries as we could get our hands on to mail to out of town family and put in our scrapbooks. That I could not be present when the Obea payin decided the funeral date for my Grandmother, or go with the oldest women in my family to collect my Grandmother’s body from the morgue. To cleanse her, dress her
modestly and lay her in the hearse and drive her to our family compound. I did not know how I needed those things. I did not know how I needed to watch the motorcade drive her body through the streets of Akropong as people lined the streets to cry, wail, dance and shout that she was going home.

I did not know how I needed to see the recently slaughtered goats blood mark the doorway to our family compound to signal to the ancestors that Grandma, Aunt Nana Yaa, Aunt Nana Ama was coming home and to welcome them graciously.
To dress them in the finest cloth and gold on Friday evening and keep watch over their bodies. To watch dancers dance adowa on Saturday and as someone announced the arrival of family members for near and far. I did not know how I needed to gather in Ebenezer Methodist Church on Sunday to sing the words or MHB 427,

Oh magnify the Lord with me;  
with me exalt His name;  
When in distress to Him I called,  
He to my rescue came

I did not know how I needed to dance with my father, my cousins, my aunts and uncles to celebrate our family going home.

I did not know how deeply I needed all these things. Zoom, WhatsApp, Facetime, and video could not take the place of being physically present. As usual when people I love pass away, my heart breaks, but this time it was broken open. The pain brought me to my knees and my insides ached. Compound by so much death, social and literal, Afro-pessimism offers me space during COVID to lay down the burden of explaining my suffering living as a Black, fat, femme, queer woman, and our suffering as Black people throughout the diaspora and just feel it. Feel the weight of the things that are trying to kill my Black flesh, our Black flesh each day. Does that make me an Afro-pessimist? I’m not sure, but I am thankful for feeling again. What I know for certain is that Black Feminist (Abolitionist) Theory is allowing me to continue to be open, to continue feeling and providing salve and balm to continue to freedom dream and be present even if I cannot be right next to the ones I love.

Jessica:

On March 17, 2020, the nation of Ghana closed its borders to outsiders. I was to arrive that day and see my love with whom I reconnected during “The Year of Return.” Ghana has always occupied a place in African American historical memory and in pan-African identity making. Kwame Nkrumah, the nation’s first President said famously on Ghana’s first Independence Day, “Our independence is meaningless unless it is linked up with the total liberation of Africa.” A Pan-Africanist in every sense of the word, Nkrumah welcomed artists, civil rights activists, and scholars to Ghana after its independence. This romantic notion of Ghana, the belief in something better, fairer to Black people kept me going during the pandemic. When Ghana opened its borders in September, I was one of the first on the plane. I was nervous traveling because I was coming from Orange County and the COVID numbers were staggering. And I was nervous about traveling because it did not make logical sense. During the eight months of the pandemic, I did not leave my home with the exception of groceries and other crucial needs. I realize and am thankful that

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26 The “Year of Return,” (2019) served as Ghana’s commemoration of the 400-year history of the trans-atlantic slave trade. During this year, Ghana subtly acknowledged its own participation in the slave trade and welcomed those in the Diaspora to come home.
my job allowed me the privilege of such isolation. I did not travel for my sister’s wedding. I did not gather with anyone with the exception of my father. I watched as the world (rightfully) closed its doors to Americans. I watched as the US passport was rendered useless. I was trapped in the “greatest country,” in the world. When the US passport was finally welcomed in one small part of the world, I was on the plane. I took every precaution and three COVID tests. Ghana felt safer. The COVID numbers were lower, the general population nicer, and it provided respite from the US and constant news cycle. The pictures I posted on social media shocked some at first. The sun was bright, I was smiling. A good friend (Karen Flynn) called me on What’s App. Her first words were, “You made it out.” Indeed, I had. Ghana became a refuge in September 2020, and it became an unanticipated refuge in December 2020 as well.

Days before I was scheduled to travel to Ghana for the Christmas holiday, one of my closest friends passed. Jemal Ruben Knowles, Thursday born, whom I called Jammin’ Jemal out of shade, and he liked it so much he just became known as Jammin’. Jammin’ was my first boyfriend. We met in college and fell in and out of each other’s lives for the next thirty years. The timing was never right. I was going to cancel my ticket to Ghana because by that point COVID rates in southern California were higher than they had ever been. I worried about bringing the virus to my family in Ghana. But I also knew that I could not stay in California, alone for the holidays, during a pandemic. And I knew I wasn’t ready to face a world without one of my most constant friends. And in my denial, he was very present. I could tell that he wanted something of his to be taken to Ghana, to offer in the water, to place in the slave dungeons, to honor the ancestors. And I listened. Jemal is in that space now where he can move freely on that ancestral plane. He has arrived on the shores that meet the Atlantic and he can rest. I imagine him arriving and hearing, “Akwaaba,” (welcome home).

Did Covid and the state sanctioned killings of Black people make me an Afro-Pessimist? I don’t think so. Perhaps I was always attuned to the theories surrounding Afro-pessimism, and the pandemic offered a point of no return.

It is not lost on me that my peace came in the form of reversing a migration that displaced Africans across the world some 400 years ago. It is not lost on me that I felt safest being beyond the US borders.

Maybe Wilderson is partially correct, that we write the narrative of anti-blackness from the position of the “slave.” Though, I maintain that we forge liberation as the “enslaved.”

Perhaps I am more open to Afro-Pessimism precisely because I am trained in US History. Perhaps it is from my positionality as a Black woman in the academy. Or perhaps it is because I can still hear the drums beating in the distant atavistic space, encouraging me to “run.”

27 Wilderson 2021: xiii.
References


