

Intervention Symposium – “Black Humanity: Bearing Witness to COVID-19”

Organized by Elaine Coburn and Wesley Crichlow

**“In the Midst of All This Terrible...”: White Supremacy and the Story
of Race during the Pandemic**

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Abstract

Race is a story that endures, from its beginnings in the origins of racial capitalism, slavery, the racial wealth gap and long-standing political struggles. During the pandemic, persistent anti-Black racisms, expressed both in violent deaths at the hands of police and in disproportionate deaths linked to the virus, deny the humanity of Black people. This means that what is at stake in this symposium about the pandemic and associated social

distancing and surveillance measures is nothing less than Black human-ness. In featuring diverse Black scholars, Gertrude Mianda, Myrna Lashley, Emma Joseph, Tamari Kitossa, Joseph Mensah, Wisdom Tettey, and George Dei and Kathy Lewis, we seek to reaffirm Black expertise and the importance of Black insights into the pandemic, in the radically unequal world in which we live. If race is a story of injustice, we need to build on the work of Black artists, scholars, activists, and Elders, to write new ones.

Keywords

anti-Black racism, Black Studies, pandemic, white supremacy

“In the midst of all this terrible...” is how Princeton Professor Imani Perry (2011: xv) prefaces her book about racial injustice in the United States. In places like Canada, China, France, the United Kingdom, and the United States, we are still in the midst of the terrible realities of anti-Black racism, present simultaneously in spectacularized state violence against Black people and in the invisible, structural racial violence resulting in the disproportionate deaths of Black women and men due to the pandemic. Race is a story of injustice that endures in both old and new ways in the current historical moment.

Persistent anti-Black racisms deny the humanity of Black people. This means that what is at stake in this symposium, concerned with the story of race during pandemic, is nothing less than Black human-ness. In featuring diverse Black scholars, Gertrude Mianda, Myrna Lashley, Emma Joseph, Tamari Kitossa, Joseph Mensah, Wisdom Tettey, and George Dei and Kathy Lewis, we seek to reaffirm Black expertise and the importance of Black insights into the pandemic, in the radically unequal world in which we live. Ultimately, we make an argument for Black humanity, as deserving the dignity

and respect due to any human being. In a more just world, this would be taken for granted, rather than a promise for a hoped for yet unrealized future that demands argument and struggle.

Living “In the Wake” of the Atlantic Slave Trade

Today, we are living “in the wake” of the Atlantic slave trade (Sharpe 2016), the normalized, racialized violence and exploitation of Black people, in a world system in which chattel slavery, for half a millennium, was identified with the supposedly ontological category of race. Without dismissing or discounting the hard-fought progress from freedom struggles – from the Haitian revolution at the dawn of the 19th century, to the long abolition of slavery, to the national liberation of African nations, to the victory against apartheid (Mbembe 2013) – there are striking historical continuities in the ongoing dehumanization and demonization of the Black Human Other (McKittrick 2006; Wynter 2003: 327).

Police violence against Black people has been transformed by a morbid gaze that takes pleasure in the suffering and devastation this violence creates in Black communities. We cannot escape the reminders. As Gertrude Mianda (this symposium) explains, when she describes the police murder of George Floyd in the United States, “the long eight minutes and forty-six seconds that the officer knelt on Floyd’s neck brought to the surface all the wounds of systemic anti-Black racism in the United States and around the world”. White supremacy is written in the right to murder Black people, but also in the right, whatever the filmed evidence, to deny that murder is what has just occurred (Hattery and Smith 2017; Joseph-Salisbury et al. 2020; Maynard 2017). The wounds of systemic anti-Black racism, with their roots in the slave trade, have not healed, but remain open.

Alongside contemporary lynchings of Black persons (Coles 2018; Gilmore 1993; Kitossa this symposium), the pandemic has introduced new, insidious manifestations of the pathology of anti-Black racism. In colonial, former slave-owning countries like Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States, Black people are dying disproportionately from the COVID-19 virus; although these deaths are counted among other deaths during the pandemic, nations like Canada are refusing to collect and publish race-disaggregated data (in contrast, see City of Toronto 2020; United Nations 2020). The refusal to acknowledge race differences in mortality associated with the pandemic is a familiar story of “Black suffering and white denial” (Marable 2006; see also Lashley this symposium), neither natural nor necessary but a carefully manufactured, deliberate ignorance (Mills 2007). In failing to disaggregate race in their statistical documentation of deaths during the pandemic, nation-states fail to notice racial injustice and so, inevitably, fail to remedy anti-Black racisms and the structural inequalities that are the social determinants of Black illness and death.

The contemporary reality of living in the wake of the Atlantic slave trade, as Mills (1997: 3) reminds us, is that Black persons are not “people who are really people”. Ontologically damaged, not-quite-fully-human humans, Black people’s suffering is both highly visible and deliberately uncounted, unnoticed, in different but equally potent narratives with the same necropolitical moral: Black lives do not matter. If race is a story, now as ever, it is as much about those stories that are untold, as those stories that we hear and see repeated, both coalescing to discount the meaningfulness of Black lives.

White Supremacy, White Power, and Racial Capitalism

The Black Lives Matter movement, which demands radical transformation of a white supremacist society, is a powerful interruption of racial capitalism and accompanying racist narratives. Too often, however, such struggles against anti-Black racism are co-

opted and corporatized. In the broader public, in the private sector, and in the academy, for instance, new training modules employ unconscious bias training (Noon 2018), problematize white fragility (DiAngelo 2018), and point to micro-aggressions (Fleras 2016). But these new vocabularies of anti-racism conceal as much as they reveal. To speak truly, we need to name the stark realities of white supremacy and white power.

White power historically and today is not so much a question of “unconscious bias”, but emphatically asserted. Nor is white supremacy limited to “micro-aggressions” but is instead everywhere and all at once, from the intimacy of our self-understandings to the far-reaching relations of capitalist enterprises, including for-profit prisons that incarcerate Black women and men (Childs 2015; Sudbury 2002). Despite discussions of white fragility, there is nothing subtle or fragile about white hegemony. Instead, today, naked expressions of white power include the open identification of national imaginaries with white supremacy, as with the “proud boys”, supported by the current President of the United States, and the resurgence of far-right parties in Europe (Gillborn 2006; Hage 2012; Inwood 2019). White power is self-conscious and explicit in its contemporary political expression.

If Black Lives Matter must have recourse to the streets, given the marginalization of Black people in positions of power, others have no need to protest. On the contrary, for the few, life is better than ever, reflecting institutionalized relations of gendered, white power, neither fragile nor contingent but systemically integrated into what Cedric Robinson (1993) described as racial capitalism. Markets have reached all-time highs during the pandemic (The Washington Post 2020), so that billionaires add to already-unimaginable wealth. At the same time, many Black women and men labour at high risk for low wages during the pandemic as personal support workers – too often, without life-protecting equipment (Lashley this symposium; Mianda this symposium). This is one expression of what M. NourbeSe Philip (2017: 27) observes as an ongoing “essential

dehumanization” of Black people whose lives do not matter intrinsically but only as raw labour that benefits those who once owned Black labour and who today continue to exploit it.

Although new pandemic narratives emphasize that “we are all in this together”, the reality is that COVID-19 and associated quarantine measures deepen gendered, racialized inequities and injustices. This continues long-standing relations of economic apartheid (Galabuzi 2006, Mianda this symposium), traceable to a worldwide system of racial capitalism that has anti-Black violence and the exploitation of Black labour through slavery written into its origins (Crichlow et al. this symposium; Robinson 1993). Today’s anti-Black racisms stretch from North America to the United Kingdom to Asia (see Tettey this symposium), reproducing dramatic ideological distinctions rooted in race (Robinson 1993: 42). This includes popular, gendered anti-Black tropes created in Hollywood and exported world-wide (Kitossa this symposium), narratives that participate in a centuries-old “racial theory of order” that imagines, rationalizes, and naturalizes white superiority and Black inferiority (Robinson 1993: 67).

Writing for Black Humanity

Writing against anti-Black racism means writing different stories – for Black humanity. Yet in the academy, from where we write, Black voices were absent in many of the early scholarly interventions concerning the pandemic; institutionalized homophilic white networks were relatively quicker to mobilize. This relative initial silence of Black voices in scholarly publications has its roots in material inequalities that reach into the university. Black scholars are overburdened, performing more service and research for less academic recognition from their peers (Henry et al. 2017), and whatever their professional status or intellectual fame, Black scholars are never safe from anti-Black violence by police and others (Martin et al. 2019; The Guardian 2009). This uneven

burden compresses the space available for reflection by Black scholars about the pandemic and its racially unequal consequences, in a moment when white power expresses itself in direct, raw ways.

In a small corrective to this organized silence – a silence that is institutionally reproduced through race inequities in the academy and beyond – this symposium features diverse Black intellectuals. They write against white supremacy, describe the historical roots of contemporary anti-Black violence in slavery, challenge the manufactured white ignorance of Black suffering during the pandemic, and highlight the role of Black women in providing care to others, for low wages and at high risk to themselves, within a global political economy of racial capitalism. These voices challenge an unjust present, by putting Black humanity at the centre, not of one story, but many stories, that tell us about how race and anti-Black violence intersects with the pandemic in ways too often untold. [1] In writing, performing, singing, protesting but also researching, teaching, writing, Black actors, including intellectuals, are retelling the story of race. Despite the hurt, the devastation, the inequity, and the injustice, there is hope for more just relationships that motivates this writing and so much Black creativity, protest, and scholarship. As Imani Perry (2011: xv) writes, “in the midst of all this terrible, there is still beautiful possibility”.

Endnote

[1] Race is a powerful story, an existential truth, but not a biological fact and never totalizing as a description of any person, or group of people. Rather, as Angela Y. Davis (2016: 162) reminds us, in her critique of institutionalized white patriarchal power, those racialized as white have the freedom to choose to struggle against white supremacy, or as she explains, “...if you are a white man, you don’t necessarily have to identify with that

collective ‘white men’ about which I am speaking”. Solidarity against white supremacy and white power is a political possibility and responsibility for white people and indeed for any human being, but this demands that we name, describe, and analyse how white supremacy operates.

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