

**Intervention Symposium – “Black Humanity: Bearing Witness to COVID-19”
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COVID-19 and the Black Experience: Keeping the Ember Burning

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Abstract

Our world is currently experiencing a global pandemic like no other. Globally, there are 62,531,000 COVID-19 cases, 1,456,794 deaths, and 42,477,179 recovered. Recent reports have also shown that the United States has the highest number of fatalities, spanning 266,534. Brazil, with the largest Black population outside of Africa, follows closely with 6.29 million cases confirmed, 5.56 million recovered and 172,561 deaths.[1] African nations continue to experience the ironic proverbial dogma of the West dismissing traditional medicine. Viruses do not discriminate. People and systems do. Black workers suffer an egregious predisposition to COVID-19, a proclivity that is a tell-tale of underlying health, economic, social, and educational hazards. COVID-19, therefore, casts a glaring light on an ongoing metamorphosis of the pillaging and murdering of Blacks globally. This paper provides a critical illustration of COVID-19’s devastating impact on the Black community. It calls for collective solidarity in our continued effort in the fight for change.

Keywords

COVID-19, Black, health, racism, community knowledge, resistance

Black and African bodies continue to live through colonial violence, so we must continue to develop the power and courage to write through our pain, vulnerabilities, emotions, suffering and resistances. In the words of Sto:lo writer Lee Maracle, we must continue to “keep the ember burning” (in Maracle et al. 2019). This is true even though COVID-19 has been unfair to humankind in general, and even though COVID-19 has been especially devastating to Black people and the elderly, including the Black elderly.

We begin this essay with personal reflections. George Dei lives with a partner who is a health care aide worker. He is also an African Canadian male in the vulnerable age group for COVID-19. One can only imagine the anxieties of a family in such a position during this fragile time. Being at home during lockdown and constantly overwhelmed with news and information of COVID-19 through the television, radio, internet, and even through personal text messages and emails, does not make this situation any easier. Kathy Lewis is an educator who centres her voice in her lived experience. She acknowledges that though her Blackness is hypervisible, her femininity, sexuality, education, and social class afford her privileges that many of her brothers and sisters are not afforded. She has learned that “when you compromise your voice, you compromise your dignity” (Love 2019). Though some refuse to name anti-Black racism, masking their denial with rhetoric about inclusivity and benevolence, to echo the words of Dr. King, “now is the time to make justice a reality for all of God’s children”.

We write in spite of our pain, our hurt, and our outrage at the spectacularized lynching of our brothers and sisters, the 21st century state and state-sanctioned murder of Blacks: COVID-19 and policing killings. One of the most recent global expressions of state violence against Black people is the image of a police officer’s knee on the neck of our brother, George Floyd, for 8 minutes and 46 seconds. This not only pains our hearts; this leaves a bitter stain emblematic of the centuries’ long fight for freedom, a fight to reclaim our Black humanity. “To be Black is not

only to be targeted for questioning or arrest; it is also to be ‘proximate to death’” (Maynard 2017: 84, quoting Sharpe 2016: 17). This is the gross reality of the continued degradation and dehumanization of our Black bodies and our Blackness.

This is the worldwide reality of living “in the wake” of slavery (Sharpe 2016). In the United States,

the fatalities highlight racial disparities already present in the state’s prison population, with people of color making up more than 80% of those who died behind bars since the COVID-19 pandemic hit New York. African Americans made up 60% of the deaths, despite being around 50% of the incarcerated population. (New York Daily News 2020)

The devastation is felt, too, in the world’s second largest Black population in the Diaspora, in Brazil. There are more than a million confirmed cases of COVID-19 in Brazil, second only to the United States. In the so-called *democracia racial* or “racial democracy”, a study of “over 5,500 municipalities shows that 55% of Afro-Brazilian patients hospitalized with severe COVID-19 died, compared to 34% of white COVID-19 patients” (Caldwell and de Araújo 2020).

In Africa, only one third of the continent has access to proper hand washing, despite the lessons learned from HIV/AIDS and Ebola on engaging communities and communicating risks, and there is less than one doctor per one thousand people on the continent (United Nations 2020). In Guangzhou, China, Africans were beaten and thrown onto the streets because of fear that their bodies are hosts of COVID-19, “a troubling logic that targeted people based on race rather than their contact history” (Los Angeles Times 2020). Though most of the narratives (and finger-pointing) are directed at China with respect to COVID-19, the pandemic has simultaneously revealed a rise of global anti-Black and anti-African xenophobia.

To examine the intricacies of COVID-19 and the impact on the Black community, worldwide, it is necessary to examine how colonial racisms have made Black bodies more vulnerable to diseases through neglect and marginalization. In Toronto, Canada, from where we write, the nation is built on Indigenous lands and the “clearing out” of Indigenous peoples, while

Black and racialized peoples have been exploited marginalized, discarded and neglected. Today, in Toronto, poverty stalks Black families and their children, so that “48 percent of Black children live in families with incomes of less than \$30,000 a year, compared to 9 percent of white children – a rate five times higher” (Maynard 2017). Given the high propensity of poverty and exclusion, the impact of COVID-19 on Black families, including children, is grave.

This is no accident. A white supremacist society like ours is built on the ongoing genocide of Indigenous peoples and the ongoing exploitation of Black and racialized labour: “Across Ontario Black people are counted amongst the working poor, many of whom have lost employment as a result of the pandemic ... As such, high proportions of Black people work in the informal sector or belong to the ‘gig economy’” (Alliance for Healthier Communities 2020). Furthermore, farm workers in Canada, mainly racialized labourers, participate in Black suffering. A farm worker shared video footage of a bunkhouse in the province of Ontario, showing 12 men crammed into a small space separated by cardboard boxes (Harvesting Freedom 2020). The cardboard boxes are literally flimsy, a symbolic reminder of the makeshift support, protection, and spaces offered to workers from Black, but also Indigenous and racialized, communities. Eulogized for their bravery, Black workers are disposable alongside other Indigenous and racialized bodies.

Black people are vulnerable because of health problems exacerbated by the intersection of race and poverty rooted in racisms. Diabetes, high blood pressure, and heart problems afflict our communities the most, yet we are least able to access quality, affordable, and culturally-competent healthcare. We carry out the most dangerous occupations during COVID-19, yet we are among the least able to afford lockdown and social distancing. We are called upon to make the ultimate sacrifices for the wider society, but we are among the least able to protect ourselves.

We are not being cruel in making these observations. We are pointing to the stark reality: anti-Black racism is alive and well. Anyone who thought that we were making progress must rethink this seductive message of hope. COVID-19 has revealed the deep-seated truth in our communities that not all lives are equal. A white supremacist society can dispense with some bodies for life to return to normalcy. Black bodies are expendable. Black disposability is akin to

the concept of “thingification” that Aimé Césaire (1972) has conceptualized, except that it is not just that Black lives are objectified – they are seen as not worth living.

What lessons can be learned, so that all this suffering is not for nothing? In a poem titled “Justice is an Ember”, Indigenous activist and scholar Maracle writes:

I cradle this ember
call you to receive it
hold it up toward the sky
bind myself to you.

With our Indigenous brothers and sisters, and all those who struggles against injustice, we draw our strength from past resistance. We remind ourselves of the imagination that enabled our ancestors to build great civilizations. We remind ourselves of hundreds of years of Black resistance to slavery, from the smallest individual act to the largest rebellions. We rejoice in Black Lives Matter, which refuses to accept the colonial dehumanization of Black lives and insists on vibrant Black futurities.

In a time when COVID-19 has revealed the grotesque inequities of “normal” life, we are now called upon to act. We will not return to normal hatreds and exploitation but create new forms of human solidarity in a transformed world where justice is not a dream but more and more an everyday reality. Despite the injustices and anti-Black racisms that COVID-19 deepens and reveals, this is how we can answer Maracle’s call and the demands from our Black brothers and sisters, worldwide – and keep the ember burning.

Endnote

[1] We are writing on 30 November 2020.

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