



kal 'fü—a Haitian Kreyòl word meaning “crossroads”

*“To get anywhere in life you have to follow a road. . . .  
To make anything happen, you have to walk through  
the crossroads.”*

—MORIS MORISET

*“This means that one must cultivate the art of recognizing  
significant communications, knowing what is truth and  
what is falsehood, or else the lessons of the crossroads—  
the point where doors open or close, where persons have to  
make decisions that may forever after affect their lives—  
will be lost.”*

—ROBERT FARRIS THOMPSON

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## IN MEMORIAM

# White Apocalypses, Global Antiracism, and the Art of Living through and against Death-Worlds

Terrance Wooten and Jaime A. Alves

As Black studies scholars, we understand all too well how our work—our existing and breathing and writing and teaching and researching—gets called to constantly do the labor of protecting the memory of those who came before us. We are tasked with not only protecting these memories but also narrating the conditions of their erasure. That is, our work often becomes just as much about Black people as it is about antiracism, sometimes with the two so tightly interwoven that one cannot discern when we mean Black life and when we mean white supremacy as a condition that structures Black life. In this special issue, we have labored to balance these (in)congruencies by documenting how Black people show up in various different global contexts, the challenges they face, and the ways they have continued to persist in what are far too frequently understood as impossible conditions. Yet and still, we find ourselves in an intellectual quagmire, torn between what might be read as an overromanticizing of Black agency, an underemphasis on antiracism, and a concerted effort to, as Toni Morrison endeavored to do forty-five years ago with *The Black Book*, remember “Black life as lived.”<sup>1</sup> This conundrum became all the more palpable as we tried to imagine writing an *In Memoriam* for the thousands of Black people who have lost their lives globally. In lieu of a traditional epitaph that focuses on a singular Black subject (often U.S. Man) who stands in as a floating signifier for Black life—much as George Floyd’s name circulated globally to mark antiracism

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violence, even as such a circulation was in part made possible through the very technologies of U.S. empire that create disparities for Black people in the Global South and whose presence overshadows the reality that there have been countless Black trans and cisgender women who have been killed outside the United States but have not been galvanized to represent a global Black (injured) subject—we decided to more clearly lay out the stakes of this project.

Implicit in what follows is our attempt to answer a complicated question: How do we mourn the loss of Black life globally in a way that does not reproduce the primacy of the Human over Nature or the Global Black Male over all other differentially positioned Black gendered subjects? Or, put otherwise, what happens when Black mourning goes global, who gets to be mourned, what is being mourned, and what do we risk reifying when we mourn Black life through the heuristics of the “global” or when holding grieving fantasies about the *Human project*, as Sylvia Wynter would have it?<sup>2</sup> To explore these questions, we first frame how it is that we think about Black globality to then geospatialize it in locally grounded and rooted places and temporalities. From there, we reflect on the competing temporal dimensions of global Black life by interrogating how racial capitalism informs our desires for a new normal, sometimes prefigured as a return to the *old* normal—a mourning for lost time that quickly forgets the colonial ordering that never ceased and therefore always already awaits our return. We end in honoring the dead by listening to the living, amplifying the voices of our contributors, who serve as conduits for our ancestors. We see them engaging in what Sharon P. Holland calls the “ultimate queer act” of “bringing back the dead (or saving the living from the shadow of death).”<sup>3</sup> In this way, we see our entire issue as a kind of memorial. Accordingly, we chose to forego an introduction to instead reflect upon and re-collect with the reader the offerings provided by the talented group of scholars and activists who made this issue come to life, even as it was born out of global Black death(s).

## Black Ecologies

In *Toward a Global Idea of Race*, Denise Ferreira da Silva launches a critique of globality as a political landscape governed by an arsenal of raciality (referenced by nation and culture) that spatializes race and thus produces both the universal white subject, the Transparent “I,” and the “affectable I,” that is, the dark populations of the globe.<sup>4</sup> In globality, the affectable “I” becomes legible only through the engagement with scientific and historic signifiers of juridical universality that reinforce the transparency thesis. That is to say, by engaging with historicity (e.g., the nation-state and its attending grammar of rights, through which cultural recognition and formal equality are sought) the subaltern—the affectable “I”—also participates in the geo-ontological project of globality, as an “irreducible and un-sublatable” cultural and racial other.<sup>5</sup> This strategy of emancipation fails because

the demand for inclusion in the Human community relies on the very reference to justice and rights that sustains the exclusionary preservation of Man.<sup>6</sup> It is precisely the reliance on modern ontology's bankrupted ideas of Humanness and personhood—with claims of restitution and recognition through the lenses of the sociohistorical logic of exclusion/inclusion rather than an ontological condition of impossibility—that has turned emancipatory movements at best dystopian.<sup>7</sup>

Running the risk of oversimplifying and trivializing Ferreira da Silva's rather sophisticated argument, we would argue that the present moment marked by the renewed promises of juridical universality—"we are all in the same boat," "we all have rights," "we are all humans," "COVID-19 is the greater equalizer"—reaffirms racial subordination by reaffirming globality as an onto-epistemological project. If modernity's promise of a universal subject is made possible through racial differentiation and evisceration, as Ferreira da Silva argues, the planetary "crisis" of COVID-19 and the white apocalypses it engenders is nothing but the reaffirmation of the "permanent horizon of death," a tempo-spatial formation that sustains a geo-ontology where whites are always already the paradigmatic subject of rights and life itself.

Jeff Bezos, Elon Musk, and Richard Branson's billionaire space race while millions are dispossessed from earth's natural resources; President Donald Trump's hijacking of essential equipment (masks and ventilators) from impoverished countries and his attempts to dismantle the World Health Organization; President Joe Biden's domestic effort to vaccinate the U.S. population while pushing forward vaccine geopolitics along with sabotaging vaccine internationalism; and the European Union's institution of a vaccine passport while undermining efforts by poor countries to waive vaccine patents in the World Trade Organization are all, if not articulated at least politically oriented, by the trans-historical and universal *nomos* of whiteness. Reading the COVID-19 pandemic through the lenses of globality may help us to explain why current scales of Black death have not "unleashed an ethical crisis expected by those who argue that racial subjection contradicts modern ethical principles."<sup>8</sup> This is also why the (white) apocalyptic narratives about the end of the world, perhaps anticipated by the pandemics (and articulated before through the geological lexicon of the Anthropocene), make no sense for those whose racial alterity places them in a geo-ontological location of absolute displacement: displacement from the world of citizenship, displacement from the category of earth-beings, and displacement from the realm of humanity. Indeed, the combination of COVID-19 with the ever-present destruction of life by capitalism, including climate change and decimation of wildlife (and the consequent pathogens that may emerge from such a zoonotic contact), has produced an arguably unprecedented planetary crisis that, for the first time, poses a real threat to human existence.<sup>9</sup>

Whether we approach the current crisis from the perspective of the Anthropocene, the capitalocene, or even the "virocene," we are not in the same boat

at all.<sup>10</sup> Scientifically proven new intervals of geologic time notwithstanding, differential access to healthcare, organic food, sustainable green environments, protection from police terror, decent jobs, security from sea-level rising, living in habitats without exposure to contaminated waste, and so on indicates the asymmetrical position Blacks occupy in the calculus of life and death before, during, and following the pandemics. The Anthropocenic “age of humans” is indeed the age of antiblackness.

Global antiblackness provides ontological, geological, economic, and sanitary security to the world. It does so not only in terms of the all-too-familiar plundering of strategic natural resources from the so-called Global North but also through the continuous rearticulation of a supranational color line well-pronounced in the medical apartheid exposed by the enduring and currently intensified global health crisis. The combination of the medical and the military industrial complexes, biosecurity and policing, is perhaps made manifest most recently in the explosion of killings by the police in places like the United States, Brazil, Kenya, and Colombia during the pandemics. As governments fought the virus to “biosecure” global flows of capital and make economies return to normalcy, they also enforced quarantine through the lethal deployment of deadly force against Black communities whose condition in the domestic and global economy did not allow for self-isolation. Now, as before, and surely as in the future, global white tourism and capital mobility had to be preserved by enforcing local and transnational racial bondages through antiblack policing, vaccination passports, and new regimes of biosecurity.

Painfully, current manifestations of global antiblackness have created extraordinary possibilities for supranational activism to defend Black lives. As the articles in this special issue illustrate, despite the horror of the pandemics and the ecocidal violence Black communities have historically faced, these communities are rich laboratories for creating lifeworlds. They truly embrace the African Diaspora as a continuum geography of resistance, one that challenges the ecological and humanitarian crises of racial capitalism by reinventing Black autonomy and reclaiming humanity. In this sense, Black communities under siege are also generative of alternative Black ecologies committed to an alternative ethics of being, one “founded upon a basic understanding that ecological care, multispecies kinship, and social justice are fundamental to the development of a human praxis that promotes well-being.”<sup>11</sup>

From maroon communities to contemporary “geographies of self-reliance” and Black social movements’ painfully crafted responses to COVID-19 in the African Diaspora, there is indeed an alternative Black ecology forged from the consciousness of being surplusly existent before, during, and after a pandemic and predicated on persistent assaults on Black life.<sup>12</sup> Resisting is not optional; it is imperative. For instance, summer 2020 saw an increase not just in cases of COVID-19 infections and deaths but also in global public protests and demon-

strations calling out the state-sanctioned violence that disproportionately impacts Black communities. Back in March 2020, amid the pandemics, protestors occupied the streets of major U.S. cities, denouncing the “virus” of police terror. The same happened in Brazil, South Africa, France, Kenya, Colombia, and other countries across the globe. Statues of white terrorists were beheaded, police stations were set on fire, and streets transformed into classrooms for insurgent pedagogies of resistance where activists demanded not only the abolition of police but also decent minimum wages, compensation for workers whose occupations increase their vulnerability to infection and death, increases in government spending on public health, and major economic changes.<sup>13</sup> While still deeply rooted in a male-dominated narrative of Black victimization, these movements exposed once again the precarious conditions of global Blackness.

Commenting on the nature and scope of protests under the COVID-19 pandemic, South African scholar Brett Bowman calls attention to the literal and metaphorical uses of the chant “I can’t breathe” in global protests that refuse the bio-policing of bodies through quarantine and instead embrace the unapologetic occupation of streets demanding radical changes:

These protests represent the very antithesis of the recalibrations required to contain the spread of the disease, and it is precisely [in] this juxtaposition of transmission risk for a respiratory disease through protest against the suffocating effects of police violence that the full force of the brutally racialized social determinants of violence and vulnerability to the communicable disease (COVID-19) is starkly apparent.<sup>14</sup>

This refusal to be disciplined by biotechniques of security is surely not new. Biometrics to reinforce slave state borders, anatomic manipulations to increase productivity in the plantation, and bodily medical intervention to normalize and regulate sexuality—all are part of the biopolitical repertoire that has historically disciplined Black bodies and the geographies we inhabit.<sup>15</sup> Thus, challenging quarantine—even when quarantine is not an option to those who cannot afford to stay home or for those with *transgressive* bodies for whom “home” means a permanent warzone—can be articulated here as part of the historical political praxis of Black fugitivity.<sup>16</sup>

## Queer Temporality and the Value of Slow Production

Racial capitalism is a global pandemic in the first instance, and so when we write of “pandemics” we seek to displace the commonsense understanding that *this* pandemic either falls along a continuum of other virologic-associated pandemics, through which we can point to an historical narrative that is interspersed with decidedly *non-pandemic* moments, or is markedly separate from other



forms of conterminous pandemics. Whereas Whitney N. Laster Pirtle poignantly argues that racial capitalism is a “fundamental cause of the racial and socioeconomic inequities within the novel coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19) in the United States,” we instead understand COVID-19 to be a biomedical manifestation of racial capitalism.<sup>17</sup> That is, COVID-19 is a symptom of global racial capitalism. In this formation, there is no contemporary *pre*-pandemic to which we can return, as that would be a call to a precapitalist, precolonial world ordering that no longer exists. The “normal” for which so many folks have been yearning is one that is constituted by and through a global structuring of inequality predicated on the devaluation and subjugation of Black life. We do not wish for such a return. Rather, we want to lean into the aperture made possible by the slowing down and shifting modes of life and livelihood to instead imagine what new world of possibilities we might create against what we have accepted as normal. What might it mean to embrace queer temporality, or the temporal drag, as necessary for radical action? Instead of rushing to be productive, to catch up, to “open back up” the economy, to *go back to the way things were*, what if we engaged in the Black (queer) radical practice of engaging acts of deviance as forms of politicized resistance that can lead to *transformation* as opposed to the maintenance of some form of autonomy, as Cathy Cohen reminds us?<sup>18</sup>

If, as Elizabeth Freeman profoundly demonstrates, the dominant arrangement of time and history pushes temporal schemae into a chrononormative sequence, which functions “to organize individual human bodies toward maximum productivity,” then “normal time” is akin to racial capitalism time.<sup>19</sup> Black bodies are pulled to labor in service to and for capital. Black scholars are asked to maximize our capacity to be productive for tenure clocks that overwhelmingly keep ticking, for teaching loads that have not reduced, and for service loads that have grown exponentially as we absorb the further precarization and firings of adjuncts as well as the affective unpaid labor of educating racist white students and white institutions on the continued crisis of antiracism. Black essential workers—has not all Black labor been essential for capital?—are being asked to run a greater risk of exposure and death, for low wages and with inadequate healthcare, to keep global industries alive. Consequently, Freeman argues for nonsequential forms of time, temporal drag, as a “productive obstacle to progress, a usefully distorting pull backwards” that names the past as part of the present and the future.<sup>20</sup> This is not a return to the past. It is an arrangement of present time that pulls on the past as it gets *dragged* toward the future, a queering of temporality. Or, as José Muñoz argues, “queerness is a temporal arrangement in which the past is a field of possibility on which subjects can act in the present in the service of a new future” and that which is always on the horizon.<sup>21</sup> By dragging on time, by slowing down and resisting the white, (hetero)normative orientation of time that undergirds popular discourses about so-called pre- and post-pandemic temporalities, we might be able to develop a

new political imagination that “can speak new ways of perceiving and acting on a reality that is itself potentially changeable.”<sup>22</sup>

Despite our own impulse to name the urgency of our writing and the need to make legible the conditions of Black suffering globally, we also had to learn to *slow down* our process for putting together this special issue, giving time for those necessary pauses and disruptions that make living under global antiblackness possible. We paused. Forced pauses. We feared unpredictable unfoldings as some of us got infected by the virus. We mourned the deaths of our loved ones and the anonymous deaths in our communities—some of our contributors were directly impacted by COVID-19, either becoming ill themselves or supporting or grieving members of their communities who became ill. We panicked over the obnoxious future of joblessness. We marched in the streets against police terror. We participated in community initiatives while neoliberal multicultural discourses insisted on engaging in “self-help” that would ensure that the affectable “I” might persist into the future; instead, we delivered essential goods to our communities at the risk of death. We launched public virtual forums to educate whites on the antiblack nature of the pandemic. We raged against growing inequality. We got frustrated with our institutions and their stalwart bureaucracies designed to keep white supremacy intact. We called for abolition and honored the names and lives of our Black trans and gender-nonconforming community members while the world remains silent on their death. We pushed our analysis to frame attacks on transgender rights, critical race theory, and reproductive health as manifestations of antiblackness. And we had to somehow give ourselves time to heal and recover. We had to learn how to not just live *in the break* but *take a break* so that our bodies do not break down, and in this way to reject the white supremacist assumption that Black people exist as “available equipment in human form,” as Calvin Warren describes it.<sup>23</sup>

## Apocalypses

It was not an Ebola outbreak in Sudan, or a cholera devastation in Haiti. It was the COVID-19 pandemic in Italy. Hospital morgues were overwhelmed, convoys of army trucks rescued bodies of elderly citizens left to die, curfew law was imposed. It was March 2020, and the unfamiliar image of a state of emergency within the borders of Europe was too strong to bear. The world was shocked. By the end of the month, at least seven thousand people, mostly the elderly, had been killed by the virus and Italy had the highest fatality rate in the world, even counting China’s Wuhan outbreak.<sup>24</sup> The lack of similar outcry to Europe’s (and Italy’s in particular) deadly enforcement of ocean borders against African immigrants—by letting them drown in the waters of the Mediterranean Sea—attests to the racialized rank of life in the European imagination.<sup>25</sup> The story? There was an apocalypse. A white one. However, for Black people trying to get into

the shores of Europe or living in the precarious urban communities around the African Diaspora, it was business-as-usual, a non-story of epic rehearsal. It was, to borrow from Ingrid Banks's incisive remarks, "COVID-20.0."<sup>26</sup> Indeed, the collection of articles in this special issue strove to tell the non-event stories of Black suffering. We paid attention to the astonishing levels of Black deaths and refused uncritical celebrations of Black resilience, all while taking great care not to involuntarily reduce Blackness to an unchangeable lethal condition.<sup>27</sup>

We tell their stories to honor their lives, not because we believe they will become legible as white suffering does. What Black suffering may perform here and elsewhere, instead, is to reinstate mundane antiracism in the political lexicon of crisis and to provincialize global health apocalypses.<sup>28</sup> For instance, in an overcrowded Brazilian favela, residents reclaim the body of an elderly woman who died, asphyxiated, in her shack the night before. In the five days preceding her death, she had traveled back and forth looking for help in the public hospitals and was told there were no beds available. She represents one of over half a million (and counting) Black lives lost due to the virus in Brazil. In the east side of Cali, Colombia, Black residents protest against the government-imposed quarantine, which has compromised the means of subsistence of thousands of families dependent on informal jobs. Red flags hanging in front of houses serve as a painfully creative way to signal that residents are starving. Since people have been tested at an extremely low rate, official data on the pandemic is unreliable. Still, the deadly combination of structural racial inequality in healthcare access and the lack of a coordinated effort to curb the virus, particularly in the predominantly Black Pacific Coast, make activists hope for the best and try to be prepared for the worst in a region where even potable water is largely unavailable.<sup>29</sup> Similarly, in the poor urban settlements of Nairobi, Kenya, residents struggle to navigate a coronavirus-prompted lockdown with no water and food, coupled with pandemic policing that is as dangerous as the virus itself. Narratives of Black individuals dragged from home and killed by police-linked death squads abound amid the government-imposed quarantine.

In contrast to the scandal of white suffering, these examples are part of the antiracism landscapes of the globe. Gentrification, homelessness, food insecurity, structural unemployment—all illustrate a liminal hellish position that calls into question white temporalities of crisis. That is to say, as horrifying as it is, far from being the end of the world, the current global crisis for some is at best a restructuring of structural conditions of racial precarity and white accumulation. Indeed, reports have shown that the health "crisis" has provided an incredible opportunity to the global capitalist elite's insatiable appetite for profit. According to a report by the Oxford Committee for Famine Relief (OXFAM) titled "The Virus of Inequality," the wealth accumulated by the ten richest billionaires—led by Amazon's founder and CEO Jeff Bezos—during the first year of the pandemic would be enough to vaccinate and provide a living stipend to the whole world

population. The report also notes that in the best-case scenario, social inequality will increase by 2 percent in the period from 2020 to 2030, which it calls a “lost” decade.<sup>30</sup>

The current global health crisis is also yet another opportunity for strengthening biotechnologies of racial and particularly Black containment and white mobility. Governments around the world are imposing new geopolitical agendas that will certainly shift the grounds of security politics. For instance, the Palestinian Authority has denounced Israel’s eugenic politics within the context of vaccine distribution. According to one source quoted by *Al Jazeera*, the Israeli government is denying vaccines to the Palestinian population while distributing doses to strategic allies to galvanize support for its geopolitical agenda of occupation, now with a renewed rhetoric focused on the biosecurity risk posed by unvaccinated Palestinian bodies.<sup>31</sup> While U.S. Senator Bernie Sanders is quoted in the same news report saying that “it is outrageous that [Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin] Netanyahu would use spare vaccines to reward his foreign allies while so many Palestinians in the occupied territories are still waiting,” President Biden, whom he endorsed, has not only demonstrated unwillingness to lift embargo sanctions to hard-hit Venezuela and Iran but also has enforced new restrictive policies on the Cuban people.<sup>32</sup> Additionally, the U.S. government has pressured Brazil not to sign a vaccine deal with Russia, despite the body-counting of mostly Afro-descendant and Indigenous Brazilians. The U.S. concern of Russia and China’s growing influence in Latin America’s largest democracy is, of course, part of the geopolitical strategy to secure American (aka white) capitalism. The race to control vital resources—when the outbreak began, the U.S. bought global supplies of N-95 masks and other essential medical supplies, and one year later the Global North had bought enough vaccine doses to immunize its entire population at least two times—shows how China, Russia, the European Union, and the United States transformed the apocalyptic crisis into a geopolitical opportunity for whites and non-Blacks.<sup>33</sup> Of course, this new scramble for the dark regions of the globe combines soft power—mainly international aid in the form of the vaccine leftovers the Biden administration delivered to the United States’ strategic partners once U.S. lives were protected—with the security agenda enforced by the very narrative of global threat the virus enables.

The Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) has condemned a “global vaccine apartheid” and warned that “nine out of 10 people living in the poorest countries are set to miss out on a vaccine this year [2021].”<sup>34</sup> The gap in access to vaccines reflects broader processes of global inequality and medical apartheid. As we write, anti-vaxxer movements in the United States and Europe have galvanized discourses of democracy, self-determination, and bodily integrity to make claims against what they frame as a biopolitical intrusion of the sovereign citizen subject while predominantly Black and Brown countries around

the globe watch their community members die waiting to receive their first dose of the vaccine. These impacts are felt beyond just vaccine access. At least ten African countries had no ventilators when the pandemic broke out, and a shortage of ICU beds and oxygen has led many to die across Latin America.<sup>35</sup> The Black populations of the United States and Europe are sharing the same fate as their counterparts in the so-called Global South: in the United States, data from the CDC has shown that the coronavirus pandemic disproportionately impacts Blacks, Native Americans, and Latinx persons. For instance, the risks for COVID-19 infection and hospitalization are nearly three times greater among African Americans than among whites. Likewise, the COVID-19 death rate for African Americans is twice that for whites. CDC reporting also shows that “race and ethnicity are risk markers for other underlying conditions that affect health, including socioeconomic status, access to health care, and exposure to the virus related to occupation, e.g., frontline, essential, and critical infrastructure workers.”<sup>36</sup>

To restate our position, one cannot understand these transnational conditions without considering an enduring project of *globality* whose universal subject of rights is defined by a “racial calculus and political arithmetic” that defines white life as life entitled to protection, immunization, and grievability.<sup>37</sup> Thus, this special issue of *Kalfou* interrogates the temporal division between pre- and post-pandemic by situating the current global health crisis within a colonial racial order that continues to define juridical universality and access to the Human community. We asked: What are the preexisting *structural* conditions that influence how COVID-19 impacts Black lives? How do Black communities disproportionately affected by COVID-19 respond to the compounded insecurities exacerbated by the pandemic? What pedagogies of everyday resistance have these communities developed to counter the social and racial impact of the virus? How may their local responses inform broader activism, knowledge production, and governance in post-pandemic temporalities? Our contributors brilliantly responded.

## Global Responses

The elderly woman from the opening of the preceding section represents the undercounted, statistically invisible, faceless lost lives that inhabit the *postcolony*. She could well be a person with hypertension and diabetes, living in an environment poisoned by industry waste, plagued by police brutality, and deprived of the city’s essential infrastructure. The combination of these social, political, and biological factors may explain the disproportionate presence of Black people among the victims of the virus. Indeed, for decades scholars have called attention to the deadly combination of preexisting multiple health conditions (multimorbidities), systemic racism, and patterns of premature death among Black populations of the African diaspora.<sup>38</sup> In the case of the COVID-19 pandemic,

scholars suggest we are witnessing a “syndemic”—that is, the combination of enduring racial injustices, sociopolitical, environmental, and biological vulnerabilities with a deadly virus that disproportionately impacts Black individuals. As Clarence C. Gravlee forcefully argues, “The utility of syndemic theory is that it directs attention to possible interactions not only between diseases (at the individual level) but also between epidemics (at the population level), taking social context and political-economic inequities into account.”<sup>39</sup>

Directly or indirectly, all authors in this special issue highlight the deadly combination of structural antiblackness (in its spatial, social, and economic dimensions) and the contingent risk posed by COVID-19. We hope statistics on Black patients lying in corridors of public hospitals or asphyxiated at home waiting for help that never comes are unnecessary to convince our readership of the antiblack pandemic. While we recognize the incisive interventions that are denouncing COVID-19 times as antiblack times, our point of departure highlights the transhistoricity of Black suffering, what makes Black lives be “lives lived in the present tense of death.”<sup>40</sup> What does it mean to live disposability as an atemporal condition? How might we articulate a critique of the present health crisis in a way that does justice to its insidious impact on Black bodies and yet does not normalize the antiblack violence that organizes the social world? What does the apocalyptic narrative of the end of the world reveal and cancel about the racial metrics of life and death?

Authors in this volume highlight the fugitive practices of Black communities escaping the antiblack syndemic. Their political project(s) cannot be more relevant. Within the necropolitical context of the pandemic, we may do well to engage with the paradigmatic figure of the Slave—an important intervention that has so extensively occupied Black studies under the rubric of the Afro-pessimist/Black optimist debate—while resolutely paying attention to the maroon politics of life embraced by Black communities to respond to the compound crisis of antiblackness within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. While engaging with the radical and much-needed critique of Black social death—resisting the urge to accept the position that Blackness is always death-bound—we invite readers to consider how an attentiveness to global Blackness far beyond the U.S. context demonstrates an overflowing of life that refuses to be contained in death-worlds. From this vantage, we can see the persistence of preexisting structural conditions as not only the fact of blackness but rather as evidence of Black vitality that needs be managed through death-making. Put differently, if we take seriously Achille Mbembe’s articulation of the postcolony as a spatial disposition governed by the necropolitical “creation of death-worlds, new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of *living dead*,” how might we account for the *living-through-and-against-death-worlds of our present*?<sup>41</sup> We see

each contributor responding to these questions in careful and insightful ways.

In the sections “Mobilized 4 Movement,” “Teaching and Truth,” and “La Mesa Popular,” respectively, authors Amanda Pinheiro de Oliveira and Wangui Kimari; Raquel Luciana de Souza, Débora Dias dos Santos, and Wellington Aparecido S. Lopes; and Ángela Mañunga-Arroyo, Debaye Mornan-Barrera, and Juan David Quiñones present important findings from their research with Black communities in Kenya (Nairobi), Colombia (Cali), and Brazil (São Paulo). All of these authors demonstrate that this global crisis is exacerbating enduring racialized inequalities, pronounced in the lack of access to quality public healthcare, the obstacles to obtaining essential services, and the policing of marginalized groups in these three countries. Deploying a relational approach, these authors provide a situated understanding of the impacts and responses to COVID-19. In doing so, they contribute to demystifying mainstream narratives on the virus, analyzing its racialized outcomes and giving visibility to community responses to it.

As increasingly deployed by scholars of race and racial relations in multi-sited research contexts, a relational approach enables the centering of the voices of Black residents in those Global Souths that exist outside and inside the United States. Though we take seriously the position and experience of Black people living in the United States, public and academic discourses have inadvertently reproduced problematic narratives of Black victimization and resistance that quite often rely on the U.S.-centric perspective. Within academia, scholarly interventions on the afterlife of slavery have inadvertently reproduced this perspective by dismissing other spatialities and temporalities of Blackness.<sup>42</sup> Likewise, contemporary protests against police brutality in urban “America” are highly selective in terms of not only the gender and sexuality but also the geographical origin of the Black victim. Accordingly, Black communities across the globe frequently get ignored, especially in moments when the contrast between Black and non-Black lives in the heart of the empire becomes too gruesome to be ignored by the so-called civilized nations of the North.

In this issue, Black relationality decenters whiteness as the litmus against which we measure impact, value, survival, and significance. By placing the realities of Black communities in Brazil, Colombia, and Kenya in *relation* to one another, we insist on the importance of focusing on global antiracism as a category of analysis when examining the afterlife of slavery vis-à-vis social inequalities that structure the lives of Black communities worldwide. Thus, the ostensibly peripheral place(s) of Kenyans in poor urban settlements, Black Colombians settled in the country’s Pacific Coast, and Brazilian *faveladas* are the places from which we offer alternative insights to locate radical praxis of Blackness. Even with minimal resources available, these communities are crafting alternative narratives about themselves and about their fate. We hope that by

highlighting these community-centered and community-located responses to COVID-19, we can call the attention of *Kalfou's* readership to the urgent need to politically and financially support these marginalized communities.

In our feature articles, the special issue also brings into focus the geopolitics of race and empire-making. Coming from different and yet complementary perspectives, Matthew B. Flynn, João Costa Vargas, and Daniel Delgado provide a timely discussion on global antiblackness. While Flynn looks at this from the Robinsonian approach to racial capitalism—which enables him to show how medical apartheid exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic is ingrained in the global apartheid regime that capitalism necessitates to produce surplus populations and surplus geographies—Vargas revisits two foundational texts, “The Combahee River Collective Statement” and Charles Hamilton’s *Black Power*, to articulate a critique of how gendered antiblackness is a foundational arrangement of power and domination in the African Diaspora. Delgado carefully documents transnational, hemispheric connections that have undergirded and informed the lived experiences of Cubans in the United States historically to frame how community organizations used—and critiqued—the discourse of “democracy” against the backdrop of Western imperialism. That is, these leaders and organizations provided an alternative vision for democracy—a vision from below, with racial justice as a central tenet and subaltern voices as the new voice—by connecting to a global set of struggles moving beyond, but still rooted in, local contexts. Going deeper into these lines of inquiry, Jaira J. Harrington and Mako Fitts Ward bring yet another perspective on the politics of vulnerability and resistance under the current global health crisis. Looking at the spatiality of domestic labor performed by Black women during the COVID-19 pandemic in Brazil as a racial necropolitical sphere, Harrington argues that Black women’s paradigmatic location is a signifier of the Brazilian model of racial domination. The stories of Miguel da Silva (a Black child left to die when his mother was walking her *patrona's* dog) and Cleonice Gonçalves (the first person to die to from COVID-19 in Brazil after being infected by her *patrona*, who came home from a vacation in Italy’s infected zone) are powerfully and carefully narrated to exemplify the underlying logic of white mobility and gendered antiblackness that sustains Brazil’s regime of domination. Finally, perhaps refusing to stay in the too-familiar “death-worlds” highlighted by some scholars, Ward provides an alternative account of Black agency. Inviting us to consider Audre Lorde’s *erotic politics* as both a mode of sociality and a pedagogy of resistance, Ward offers the reader a grounded perspective on Black women’s biopolitical agency that challenges Black-male-centric narratives of victimization and violence. Her invitation is particularly important when considering how gender and sexuality are left out of, or at best marginal in, radical praxis of liberation, including in recent protests in the United States around George Floyd’s death as discussed above. Ward offers blueprints for following Viviane Saleh-Hanna’s “metamorphic liberation” through what she names the



Black feminist commons. While refusing heteronormative assumptions around vulnerability, care labor, and the erotic, Ward points a way out through a radical redefinition of self-care as Black women's biopolitical agency.

## NOTES

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## LA MESA POPULAR

# COVID-19, Life, and Re-existence in an Afro-Colombian Community

Ángela Mañunga-Arroyo, Debaye Mornan-Barrera,  
and Juan David Quiñones

“If you leave, you no longer work for this family,” Raquel’s boss told her. After the Colombian government declared a lockdown due to the COVID-19 global pandemic, Raquel, a Black woman working as a maid in the city of Cali, had tried to negotiate a release to see her children. To protect the white/mestizo family who feared she would infect them if she went home and returned, Raquel ultimately stayed confined in their house, leaving her own children alone for two months. They depended on the care of other Black women from the community who were perhaps fired for the choice imposed on them.<sup>1</sup> Raquel’s confinement in the house of the white/mestizo family speaks volumes about not only the job insecurity that most women from Cali’s large, impoverished, and marginalized Black population experience but also the enduring reality of violence Black women are subjected to in Colombian society.

Raquel’s economic survival depends on following the white/mestizo family’s imposed quarantine. As a consequence, Raquel has grappled with food insecurity, homicidal violence, and the anti-Black racism of the city’s white elite, who stigmatize the Aguablanca district where much of Cali’s Black population lives. She navigates between the responsibility of caring for her family and the

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burden of preserving the biosecurity of the white household. Her experience in the midst of a global pandemic reflects historic patterns of domination by Cali's white elite over the bodies and lives of Black women, now excused and justified by the fear of them spreading the virus to the other side of the city.

This systematic practice challenges the chronological narrative that would hold clear distinctions between “pre-pandemic” and “pandemic.” Nowhere is this continuum of subjugation more pronounced than the place that Black women occupy as neo-servants in Cali's economy. Lacking better opportunities and trapped in the kitchens of white families, Black women have long “go[ne] through the anguish of not being able to offer their children the minimum conditions for a dignified life. While they work in other people's houses, taking care of other people's children, their own are left alone, with no one caring for them.”<sup>2</sup> These pre-pandemic dynamics can also be understood from what Saidiya Hartman has called “the afterlife of slavery.”<sup>3</sup> According to this perspective, the current living conditions of Black communities are not substantively different from those of colonialism, when Black people, particularly women, were subjected to the same violence the pandemic is deepening.

In Colombia, slavery was formally abolished on May 21, 1851, after a long process of resistance by enslaved Blacks organized around the practice of maronage.<sup>4</sup> Although abolition outlawed slavery, it did not free the Black population of places like Cali, an important colonial settlement of slaveholders and landowners.<sup>5</sup> The law abolished the slave trade but not the practice of slavery due to the fact that the formerly enslaved were technically “free” but in reality forced to continue working the land because of economic conditions. As Gustavo Sierra describes, “They continued to live in conditions of misery, many of them even under the same master and subjected to the same exploitation—physical and mental—as before the abolition.”<sup>6</sup> We maintain that the experience of Black women like Raquel indicates the afterlife of Black slavery in the country.

The official myth of the nation enshrines Colombia as a democratic state of equal rights, where ethnic and cultural diversity is recognized and protected.<sup>7</sup> However, this vision of the nation occludes its exclusionary perspective on Black people. National memory, history, and geography are mobilized “to mark racial borders” and to make particular regions disposable in the service of capital appropriation.<sup>8</sup> In other words, despite the normative discursive recognition of the rights of the Black population, the national geography is imagined through Black exclusion. This, in its turn, is reflected in the way Cali treats its Black population. To understand their experiences, it is essential to understand the processes through which Black places and bodies are violated far beyond the pandemic context. The borough of Aguablanca houses a Black population internally displaced by the fifty-year-long armed conflict that stripped them of their original territories on the Pacific coast.<sup>9</sup> Individuals like Raquel arrived in Cali after losing their relatives to the war. This population's disposability is

pronounced in the situation of Black exile, a fair description of how Raquel and other Black women experience their Blackness in the city.<sup>10</sup>

## Underlying Conditions

In Colombia, Black lives are always lived in conditions of precariousness. According to a report by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), the proportion of Blacks living in poverty is 30.6 percent, while among whites/mestizos it is 11 percent. Likewise, only 54.8 percent of Black residences have basic sanitation.<sup>11</sup> Poverty, malnutrition, and unemployment are highly concentrated on the Pacific coast, where much of the Black population of Colombia lives. According to the “Observatorio Social de Violencia” from Cali’s local government, this geography of exclusion is evident in Cali as well, with poverty and homicidal violence concentrated in Aguablanca. The Observatorio’s maps show that this part of the city has the highest rates of extreme poverty and violent deaths, while the part of the city where the white/mestizo population lives has the lowest rates, indicating a better quality of life.<sup>12</sup>

There is also an overlapping geography of homicidal violence and educational exclusion in the city. Studies on racial inequalities in Cali have also identified a gap between white and Black educational achievement.<sup>13</sup> As Fernando Urrea-Giraldo, Carlos Viáfara, Héctor Ramírez, and Waldor Arias point out, “The percentage of school non-attendance in all age groups is higher for Afro-Colombian individuals in Cali than the average of the other thirteen metropolitan areas of the country.”<sup>14</sup> In the context of Brazil, João Costa Vargas states that the paradigmatic differences in social indicators, which suggest accumulated disadvantages for Black people over generations, are manifested between Blacks and non-Blacks and not between whites and non-whites.<sup>15</sup> The same applies to the Colombian context, where anti-Black racism fuels patterns of exclusion and inclusion in the realm of citizenship. As the countries with the largest Black populations in Latin America, Brazil and Colombia are societies organized around anti-Blackness. In Colombia, this structure of anti-Blackness is reflected in the distribution of life and death in COVID-19 statistics. While Cali’s predominantly white neighborhoods are better prepared to deal with the pandemic (equipped with healthcare clinics and city infrastructures to facilitate biosafety), the predominantly Black neighborhoods are not only the most affected by food insecurity, homicidal violence, and unemployment but also subjected to deliberate abandonment that produces further vulnerabilities to death from COVID-19.<sup>16</sup> For every 100 registered cases of COVID-19 in Cali, 2.8 deaths occurred in communities with the highest risk of death, which are the communities with the highest concentration of Black residents.<sup>17</sup>

According to the weekly report from Cali’s local government that shows the rates of infection by COVID-19 across the city as a whole, the north-south

axis encompasses the boroughs with the highest incidence of infections, and these are also the areas where most of the white/mestizo population of the city lives. On the other hand, the highest rate of lethality of COVID-19 is concentrated in the sector with the lowest risk and speed of contagion, which is also the area where the Black population of the city lives.<sup>18</sup> The lethality of the virus is expressed with greater force in the most impoverished sectors, which have the highest concentration of Black residents. Despite being the area of greatest risk and speed of contagion, the sectors where Cali's white elite is concentrated have the lowest fatality rates in the city. Unlike Aguablanca, the north-south axis has better healthcare assistance, and even the political-economic resources for healthcare at home, while the Black population must take risks in weak and crowded healthcare centers—if clinics exist in their neighborhoods at all.

Although the predominantly white affluent neighborhoods of the north-south corridor were hotspots for the pandemic in Cali, Black people were stigmatized and blamed for the spread of the virus. People on social media asked for the militarization or even extermination of Black territories to curb the pandemic: "Militarize the city, cut the electricity and finally, if nothing works, throw a bomb and voila." There was also a suggestion to lock people up: "Like Trump, the mayor should make a wall that contains those people in their own world, their ghetto. There they do whatever they want . . . kill each other." Likewise, social activists have identified an exacerbation of anti-Black racism during the pandemic as Black spatial mobility to other parts of the city has been further stigmatized, motivated by the idea that Black families are much larger and therefore the main incubators of the virus.<sup>19</sup>

## **Local and National Government Responses to the Pandemic**

Despite being the city with the largest Black population in Colombia, Cali lacked policies focused on the particularities of Black communities in containing the health crisis. Reference to the Black population was virtually absent from the city government plans to curb the spread of the virus.<sup>20</sup> Reflecting this lack of consideration, many Black Colombians were spatially confined due to the suspension of regional, intermunicipal, and local transportation routes. Although much of the Black population lives in the metropolitan area of Cali, many reside in the countryside, where the cost of living is lower, but continue to work and carry out other activities in Cali. Another example of disregard for Black people's lives was the recommendation from the Education Ministry to close schools and to enforce online instruction. The measure deepened the educational gap between Blacks and non-Blacks in a country with one of the lowest rates of digital citizenship in the hemisphere. Since computers, tablets, and internet connections are not available to most of the Black families living under extreme poverty, school-age Black youth were largely kept from receiving education. As Angie Culma puts it, with

the pandemic more than ten million students are not learning, and the alternatives implemented by the national and local governments (educational guides, virtual classes, and classes on radio and television) have not been effective.<sup>21</sup> Although in the impoverished and densely populated borough of Aguablanca the closure of schools and colleges came as no surprise given the chronic lack of access to education (many young people have to drop out of school to support their families), the putatively color-blind decision to transition from regular to online instruction added to the color-bound humanitarian and social tragedy of the pandemic. These policies find their ultimate expression in the unequal distribution of medical care. According to data from the Ministry of Health, by mid-2020, Colombia had acquired 5,692 hospital ventilators, although only 1,556 had been delivered.<sup>22</sup> The distribution of the ventilators once again reproduced the exclusionary spatial logic impacting Black people in the country.<sup>23</sup> Urban, central, mostly white areas—in contrast to rural and/or mostly Black areas, which as mentioned, also have the most fragile health systems—were again given priority.

### Looking from Inside

The pandemic has deepened the logic of exclusion, oppression, and marginalization directed toward Colombia's Black population. In Aguablanca, it has exacerbated the precariousness of employment, education, and living conditions. Yet this is not a new reality for local Black residents. For Helena Hinestroza, a local activist and internally displaced Black woman living in the borough, "This situation of exclusion, death, and resistance of Black people is not new." According to her, the pandemic "just" exacerbated a structural condition. "Being locked up at home, without food . . . the armed conflict has imposed lockdowns in our territories before," Hinestroza said.<sup>24</sup> She and other interlocutors identify anti-Black racism as a normalized practice in countless everyday situations prior to the pandemic. "How are we going to lock ourselves down if we don't have means to survive?" asks Erlendy Cuero, another community organizer. Reflecting on the social and economic reality intensified by the pandemic, Cuero seizes the opportunity to show how in Colombia, as in other places, the state is anti-Black. She states: "It is very easy to tell us to stay home, but the reality of Black women does not allow us to do so." She notes that Black women have to make a living in occupations such as selling fruit in the street, working at restaurants, and performing domestic labor as maids. "How do we protect ourselves, when we don't have the conditions to stay home?" Cuero concludes.<sup>25</sup> The structural conditions in Colombian society mean that Erlendy, Helena, Raquel, and so many other Black women are victims of historical patterns of exploitation, domination, and subordination that determine their place in the nation and in the city.<sup>26</sup> As Betty Ruth Lozano-Lerma reminds us, the urban experiences of Black women are framed by intersectional forms of oppression: "If we were to point out on a map



of the city . . . we would realize that our location coincides perfectly with the most impoverished and marginal sectors, with little or no presence of public services and the absence of spaces for well-being.”<sup>27</sup>

## Politics of Death

According to the newspaper *El País*’s “El mapa de la muerte: 15 años de homicidios en Cali” (The map of death: 15 years of homicides in Cali), between 2000 and 2015, 10,875 people were murdered in the city. The vast majority of those killed were youths from the eastside and the hillside shantytown, predominantly racialized areas.<sup>28</sup> This astonishing level of homicidal violence demonstrates that the pandemic is only one event in the long process of Black dehumanization in Colombia. When five young Black men were massacred on August 11, 2020, in the middle of the lockdown, the killings mobilized social movements in a wave of demonstrations demanding justice, as seen in a photo from Daniel Zaya, activist, photographer, communications student, and inhabitant of eastern Cali (Figure 1).

This situation is not exclusive to the period of pandemic and quarantine. Black young people have consistently faced the challenges of protecting themselves against the deaths imposed by homicidal and structural violence. In a virtual focus group with young people from Casa Cultural El Chontaduro, a local grassroots organization, participants emphasized the fear of being killed during the lockdown.<sup>29</sup> They also mentioned that they are afraid of the police, do not feel safe, and are constantly profiled for being Black. Homicidal violence, fear of the police, rising unemployment, and poverty are layered on top of government measures imposing social isolation, turning Black communities into even more segregated and stigmatized spaces. That is to say, for the Black people of Aguablanca, quarantine is not an option, and yet urban mobility is ruthlessly policed and criminalized. Marlon, a young Black man, tells us that his mother lost her job as a result of the pandemic. With four brothers and an unemployed mother, he says, “in my case I had to put my studies on hold, because I needed to bring food home. With hunger, it is not possible to study.” In the pandemic, these communities were forced to rearrange their efforts to make life livable in order to literally not starve.

## Politics of Life

Although the national and local governments have failed miserably to guarantee adequate living conditions for Black communities during the pandemic, the communities have mobilized to create alternatives and combat the effects of the health crisis. Activists have crafted strategies such as collecting donations for food and basic needs, holding educational campaigns on preventing the spread



**Figure 1.** “Who killed them?” (Photo by Daniel Zaya, reprinted with permission.)

of the virus, and creating spaces for mental and emotional self-care to endure the psychological trauma.

Within this context, Black women are the main agents of transformation. They have been central protagonists in the construction of these spaces of life. Historically, Black women have built their resistance strategies based on ancestral knowledge and critical readings of their historical context, risking their lives when facing the “genocidal game of exclusion, oppression and exploitation” for the protection of their territories and communities.<sup>30</sup> Thus, Black female agency has created conditions of possibility for the community’s economic, social, emotional, and mental well-being.

Among the strategies developed by the community during the pandemic was the campaign named “Mi amigo de cuarentena” (My friend from quarantine), carried out on social networks, which aimed at supporting those in quarantine due to underlying conditions (especially those in overcrowded spaces with no internet access). The strategy included playing games, producing audiovisual material, and writing letters to keep in touch and to collectively confront the emotional impacts of the pandemic. Another strategy, named “Ollas comunitarias” (Community pots), addressed food insecurity.<sup>31</sup> Black women organized this effort, occupying the streets early in the morning with large pots in which they cooked meals to feed local families. Hanging a piece of red cloth outside the house became a sign for denouncing the state’s abandonment and highlighting the need for community solidarity.<sup>32</sup> Popular artists from Aguablanca also

joined the campaign, organizing the concert “Cantos y voces por la solidaridad” (Songs and voices for solidarity), which in addition to money raised food for three hundred families.<sup>33</sup> This concert also became a stage to reaffirm Black identity and to strengthen the solidarity that marks Black people’s history of resistance.

Finally, community organizers developed the “Trueque” (barter/exchanges) campaign, in which they left food and other basic necessities on the doorsteps of those facing economic hardship. Those helped would later pay the gesture forward by leaving an item on the doorstep of another neighbor. This strategy was supported by community gardens that Black women have developed to sustain Black families in the Aguablanca zone. One of these gardens provides organic food. Andrés Albeiro Valencia, a young Black man who leads the strategy, is excited by the prospect of getting support to create a seed bank “to multiply all kinds of seeds and support all those orchards that exist in the Cali sector, because the pandemic showed us that we must prepare for sovereignty and food security.”<sup>34</sup> In these ways, local activists have crafted endogenous solutions to address both longstanding structural racism and the current lack of resources affecting their communities within the context of the pandemic.

## Conclusion

COVID-19 has exacerbated racial violence against the Black population in Colombia, presenting Black communities with an impossible choice between isolating themselves to avoid getting sick or disobeying quarantine to avoid starvation. However, Black communities continue to build pedagogies of resistance with self-care campaigns and collective care initiatives. These strategies have made it possible to confront the difficulties exacerbated by the pandemic. In sum, if, on the one hand, the pandemic has deepened structural violence and anti-Black racism in Colombia, it has also provided opportunities for reinventing ways of collective survival. Faced with no feasible choices, community organizers have developed actions not only to counteract the biosocial effects of the pandemic but also to create other possibilities of living. Once again, Black solidarity, in times of crisis, is part of the history of agency Black people have developed for defending life and autonomy and reaffirming Blackness.

## NOTES

1. The information about Raquel is taken from a forum hosted by the Colombian research group Interseccionalidades (Intersectionalities), titled “Entre el racismo estructural y la crisis coyuntural: COVID-19, una mirada desde las mujeres del Oriente de Cali,” November 19, 2020.

2. Betty Ruth Lozano-Lerma, “Género, racismo y ciudadanía,” *La manzana de la discordia* 4, no. 1 (2009): 9, translation ours.

3. Saidiya Hartman, “The Dead Book Revisited,” *History of the Present* 6, no. 2 (2016): 210.

4. Fernando Urrea and Andrés Cándelo, “Cali, ciudad región ampliada: Una aproximación

desde la dimensión étnica-racial y los flujos poblacionales,” *Sociedad y economía* 33 (2017): 145–174.

5. Ibid.

6. Gustavo Sierra, “La esclavitud como relación laboral, ayer y hoy,” *Economías CUC* 31, (2010): 65–66, <https://revistascientificas.cuc.edu.co/economicascuc/article/view/1183>, translation ours.

7. We describe Colombia’s ethnic and cultural diversity as a “myth” because “the official image of the national identity has been elaborated by the white-mestizo elite around the notion of miscegenation, understood as whitening.” Mara Viveros, “Dionisios negros: Corporalidad, sexualidad y orden socio racial en Colombia,” in *¿Mestizo yo?*, ed. Mario Figueroa, Sanmiguel Ardila, and Olga Restrepo (Bogotá: Universidad Nacional de Colombia, 2000), 95–130, 1, translation ours.

8. Santiago Arboleda-Quiñonez, “Plan Colombia: Descivilización, genocidio, etnocidio y destierro afrocolombiano,” *Nómadas* 45 (2016): 80.

9. Ibid., 89.

10. For more information, see Aurora Vergara-Figueroa, *Afrodescendant Resistance to Decimation in Colombia: Massacre at Bellavista-Bojayá-Chocó* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018); Santiago Arboleda-Quiñonez, “Conocimientos ancestrales amenazados y destierro prorrogado: La encrucijada de los afrocolombianos,” in *Afro-Reparaciones: Memorias de la esclavitud y justicia reparativa para Negros, Afrocolombianos y Raizales*, ed. Claudia Mosquera and Luiz Claudio Barcelos (Bogotá: Universidad Nacional de Colombia, 2007), 467–489; Santiago Arboleda-Quiñonez, “Plan Colombia: Descivilización, genocidio, etnocidio y destierro afrocolombiano,” *Nómadas* 45 (2016): 80; Carlos Valderrama, “Espacios geográficos construidos para el destierro,” *Revista CS* 27 (March 2019): 173–177.

11. United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), “Implicaciones del COVID-19 en la población afrodescendiente de América Latina y el Caribe,” April 28, 2020, <https://lac.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/2-Covid-Afrodescendientes%20%281%29.pdf>.

12. Alcaldía de Santiago de Cali, Observatorio Social, “Mapas,” 2014, [http://web1.cali.gov.co/observatorios/publicaciones/observatorio\\_social\\_mapas\\_pub](http://web1.cali.gov.co/observatorios/publicaciones/observatorio_social_mapas_pub).

13. Fernando Urrea-Giraldo, Carlos Viáfara, Héctor Ramírez, and Waldor Arias, “Las desigualdades raciales en Colombia: Un análisis sociodemográfico de condiciones de vida, pobreza e ingresos para la ciudad de Cali y el Departamento del Valle del Cauca,” in *Afro-reparaciones: Memorias de la esclavitud y justicia social reparativa para Negros, Afrocolombianos y Raizales*, ed. Claudia Mosquera and Luiz Claudio Barcelos (Bogotá: Universidad Nacional de Colombia, 2007), 691–710.

14. Ibid., 697.

15. João Costa Vargas, “Por uma mudança de paradigma: Antinegitude e antagonismo estrutural,” *Fortaleza* 48, no. 2 (2017): 87.

16. Angela Mañunga-Arroyo, “Pascua para el pueblo negro,” *La silla vacía*, April 17, 2020.

17. Alcaldía de Santiago de Cali, *Boletín epidemiológico* 348 (February 20, 2021), <https://www.cali.gov.co/salud/loader.php?lServicio=Tools2&lTipo=descargas&lFuncion=descargar&idFile=50547>.

18. Alcaldía de Santiago de Cali, *Boletín epidemiológico* 354 (February 26, 2021), <https://www.cali.gov.co/salud/loader.php?lServicio=Tools2&lTipo=descargas&lFuncion=descargar&idFile=50658>.

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24. Interseccionalidades, “Entre el racismo estructural y la crisis coyuntural.”

25. *Ibid.*

26. See Lozano-Lerma, “Género, racismo y ciudadanía”; Viveros, “Dionisios negros.”

27. Lozano-Lerma, “Género, racismo y ciudadanía,” 10, translation ours.

28. *El País*, “El mapa de la muerte: 15 años de homicidios en Cali,” 2016, <https://www.elpais.com.co/especiales/el-mapa-de-la-muerte/>.

29. Casa Cultural El Chontaduro is an association made up of women, youth, and children from eastern Cali, which works on lines of gender equality, diversity, and racial and social justice. See more at <https://casaculturalchontaduro.wordpress.com/lacasa/>.

30. Ángela Mañunga-Arroyo, “Mujeres negras y feminismo afrodiasporico en la agenda Brasil-Colombia,” *Geopauta* 4, no. 2 (2020): 185, doi:<https://doi.org/10.22481/rg.v4i2.6531>.

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33. Concert organized by Red de Oriente (Network of Eastern Cali). See more at “Cantos y voces por la solidaridad,” YouTube video, posted by Cali on October 25, 2020, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HAjqGbd\\_UTA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HAjqGbd_UTA).

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# MOBILIZED 4 MOVEMENT

## Resisting Colonial Deaths

### *Marginalized Black Populations and COVID-19 in Brazil and Kenya*

Wangui Kimari and Amanda Pinheiro de Oliveira

*“The colonized sector, or at least the ‘native’ quarters, the shanty town, the medina, the reservation, is a disreputable place inhabited by disreputable people. You are born anywhere, anyhow. You die anywhere from anything.”*

—FRANTZ FANON, *The Wretched of the Earth*

Since the World Health Organization declared the COVID-19 outbreak a global health emergency in January 2020, the coronavirus has impacted people across the globe, at once decimating both lives and livelihoods. In addition, it has increased the number of forcibly displaced and stateless people: in 2020, this demographic surpassed 80 million persons.<sup>1</sup> Certainly, the pandemic—its socioeconomic impact along with its resultant amplification of policies of confinement and segregation—has had a much greater effect on communities of color across vulnerable groups, in both the Global South and North.<sup>2</sup> This article reflects on the experiences of the marginalized in Brazil and Kenya, in particular those who are living in historically poor and intentionally neglected urban spaces, migrants, deportees, and the internally displaced.

In the first months of 2020, as COVID-19 crossed international borders, transcended class divides, and became a pandemic, its lethal capacity was touted as the equalizer of social and racial inequalities. It is not. In Brazil, aggressive transmission has killed, principally, poor Black and Brown people long imperiled by systemic social and racial inequities. In Kenya, as in Brazil, the virus has made violently clear domestic socioeconomic asymmetries, and the global disparities in access to the vaccine have demonstrated the ongoing colonial relations between countries in the “North” and “South.”<sup>3</sup>

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In our two countries of focus, large segments of the population are denied access to basic healthcare, consistent water, and adequate shelter—only a few of many examples of structural inequalities. They are unable to engage in the “social distancing” advised during this pandemic. Similarly, in both sites, policing of the lockdown has taken many lives, and, essentially, curfew or lockdown regulations have inadvertently worked to furnish a historically anti-Black police force with additional legitimacy to persecute and even kill those from marginalized populations.

Correspondingly, many international borders have been closed to deter poor people from seeking help in other nations. To boot, violent xenophobic attacks have increased as political leaders have deemed “outsiders” to be virus bearers and transmitters. In this regard, in Europe, hotels, supermarkets, and restaurants closed their doors to immigrant-looking families, though many of them were citizens. Similarly, after being deported to their home country from Mexico, Haitians accused of putting their people at risk were attacked and denied healthcare. Still in the Americas, Venezuelan refugees were the target of hate crimes in Colombia. And of the Mexicans, Haitians, and Central Americans expelled from the United States, many are sleeping on the streets of Tijuana, contracting the coronavirus, and dying.<sup>4</sup>

In this article, while referencing other examples, we draw primarily on the experiences of marginalized populations in Brazil and Kenya to highlight how the coronavirus has increased the likelihood of “colonial deaths” for vulnerable populations, while also intensifying the fervent modes of resistance taken up by these groups to resist these ways of dying.

By late October 2021, COVID-19 had killed 607,642 mostly Black and Brown people in Brazil and 5,273 in Kenya—although it is highly likely that the death toll has been underreported in both countries and will increase during the ongoing “third wave.”<sup>5</sup> Reflecting on the prevailing violent conditions that have allowed for these deaths, the disparities that permit them, and the grassroots challenges to these gross violations, allows us to contribute to the central objective of this article: to allow for the sharing of resistance experiences and strategies across both geographies and the African diaspora more broadly. We begin by reflecting on the realities of poor and displaced Black and Brown citizens and noncitizens of Brazil, including their disproportionate death rate from COVID-19, the structural conditions that were exacerbated by the pandemic, and the grassroots responses to them. Here we dwell, in particular, on the experiences of undocumented migrants and favela residents. Following this section, we highlight the similar conditions witnessed in Kenya, and the various longstanding and innovative modes that poor citizens have taken up to challenge what Juan David Quiñones, community researcher and activist from Cali, Colombia, called “just a new way of dying for us.”<sup>6</sup> We conclude by connecting

strategies in Brazil and Kenya and discussing the importance of such sharing for a global African and African diasporic resistance to “colonial deaths.”

## Brazil

Brazil became the epicenter of the coronavirus pandemic in Latin America in May 2020, when the region exceeded all others in the number of COVID-19 cases and deaths. The lack of a comprehensive national response program, primarily because President Jair Bolsonaro was downplaying the scale and potency of the virus, left mayors and governors to determine and fund their own states’ virus responses. Between March 2020, when the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a global pandemic, and December 2020, Brazil changed its health minister three times. Without centralized coordination, cities implemented their own versions of the lockdown, with flexible or nonexistent social distancing guidelines. Some closed their schools; others did not. Soccer games of the major leagues were canceled to avoid fans gathering, but small matches continued to take place. Though Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo postponed their 2021 Carnival parades—Brazil’s most famous cultural event that draws thousands of tourists to its coastal cities every year—this did not stop hundreds of people from assembling for packed street gatherings.<sup>7</sup>

In this context, Wilson Witzel, governor of the state of Rio, was suspended from office in August 2020 after he was alleged to be at the “top of the pyramid” of a corrupt scheme of bribes and kickbacks for government contracts for projects supposedly aimed at combating the state’s disastrously chaotic response to the pandemic.<sup>8</sup> This took place at a time when health systems were under extreme pressure, ultimately collapsing, even as over 80 percent of Brazil’s population relies on the public Unified Healthcare System (SUS). Despite inconsistent approaches across the country, some preventive measures reduced the spread of the virus, especially in busy urban centers. Evidencing this, the rates of infection and COVID-19-related deaths were relatively low in the second half of 2020: it was only in late November 2020 that the daily death toll passed one thousand.<sup>9</sup>

The lack of data on the effects of the pandemic locally, which could have been addressed if there was a cohesive national response, also jeopardized many lives in Brazil. This situation was the backdrop to President Bolsonaro’s repeated trivialization of the virus and attendant hesitancy to order measures to contain its spread. When asked about the latest death toll in April 2020, Bolsonaro responded: “Look man, I’m not a gravedigger. . . . So what? I’m sorry, but what do you want me to do?”<sup>10</sup>

Moreover, as a consequence of the absence of a cohesive people-centered COVID-19 response, the Health Ministry subsequently stopped informing the population about the spread of the virus. As a result, by December 2020, the



only source of data on the pandemic was, still, the efforts of a media network consortium, which was created to gather, sum up, and produce information for citizens on COVID-19. The deliberate lack of information on the impact of the virus continues to inordinately affect those most at risk: vulnerable groups such as the poor and migrants, who are primarily racialized.

### *COVID-19 and Migrants in Brazil*

While Brazil has become a place of transit and protection for forced migrants from across the globe, the nation's refugee community has been severely impacted by the pandemic. The systemic lack of adequate public information about the numbers and conditions of migrants, refugees, and displaced populations, added to the historical state neglect of these groups, has created perfect super-spreader conditions for COVID-19 in the country. Almost a year after the coronavirus was declared a global pandemic, public officials in Brazil still do not know which migrant groups were affected: who was sick, who was high risk, who recovered, or who died from the virus. Revealing the impact of this neglect, Venezuelan asylum seekers living in shelters and on the streets in Roraima, in the north of Brazil, and Congolese and Haitian migrants living in favelas, have been particularly affected by the pandemic and Brazil's inadequate response to it.

Against this background, Venezuelans have become, overwhelmingly, the largest group of asylum seekers in Brazil since the political and economic turmoil that began in 2015, which has uprooted more than 5.4 million of the country's nationals.<sup>11</sup> Intentional political decisions such as border closures and regulations to govern the displaced have exposed how public health dictates are used as an excuse to keep out Venezuelan and other migrants. Claiming health reasons related to the risks of contamination by the coronavirus, in March 2020, Brazil restricted Venezuelan migrants from coming through land borders, the most common form of entry by those in search of protection and shelter. However, its air borders were open to all, including those from Venezuela as well as European countries where the infection levels were extremely high. These pandemic-sanctioned regulations certainly underscored the classed and racialized imperatives of the Brazilian state.<sup>12</sup>

In Roraima, which shares its border with Venezuela and where thousands of Venezuelan migrants live in public shelters and homeless encampments, life before the pandemic was already very precarious. The state has four ICU beds for every one hundred thousand people, and over 30 percent of its population lives in poverty. This social setting has led to tensions between Brazilians and Venezuelan immigrants, escalating xenophobia and discrimination practiced even by the local government. Together with local and international NGOs, the federal government in Roraima has established "Operação Acolhida" (Opera-

tion welcome), a collaborative intervention to create order on the border, shelter migrants, and transfer them to other Brazilian states. Despite its achievements, it has not succeeded in preventing social conflicts and xenophobia from worsening the impact of COVID-19 on migrants.<sup>13</sup>

### *COVID-19 and Favela Responses*

In a “pigmentocracy,” where Black and Brown Afro-Brazilians are at the bottom of Brazil’s racial pyramid, Black and Brown migrants are at greater risk.<sup>14</sup> As Igor Machado and Derek Pardue describe in the context of the city of São Paulo:

The fact that the urban geography in which these black foreigners circulate is the same geography of exclusion of the black populations in the city of São Paulo, facilitates this association between skin color and exclusion, between discrimination directed to Afro-Brazilians and that addressed to black foreigners.<sup>15</sup>

The pandemic has, certainly, magnified the precarity, invisibility, racial violence, and xenophobia that shape the life experiences of Black migrants and Black and Brown Brazilians. For those living in favelas, precarious urban settlements where exclusion and marginalization—biopolitical apparatuses of a “race war” between institutions and oppressed groups—have trapped poor Black people since the colonial period, COVID-19 is even more devastating.<sup>16</sup>

In the absence of official data about the impact of the virus on poor Brazilians and their strategies to respond to both the state neglect and the pandemic, research conducted by favela residents has been critical in exposing why COVID-19 is even more devastating for poor Black and Brown people. The Data Favela Institute’s 2020 study “Pandemia na favela: A realidade de 14 milhões de favelados no combate ao novo coronavírus” (Pandemic in the favela: The reality of 14 million favela residents in the fight against the new coronavirus), on the pandemic’s widespread and negative economic impact on poor and racialized communities throughout Brazil, revealed alarming indicators: 46 percent of favela homes do not have drinking water, and 96 percent of residents do not have health insurance and depend almost exclusively on the public health system, which is extremely deficient. These densely populated informal settlements, where near 14 million Brazilians live, often lack proper sanitation systems, and most residents are not able to self-isolate given that the majority live in multi-family homes. In fact, about 50 percent of favela residents share a house with four or more people, and 60 percent of the households have up to only two bedrooms.<sup>17</sup> Regarding income, half of favela residents have a family wage no greater than R\$ 2,400 per month (roughly 480 USD), and thus, for all of them,

working is of existential importance. One resident of Favela da Rocinha, one of Brazil's largest poor urban settlements, lamented: "If you don't leave your home to work during the day, you won't be eating that night."<sup>18</sup>

In terms of community responses to these pandemic-exacerbated challenges, in Complexo do Alemão in Rio, for example, residents realized that the "little flu," as President Bolsonaro called the coronavirus, could devastate their neighborhood, and so they formed a coalition to identify and respond to the needs of the most vulnerable.<sup>19</sup> Residents went shopping for those who had to stay at home, collected and distributed donations of food and hygiene products, and used social media to inform their communities about the dangers of the virus and how to protect each other from it.

The risk of the virus to the poor was such that drug traffickers and militiamen established curfews in Rio favelas after coronavirus cases were confirmed in these communities. Criminals also threatened residents who were caught circulating on the streets after the 8 P.M. curfew time. In Cidade de Deus, the first favela in Rio to have a confirmed case of the virus, the following message was disseminated through a loudspeaker: "We will establish a curfew because no one is taking it [the stay-at-home order] seriously. Anyone who is wandering around will be 'corrected' to serve as an example."<sup>20</sup>

In São Paulo, rallying to prevent COVID-19 from decimating Paraisópolis, a neighborhood with over one hundred thousand people, residents acted fast. They hired doctors and nurses and rented ambulances to help the sick. Women in the community organized a taskforce to cook and distribute over a thousand meals for families of the unemployed, and they used their own bedsheets to make cloth masks for their neighbors. In addition, local schools were transformed into shelters to quarantine sick residents, and houses became improvised daycare centers so that children were not on the streets or unattended at home while their parents worked.

Migrants and refugees from Africa—mainly from Nigeria, Senegal, Angola, Congo, and Cameroon—make up almost three hundred thousand of the foreign residents who arrived in São Paulo between 2001 and 2017.<sup>21</sup> Facing anti-immigrant sentiment as well as Brazil's established racism, related and corresponding to a marginal class position, they were already suffering daily from the challenges of accessing the health system, housing, and jobs. With the pandemic, these difficulties increased and placed this group among one of the most impacted by COVID-19. Furthermore, the closure of businesses has directly affected them, as many have to start their lives again, once they reach Brazil, through small businesses. As a consequence, a significant number lost their incomes due to the pandemic and, because of the bureaucratic obstacles to obtaining regularization or meaningful recognition by the state, were excluded from the emergency aid granted by the government. For these reasons, many lost their homes and moved to multifamily units, most of them in poor com-

munities. Without government aid, many migrants are depending on the help of Black and Brown neighbors, whose long experience in surviving social and racial exclusion has helped them endure and navigate the extreme hardship that the coronavirus pandemic has imposed on their lives.

## Kenya

Africa was predicted to be one of the most severely affected continents by the COVID-19 pandemic. In early 2020, commentators from philanthropists to leaders of various local governments highlighted the catastrophic human impact that was expected to be unleashed by the virus. Bill and Melinda Gates, for example, anticipated that ten million lives could be lost, rendering an immense number of “bodies on the street.”<sup>22</sup> The forecasts of widespread deaths, while important to heed, did not immediately come true: in a December 8, 2020, briefing by the Africa Centre for Disease Control, the continent accounted for only 3.4 percent of all COVID-19 cases globally.<sup>23</sup> Notwithstanding the comparatively low incidence of cases, however, the coronavirus continues to have grave political, social, and economic effects on large segments of the continent’s population, particularly those who were already the most marginalized. Certainly, people continue to be wary of the future, uncertain about what the now “third wave” will bring.

This section on Kenya reflects on how the poorest citizens, long abandoned by the government, are subject to further state neglect and surveillance since the first COVID-19 case was declared locally. We argue that they are effectively left to battle two pandemics: state (non)intervention and the coronavirus. In particular, we focus on residents in the poor urban settlements of Nairobi, conjunctural spaces that endure historically aggregated racial and class discrimination, to highlight their abandonment to what we are calling colonial deaths. Specifically, we attend to the increased socioeconomic disenfranchisement, medical neglect, and hyper-policing they have had to contend with since March 2020, when the COVID-19 lockdown was put in place. Nonetheless, as in the section on Brazil, we also detail the responses of these poor communities left on their own, showing how their actions can shape knowledge and survival across these geographies. These events highlight the globality of Black dispossession and death, even in contexts such as these where Black people are the majority. In this case, spaces constructed in service of historical anti-Blackness—the communities that were formerly the “native city” or *cit  indig ne* during colonialism—continue to reproduce the racialized and class marginalizations of earlier periods. In the midst of a worsening pandemic, these spaces further predispose their residents to what we discuss as colonial deaths: dying anywhere and from anything, as life expectancy remains far below that of more prosperous and historically white areas.<sup>24</sup>

Due to their high-volume travel and direct links to Chinese cities with substantial rates of COVID-19 transmission, on January 31, 2020, thirteen African countries, including Kenya, were identified by the World Health Organization as high-risk for the spread of the virus.<sup>25</sup> Transmission, however, was not the only concern: there was significant worry that many of these “high-risk” countries in Africa had “weak health-care systems, low economic status, or unstable political situation[s] [which] ma[de] them highly vulnerable.”<sup>26</sup> Responding to these local and global concerns, the Kenyan Ministry of Health launched a three-month contingency strategy called the “National 2019 Novel Coronavirus Contingency (Readiness and Preparedness Early Response) Plan,” put counties with international airports and major land borders on high alert, coordinated across agencies and ministries, and implemented a lockdown as soon as the first case was detected.

It is this prompt action, replicated across a number of countries on the continent, that is seen to account for the low number of deaths regionally; it explains why “the sky hasn’t fallen in Africa yet.”<sup>27</sup> As of October 2021, nineteen months after the “first case” was detected in Kenya, the official number of infections is 253,151, with the total deaths from the virus coming to 5,273, within a population of 47,000,000 citizens.<sup>28</sup>

The overall effectiveness of these efforts, however, should not blind us to the exclusionary governance that the current pandemic period has both further exposed and exacerbated. In the first two months of the national lockdown in Kenya, more people were killed by the policing of the lockdown than by the virus itself, including a thirteen-year-old boy named Yasin Moyo.<sup>29</sup> The 7 P.M.–5 A.M. curfew imposed in late March 2020 was primarily implemented by a police force, who, amid ongoing trigger-happy practices in poor communities, used the curfew as additional legitimacy to terrorize and extort.<sup>30</sup> As a consequence, poor spaces—already struggling with high rates of unemployment, worsened by an effective shutdown of the economy; supplied with inadequate water, despite the reality that handwashing was of greater urgency; and facing a healthcare system with stark disparities in quality between public and private facilities, rendered even more inaccessible by the high cost of COVID-19 isolation and treatment and a public health workers’ strike in November 2020—became further predisposed to colonial deaths from starvation, disease, and state violence.<sup>31</sup>

The state, however, was ineffective and seemingly unwilling to take action against these three now more pronounced causes of death. Although a two-tier economic stimulus package was launched by the president in March and May 2020, it fell “far short” of what was necessary to address the ongoing hunger exacerbated by the pandemic.<sup>32</sup> In addition, though the Nairobi Metropolitan Services (NMS), which constitute the formal administration of Nairobi, and nongovernmental organizations sought to provide free water access to poor settlements, this provision was not consistent, adequate, or accessible to the vast

swathes of people who would require it.<sup>33</sup> And though charging the police officer responsible for the death of Yasin Moyo is seen as a progressive move, this officer remains out on bail, and, ultimately, the police force has never explicitly recognized or addressed the enduring violent hyperpolicing that is state sanctioned in poor settlements.

Against the inability to “social distance” in densely populated settlements, sanitize, wash hands consistently, and remain safe, and with no effective measures from the government to support Kenyans to do this in a realistic and humane manner, it was community groups that, once again, became the principal nodes of redress for their poor neighborhoods. Activists from a variety of Kenyan settlements spoke of providing food to community members on a weekly basis, offering water at a lower cost, documenting human rights violations, and assisting those who had been evicted or had no money for rent, even against increased surveillance of activist work and gatherings, ostensibly to ensure their adherence to COVID-19 protocols.<sup>34</sup> And certainly, the increase in sexual and gender-based violence in communities during the lockdown, nationally seen to be symbolized by a large spike in teenage pregnancies, highlights some of the unforeseen gendered impacts of the virus.<sup>35</sup> Such violences, of all natures, were tackled primarily by activists and community health volunteers, against their own precarity exacerbated by the pandemic, and with few, if any, effective interventions by the state.

## Conclusion

What lessons can be learned from the local grassroots activism for these populations in the two sites, and what work needs to be done to translate these local strategies across Black geographies? In the preceding sections we reflected on the conditions faced by marginalized Black and Brown populations in Brazil and Kenya during the pandemic—the uncertainty and the heightened predisposition to colonial deaths. It is clear that the articulations of a classed anti-Blackness manifest quite similarly across these two countries: in the police violence, the inadequate provision of basic services, and the unequal access to health services, as but a few examples.

With this information established, what then becomes imperative is the learning that can take place from these experiences of suffering and, above all, from the community work to prevent loved ones from “dying anywhere and from anything.” In both countries, residents of poor neighborhoods have rallied together to support their neighbors with food, water, documentation of violations, and improvised but important medical attention during the past and contemporary moments of the pandemic. These efforts are all anchored in the recognition that poor Black and Brown communities are on their own and cannot depend on their governments. Ultimately, it is those who are left to “die any-

where and from anything” who do the most to ensure collective survival, even as the coronavirus exacerbates the impact of already violent colonial regimes.

Though Brazil and Kenya are some distance away from each other, favela responses on both sides of the Atlantic highlight the importance of local praxis during this crisis, from selling water more cheaply in Kenya to *favelados*-led research in Brazil—a praxis anchored in a recognition of the globality of oppression and the anti-Blackness central to colonial regimes. Knowledge learned across these geographies, therefore, could include the necessity to “ground” community responses, the similarity of these mobilizations, and, above all, the recognition that in both sites activists build on enduring collective determination to resist the violence brought about by COVID-19 and underscored by global and local structures. This article is but a humble contribution to the registration of the commonalities of experiences and responses to the pandemic in both of these African/African diasporic spaces, with the hopes that in connecting and translating these struggles to each other, they can be linked. Certainly, more intentional collaborative research between regions of Africa and the African diaspora, towards a shared battle praxis, can ensure that we enable greater resistance to the colonial deaths that continue to haunt us.

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# TEACHING AND TRUTH

## Enduring the COVID-19 Pandemic

### *Challenges and Imperatives in the Defense of Black Lives in Brazil*

Raquel Luciana de Souza, Débora Dias dos Santos,  
and Wellington Aparecido S. Lopes

*“Brazil is a child in the elevator, looking for its mother.” “Brazil is lost in the  
elevator, looking for its mother.”*

—BETO EHONG, “Procurando a Mãe”

When the coronavirus outbreak was labeled a pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO), its director general, Tedros Ghebreyesus, urged governments to take “urgent and aggressive action” in order to curb the spread of the virus.<sup>1</sup> However, contrary to WHO recommendations based on scientific research and evidence, governmental discourses—particularly in countries under the rule of right-wing conservatives, such as Brazil and the United States—almost solely emphasized concerns about impact of the pandemic on the economy, pushing for a “reopening of business as usual” while disregarding the deadly impact of COVID-19 on those considered essential workers.<sup>2</sup> Due to racialized colonial legacies, the large majority of this labor force is people of color, who correspond to the most vulnerable sectors of the population worldwide.

A case illustrating the dynamics of exclusion and vulnerability before, during, and surely after the pandemic is the death of Miguel da Silva, a five-year-old Black child who fell off the ninth floor of an upscale residential apartment complex known as the Twin Towers in Recife, capital of the Brazilian state of Pernambuco on June 2, 2020.<sup>3</sup> His mother, Mirtes da Silva, worked as a maid on

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the fifth floor, and when the accident that resulted in her son's death occurred, she was out walking a dog for her *patroa* (employer), Sari Corte Real. Police investigations revealed that the child had been left in the care of Real, who was married to the mayor of Tamandaré, a city 100 km away. She was arrested for manslaughter and quickly released after paying a bail of merely US\$4,000. As the inquiries into the case unfolded, footage emerged of Real taking the child to an elevator and recklessly pushing the ninth-floor button while Miguel was crying and asking for his mother. What does this story show about mundane conditions facing Black people in Brazil before, during, and after the pandemic?

In this article, we provide an overview of the racialized landscape displayed by the deadly patterns of the COVID-19 pandemic in Brazil, as well as the pedagogies of resistance emerging from Black communities hard-hit by the pandemic, drawing from recent theoretical contributions on the precarity of Black lives.<sup>4</sup> We then address the incidents and patterns that exacerbate the vulnerabilities endured by people of African descent in Brazil, highlighting the agency of Black organizations and collectives in crafting solutions and alternatives to address state negligence and the violence orchestrated against Blacks in the country.

### **Asphyxiating Racialized Inequalities**

Further investigation into Miguel's death revealed that Real, a wealthy white woman, had abandoned the five-year-old Black child in the elevator and gone back to getting her nails done in her luxurious apartment. As the child's mother returned to the building's main entrance, she was informed that someone had just fallen. She walked toward the scene and found her son motionless on the ground.<sup>5</sup> Mirtes da Silva had been forced to take her child to work because his school was closed as part of COVID-19 shutdown measures.<sup>6</sup> As more details about the case were exposed, it emerged that both da Silva and her mother, who also worked for Real, had been exposed to the virus by Real's husband, and according to da Silva's niece, the women continued to perform domestic chores while battling the virus symptoms.<sup>7</sup> Investigations also revealed that da Silva was hired as a domestic worker, but her wages were drawn from Tamandaré's municipal payroll.

This tangled web of circumstances shaped the background that led to Miguel's death, underscoring the impacts of economic and health insecurities evinced by the pandemic and the vulnerability of people of African descent to premature death. Da Silva's family lost Miguel in part because they could not afford to stay at home and follow WHO social distancing recommendations; their socioeconomic circumstances did not allow them to quarantine and protect themselves.<sup>8</sup>

This event encompasses key elements of racialized socioeconomic and power disparities further evidenced by the pandemic. It painfully illustrates preex-

isting structural conditions that impact how Black communities are disproportionately affected by COVID-19. As stated in Human Rights Watch’s (HRW) *World Report 2021*, “Black Brazilians were more likely than other racial groups [in Brazil] to report experiencing symptoms consistent with COVID-19, and more likely to die in the hospital.” Among other factors, experts attributed the disparity to higher rates of informal employment among Black people, preventing many from working from home, and to higher prevalence of preexisting conditions.<sup>9</sup> The ongoing pandemic has exacerbated socioeconomic disparities on a global scale, and such patterns become distinctly alarming in Brazil, a country that was the last in the Americas to abolish slavery, where the socioeconomic gap between its Black and white populations has historically been substantial.<sup>10</sup>

Within the context of the pandemic, state negligence toward the most vulnerable sectors of Brazilian society, particularly Afro-Brazilians and Indigenous populations, has become particularly glaring and deadly under the current right-wing federal government. Such carelessness is illustrated by MP 936, a piece of legislation approved in the Brazilian senate on June 16, 2020.<sup>11</sup> Justified as an effort to curb job losses and unemployment rates, it allowed employers to reduce the minimum wage, shorten working hours, and temporarily suspend contracts.<sup>12</sup>

## Suffocating Patterns of Negligence

While many countries have been actively working to vaccinate their populations in order to curb the deadly impacts of COVID-19 and recommence their economic activities safely, Brazil’s president, Jair Bolsonaro, who is currently not affiliated with any political party, has been managing the pandemic by pushing chloroquine and ivermectin as solutions. Since the WHO announced the surge of a deadly virus and asked world leaders to prepare for the pandemic, Bolsonaro, a former member of the Brazilian military forces, has dismissed the pandemic’s severity, labeling it as “collective hysteria” fueled by a sensationalist media that seeks to spread fear among the population.<sup>13</sup> Bolsonaro has utilized the strategy of proposing a paradoxical project of democracy, challenging democratic values while claiming to be an anti-establishment politician. In that sense, he was utilizing democracy in order to promote antidemocratic ideals, denying the legitimacy of formal politics. He has been utilizing the same strategy of denialism in his governmental (mis)management of the pandemic.<sup>14</sup>

On April 4, 2020, he fired Luiz Henrique Mandetta, a physician who was in charge of the Ministry of Health, accusing him of adhering to World Health Organization guidelines and not demonstrating enough concern for the negative impact of the pandemic on the national economy.<sup>15</sup> Mandetta’s replacement, Nelson Teich, resigned after twenty-nine days due to his divergences with Bol-



**Figure 1.** Cartoon by Brazilian artist Bruno Aziz. Published on Aziz’s Facebook page, August 21, 2021. Reprinted with permission.

sonaro, who continued to downplay the severity of the pandemic, pushing for a return to “normalcy.”<sup>16</sup> The subsequent minister of health, Eduardo Pazuello, was an army general who did not have a background in any field of medical science. One of the main consequences of such a scenario is that as of this writing, Brazil’s pandemic-related death rates are the second highest in the world.<sup>17</sup>

As illustrated in Figure 1, the Ministry of Health in Brazil has been merely following the guidelines provided by a headless president who acts as a ventriloquist, manipulating puppet-like ministers, while carelessly mismanaging/playing with the COVID-19 pandemic.

The health crisis has been particularly dramatic in Manaus, capital of Brazil’s largest state (Amazonas) and one of the cities hit hardest by the pandemic worldwide. During April and May 2020, the city went through a dramatic situation, with hospitals and cemeteries absolutely packed. Lockdown measures were almost adopted. However, the mayor, Arthur Virgílio Neto, member of the Partido Social da Democracia Brasileira (PSDB); Governor Wilson Lima, member of the Partido Social Cristão (PSC); and even President Bolsonaro

abandoned the pandemic strategy that should have been established in order to prevent a later surge in COVID-19 cases.<sup>18</sup> Amazonas was the first state in the country to reopen private and public schools in August 2020. Reopening bars, restaurants, and tourist activities led to large crowds, decisions that configured a superspreading chain of events.<sup>19</sup>

By December, hospitals in Manaus started to experience a significant increase in cases. In mid-January, the crisis intensified, and the healthcare system was overburdened to the extent that several patients died by asphyxia because the main local public hospital ran out of oxygen tanks.<sup>20</sup> The Brazilian vice president, Hamilton Mourão, an army reserve general, asserted that “one could not predict what would happen with this strain that is occurring in Manaus,” while also contending that Brazilians do not have the propensity to follow restrictive measures.<sup>21</sup> However, the Oswaldo Cruz Foundation (Fiocruz) had recommended a lockdown in late September, warning that Manaus was experiencing a second wave of the pandemic.<sup>22</sup> The results of Fiocruz’s research were discarded by the Amazonas government at that time.<sup>23</sup>

In January, as the situation became critical, health minister Eduardo Pazuello visited the city to inspect its healthcare facilities. In order to address the crisis, the Ministry of Health issued a letter to Manaus City Hall officials, pressing them to distribute hydroxychloroquine and ivermectin—treatments for malaria, lupus, and worm infestations—reiterating misleading claims that such medications are effective in the early prevention and treatment of COVID-19.<sup>24</sup> Pazuello set up a task force with physicians who support these supposed “early preventive” measures in order to ameliorate the crisis in Manaus’s healthcare system.<sup>25</sup>

The HRW describes how the right-wing president has been downplaying the importance of restrictive measures and interventions, including naming coronavirus infections “a little flu” and spreading deceptive information about the pandemic.<sup>26</sup> The mismanagement of the COVID-19 crisis by Brazil’s federal government has had a critically negative impact on a crucial measure needed to curb the deadly spread of the virus, which is vaccination.<sup>27</sup> On December 19, 2020, the president stated that “the rush for the vaccine is not justified because you are playing with people’s lives . . . [and] the pandemic is really reaching its end, the numbers have shown this, we are dealing with small rises now.”<sup>28</sup>

By January 14, more than forty countries had already started administering vaccines against the virus, while Brazil’s federal government was embroiled in political disputes, demonstrating an unwillingness to organize a unified plan that would provide the logistics and strategies for offering immunization on a national level.<sup>29</sup> When pressed to provide answers and solutions to address these dire circumstances, Bolsonaro went so far as to say that he “did not care,” and did not feel pressured by high vaccination rates abroad.<sup>30</sup> A cartoon titled “Plano nacional” (National plan) poignantly illustrates the deadly impact of the

Brazilian government's recklessness in managing the health crisis in the country.<sup>31</sup> It depicts President Bolsonaro surrounded by personifications of the coronavirus, who gather around a table, actively examining a map of Brazil and planning for a full invasion of the country's geographical landscape.

In June 2020, HRW, bringing together eighteen civil society organizations and social movements, published a document highlighting the genocidal aspects of Brazil's deliberate negligence toward vulnerable populations in the context of the pandemic.<sup>32</sup> The Human Rights and COVID-19 Crisis Observatory issued a bulletin that denounced the highly unequal impact of the pandemic and the genocidal ways in which Brazilians—particularly Blacks, women, and Indigenous and traditional communities—are treated as disposable. The bulletin emphasizes that in light of deliberate lapses by the state, community organizations have sought solutions to minimize the impacts of the pandemic while also seeking to address the failures of economic plans that do not account for the historical and contemporary disadvantages disproportionately affecting vulnerable groups.<sup>33</sup> In fact, an Oxfam Brasil report titled *O vírus da desigualdade* (The virus of inequality) has demonstrated that “in Brazil Afro-descendants were much more likely to die than White Brazilians. If their death rate had been the same as White people's, then as of June 2020 over 9,200 Afro-descendants would have still been alive.”<sup>34</sup>

## Gasping for Air

Preexisting conditions stem from the historical accumulation of disadvantages that prevent Black and Indigenous people from having access to adequate healthcare and housing, among other factors. Disenfranchisement, socioeconomic exclusion, and the impact of state violence targeting these groups have spurred social movements for many decades, and organizations have denounced and combated these concerns while crafting strategies to address them.<sup>35</sup> Chief among these efforts are Black NGOs that have collectively intervened in the political arena and produced new discourses around the meanings of Blackness. By utilizing a pragmatic, strategic approach to race and racial identity, these organizations seek to provide alternatives and responses to overcome the barriers posed by the legacies of colonial violence and state negligence, which set up complex and layered preexisting structural conditions that pre-date the pandemic.

For instance, in the past twenty years, the Brazilian Black Movement has been engaged in efforts to address the educational gap between white and Black students in institutions of higher learning. The *pré-vestibulares*, which are similar to SAT preparation courses, are a component of self-help initiatives—strategic Black community-based interventions—aiming to both decolonize the overwhelmingly white public institutions of higher learning and expand Black access

to citizenship rights. In these spaces, Black activism is engendered through educational practices that not only prepare students for the entrance exams required by institutions of higher learning but, equally important, foster Black awareness and Black political engagement.

One of the country's most prominent Black NGOs offering *pré-vestibular* courses is UNEafro Brasil, founded in 2009 and located in the city of São Paulo.<sup>36</sup> Aside from providing low-income Afro-Brazilians with educational training in the traditional disciplines required in admission exams for institutions of higher learning, UNEafro members are engaged in organizing campaigns, particularly social interventions that seek to foster and strengthen Black citizenship.<sup>37</sup> These are organized through several clusters that “represent an alternative for mobilization, constituting spaces aimed at the construction of social struggles and concrete local community actions aimed at transforming living conditions. These will be auspicious spaces for theoretical and practical political training, fostering the emergence of new community leaders.”<sup>38</sup>

UNEafro counts on the work of volunteers as well as paid professionals to implement its activities, which include educational seminars, human rights workshops, and professional development courses that train individuals to become actively engaged in antiracist struggles and Black mobilization in the region. While being pragmatically involved in local and national struggles for the rights of the Afro-Brazilian community, UNEafro recruits low-income Black students, engaging them in educational activities that seek to raise Black political awareness and leading them to learn about the history of Blacks in the African diaspora and reflect on their past, present, and future conditions. Moreover, it prepares these students to challenge and denounce racist and sexist attitudes on both personal and group levels, as well as to understand the patterns of structural racism-sexism that have been historically established and reinforced by the state in order to maintain racial-gender hierarchies.

To address the complex set of challenges currently faced by Black communities in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, UNEafro has developed fundraising campaigns to support low-income Black families, distributing over 120 tons of food as well 50,000 hygiene products. Moreover, the institution has provided financial support to students, teachers, activists, and members of partnering institutions. In seeking to address the dire circumstances of vulnerable populations impacted by unemployment and other challenges faced by low-income Black families and residents of peripheral areas, UNEafro organized a food and hygiene product distribution to Black LGBTQI+ people. This sector of the Black population is particularly susceptible to violence, oppression, and socio-economic exclusion in light of the intersections of racism, sexism, homophobia, and transphobia, which often motivate deadly violence against those who are considered undesirable according to heteronormative standards.<sup>39</sup> UNEafro's program has also provided support to other vulnerable sectors of the popula-



tion in the city of São Paulo, such as homeless people and drug addicts, who are often subjected to stigmatization, destitution, police brutality, violence, and incarceration. As stated by Patrícia Borges, a transwoman activist and poet, UNEafro's interventions mean "a gathering, a very wonderful addition of Black people doing things on behalf of Black people, during a pandemic in which many families have lost their income and employment; at the peak of the virus, UNEafro comes with food and hygiene supplies and we take them to LGBTQI+ families, this hope and the food that we were lacking."<sup>40</sup> Concomitantly, the organization promotes courses and workshops, grounded in an interdisciplinary perspective, specifically geared toward this sector of the Black population, so that they not only have access to institutions of higher learning but also become leaders who work and advocate on behalf of LGBTQI+ groups.

The efforts by organizations such as UNEafro to combat the socioeconomic exclusion and oppression of Afro-Brazilians foster political practices and interventions that generate new Black political subjectivities among disenfranchised, impoverished Black youth. In other words, UNEafro is crafting Black agency through educational practices and political mobilization around specific problems that affect these youths' urban life. Through work by UNEafro's current and former students, classes, lectures, seminars, and workshops that foster academic and leadership training, as well as cultural activities and social gatherings, have generated a context of engagement in low-income Black communities. Those spaces become powerful sites in which contesting forms of Blackness are forged and lived.

Hence, recruited by UNEafro and similar organizations, young Black people have reconnected with their historical past, linking their local and contemporary experiences with other communities in the African diaspora. The work of UNEafro illustrates how pedagogies of everyday resistance have been reconfigured in Brazil, where Black communities have been facing not only the deadly impact of the pandemic but also blatant disregard and negligence perpetrated by a right-wing, necropolitics-oriented government, which has been diligently seeking to dismantle workers' rights while promoting fiscal austerity measures grounded in a neoliberal political framework, and belittling human rights activists while promoting and supporting violent, deadly incursions into Black low-income neighborhoods by security forces.<sup>41</sup> This learning encompasses key elements of racialized socioeconomic and power disparities exacerbated by the pandemic. It painfully illustrates preexisting structural conditions that impact how Black communities are disproportionately affected by COVID-19.<sup>42</sup>

The scale of violence utilized in police raids in low-income neighborhoods during the pandemic, particularly in the city of Rio de Janeiro, was such that the Brazilian Supreme Court issued a writ of prevention placing restrictions on police raids per request of the Brazilian Socialist Party.<sup>43</sup> These restrictions were imposed after a Black teenager, João Pedro, was killed inside his cousins'

home in a police raid in which the home was hit by seventy bullets. His mother had heard a helicopter hovering over the neighborhood and shooting; when she called João to express her concern, he replied “Mom, stay calm, we are inside the house.” It was the last time that she heard her son’s voice.<sup>44</sup>

This case poignantly illustrates how sheltering-in-place orders and social distancing may be deadly for disenfranchised sectors of the population, when they live in low-income Black neighborhoods that are targeted by violent and reckless police incursions or have been forced to live in the streets due to extreme poverty, unemployment, fleeing from domestic violence, drug addiction, and other factors.<sup>45</sup> According to a BBC article that addressed these deadly dynamics within the context of the pandemic, “In the first six months of 2020, just when many people stopped walking the streets to protect themselves from the virus, 3,148 people were killed by police in Brazil, in police interventions. On average, 17 people died every day.”<sup>46</sup>

In April 2020, the Brazilian government set up an Emergency Aid Program that sought to support those sectors of the population in order to mitigate the economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. It provided for the transfer of R\$600 per month (initially for three months) to informal workers; low-income, individual microentrepreneurs; and also individual contributors to the National Social Security Institute (INSS). However, by December 2020 the program had closed, even as new strands of the virus had increased death rates all over the country.<sup>47</sup>

Moreover, thousands of people have been affected by the restrictions imposed on the social gatherings that are common around pre-Carnaval rehearsals and Carnaval festivities. Assessments of financial losses resulting from the cancellation of Carnaval celebrations estimate that around R\$8 billion will not be circulating in Brazil’s economy.<sup>48</sup> Although the economic wealth generated by Carnaval festivities, which are directly connected to the tourist industry and attract travelers from all over the world, does not bring large revenues to historically impoverished and marginalized sectors of the population, it does provide the means of survival for many families who mobilize around this event.<sup>49</sup> They earn a living in temporary jobs by selling food and beverages, producing costumes, and working as hotel employees, musicians, dancers, artists, street vendors, seamstresses, carpenters, cooks, waiters, security guards, and other professionals hired by the entertainment industry.<sup>50</sup>

It is within this complex context—marked by persistent human rights violations, state violence, racialized and gendered income disparities, and historical patterns of Black socioeconomic exclusion and disenfranchisement—that Black organizations’ collective efforts to address the specific issues that have historically affected Black families in Brazil have emerged. In February 2021, the Black Coalition for Rights organized a campaign geared toward two urgent main goals. The first was to demand the return of the Emergency Aid Program

in order to provide for impoverished families that continue to struggle under the weight of job losses and other detrimental impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. The second was to denounce the chaos surrounding the vaccination distribution in the country, demanding that the federal government, through the Ministry of Health, organize a well-structured and organized plan in order to protect the lives of the most vulnerable sectors of the Brazilian population.<sup>51</sup>

Black organizations such as UNEafro are fully engaged in these efforts, not only through organizing national protests and denunciation campaigns but also by providing assistance to impoverished Black families who live in the peripheral areas of São Paulo, while articulating similar interventions with partnering Black organizations on a national scale. Within the dire context of the pandemic, UNEafro has organized campaigns to distribute food and hygiene supplies through fundraising campaigns nationally and internationally. The organization has been able to provide support to struggling families since April 2020 through the program Permanent Support to Black Families Facing Genocide by COVID-19.<sup>52</sup>

Moreover, UNEafro has organized interventions through educational programs, in order to lead Afro-Brazilians to occupy spaces that have been historically reserved for white upper-middle-class Brazilians. This is conceived as a strategy for challenging white supremacy and white privilege. These programs are geared toward training low-income Black Brazilians to acquire educational training in public and private institutions of higher learning, and well-paying jobs outside of the realm of domestic work and other low-paying jobs to which Afro-Brazilian women and men have historically been relegated. These are efforts to enable Afro-Brazilians to destabilize hegemonic spaces that have been reserved for whites, while asserting rebellious citizenship from a defiant standpoint in realms that have been shielded by institutional racism.

## Breathing through the Gaps

*Autoethnographic Narrative of Resistance,*  
by Wellington Aparecido S. Lopes

As a Black man coming of age in the outskirts of São Paulo, I have witnessed lifeless Black bodies lying in the streets of my neighborhood. I have witnessed the increase of violence and drug trafficking, which I came to understand as a determining element there. I can't remember exactly when, but I do recall a man was beaten to death just a few meters away from my home when I was on my way to school one day. I grew up feeling a profound rejection of state security forces and institutions, and many events contributed to this. In early 2012, when I was fifteen years old, four young Black men were shot near the doorstep of my grandfather's home. There was a lot of blood in the streets; their bodies were

piled up on top of each other, and there were bullet holes in their faces, arms, and chests. My brother and I were desperate, we cried profusely, our parents were not at home. I called the police, and I regret not having called an ambulance, but I did not know what to do at that time. Later on, there were people surrounding the bodies; such violence was a common occurrence.

No ambulance came, but the policemen arrived quickly, dragging the bodies by their legs and throwing them into the trunk of a van, collecting the bullets. They were laughing. At night, the silence was pierced by the sounds of desolate crying mothers. In 2013, my brother Jeovane was arrested. He was depressed, and he had become a drug addict after what happened. The policemen who arrested him were known in our neighborhood for being violent, and everyone we knew had some story to tell about their encounters: slaps in our faces, kicks, and humiliations. That same year, as I visited my brother in jail, I saw many childhood friends and schoolmates at the same Provisional Detention Center, and they were mostly Black young men. These incidents and developments had such a strong impact on me, as I became personally acquainted with and directly affected by what I later learned represented patterns of structural anti-Blackness.

My life was forever changed near the end of that year. As part of Black History Month, which is celebrated in November in Brazil, I saw a history teacher and a Portuguese language teacher being interviewed by reporter Ronald Rios on a TV program. They spoke of self-esteem, and structural racism, and violence against the Black population, and the valorization of Black identity. I had shaved my head the day before because my hair was falling out due to straightening products. In 2014, one of those same teachers came into my classroom inviting us to register for the pre-university preparation course at Center XI de Agosto, organized by UNEafro Brasil. Since then, the organization has become a central part of my life.

It was all very new, and the following year I went to university. I was approved for the National High School Exam at the State University of Mato Grosso do Sul (UEMS) in 2015. The teachers at UNEafro Brasil, my friends, and my parents helped me with money so that I could study at a university in another state. On February 18, 2015, I traveled to enroll and start the new phase of my life. My commitment to supporting struggles against Black disenfranchisement is fueled by my commitment to support those whose lives have been cut short or impaired by state violence and negligence. My engagement with the work developed by UNEafro Brasil has provided me with invaluable experiences, particularly in witnessing the strength wielded by collective efforts to combat Black oppression and exclusion. Hence, though I had already become a student at an institution of higher learning, I remained a member of UNEafro Brasil. Upon my return to the state of São Paulo in 2019, I became a coordinator at the XI de Agosto UNEafro center.

*Autoethnographic Notes on Political Engagement,*  
by Débora Dias dos Santos

“Daring *neguinha*.”<sup>53</sup> I believe hearing these two words is my first memory of the place I occupy in the world, or at least the projection of whiteness over me. The first time I heard this line, I was about seven years old, and I don’t remember who said it; I just know that it was crucial to understand that the love my mother and grandmother built around me had been pierced. They always named the micro-violences of everyday experiences as racism. I recall that at school the substitute teacher often left me to stand last in line even though I was one of the smallest in the class. As a naïve child, I could not comprehend how those words were supposed to demarcate how far my Black body was supposed to reach.

Building on a collective organization is a key part of how most Black mothers living in the peripheries raise their children. My mother assiduously accessed this network formed by Black women, as it was my grandmother, with the help of my aunt and cousin, who looked after me when I was growing up. I often say that my life has been the result of a collective project, long before I knew what it meant, because it is precisely in these communal constructions that Blackness crafts its survival and produces life technologies in the *quebradas*.<sup>54</sup> Education as a priority, art as an important instrument to acquire “culture”—these messages are what the Black women who raised me preached as the only possibility of becoming “someone.” I took their advice and guidance very seriously. At school I was president of the student representatives’ guild, and I participated in the Youth Parliament Program for two semesters (an omen, perhaps?).

Through my engagement with the educational and intervention programs developed by UNEafro, teachers and mentors become acquainted with my life trajectory, fostering and strengthening my potential. They helped me to become someone who could fulfill the political task of collaborating with the Coletivo Quilombo Periférico (Urban Maroon Community) through actively participating in institutional politics and running for a seat in São Paulo’s municipal legislature.<sup>55</sup> Contextualizing my life and existence before I reached the present scenario serves to illustrate the objective results of the hard work of popular educators who dedicate their weekends so that young people like me may rise beyond the limits set by historical patterns of disenfranchisement imposed by violent racialized and gendered colonial legacies.

Under the guidance of UNEafro mentors, and as a result of the political struggles of the Black Unified Movement in Brazil, founded in June 1978, my engagement in an electoral campaign resulted in my election as a councilwoman for the city of São Paulo in November 2020. The process took place under challenging circumstances in light of the complex set of restrictions and conditions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. The social-political context in the country added another layer of complexities to running a Black feminist/left-wing/non-

heteronormative political campaign, given the rise of a right-wing conservative wave known as Bolsonarism. This reactionary movement had resulted in establishing a federal government led by Bolsonaro, consolidated when he became the president-elect in November 2018.

## Conclusion

Far from being an isolated phenomenon, the circumstances surrounding Miguel da Silva's death demonstrate the deadly patterns of multiple forms of violence inflicted on Black people in the African diaspora. Preceding Miguel's demise, by May 2020, people of African descent all over the world were experiencing compounded sadness, fear, anxiety, anger, and anguish. The patterns of the COVID-19 pandemic had started to emerge as particularly deadly for people of African descent, in light of accumulated historical socioeconomic disadvantages and disenfranchisement, poignantly exposing Black disposability as a global phenomenon.<sup>56</sup>

Concomitant with this was the assassination of George Floyd, a Black man who was asphyxiated in Minneapolis by a vicious white officer who knelt on Floyd's neck, supposedly trying to immobilize him, for a reported eight minutes and forty-six seconds, while he pleaded for his life. The whole incident was captured on camera by witnesses who desperately tried to intervene, to no avail. The videos went viral on social media as well as mainstream media on a global scale. Protests ensued, reverberating throughout the United States and the world. The gloomy prospects imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, the virtually omnipresent footage of Floyd's murder, and images of police brutality and hostility against protestors conflated in an overwhelming feeling that violence and death were almost unavoidable company for people of African descent, spreading like a suffocating mantle of grief, fear, and distress.

Suffocating indeed. By the end of February 2021, Brazil's COVID-19 death rates had surpassed a staggering 250,000.<sup>57</sup> According to data provided by the National Council of Health Secretariats (CONASS), the country is experiencing an even worse phase of the epidemic, due to issues such as the emergence of new strands of the virus, budget cuts, a lack of consistent testing, and a shortage of vaccine supplies: a configuration that CONASS president Carlos de Oliveira Lula describes as prefiguring a catastrophic scenario.<sup>58</sup> Meanwhile, President Bolsonaro continues to position himself against lockdown measures employed by governors and mayors all over the country in their efforts to curb the spread of the virus and manage the dire situation of emergency care units in public and private hospitals.

Bolsonaro's defiance and denial of democratic values, as well as the scientific denialism that has informed his attitudes and policies about the pandemic in Brazil, have fostered sociopolitical phenomena deeply informed by a necropo-

litical framework that promotes erosions in democracy.<sup>59</sup> The trivialization of deaths further reinforces the naturalization of a hierarchy of values elevating the lives of those who deserve to live over the disposable ones—the essential workers, the unemployed, incarcerated people, the homeless, and historically disenfranchised groups such as uninsured, low-income Black and Indigenous populations.<sup>60</sup> As the country's death rates peaked, the president once again expressed opposition to wearing masks, arguing that they may cause collateral problems, while criticizing social isolation measures. He has gone as far as to threaten to discontinue funding for emergency aid programs—which are currently being debated within the Brazilian senate—to governors who impose such restrictive measures in their states, accusing them of politicizing the pandemics and destroying jobs.<sup>61</sup> And as of March 15, 2021, according to the data provided by the John Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center, only 1.37 percent of the country's population had been vaccinated.<sup>62</sup>

Still, in spite of such gloomy scenarios, Black people forge spaces of life out of resilience and refusals, building upon historical legacies of Black collective struggles. In the case of UNEafro Brasil, the organization advances a pedagogy of resistance that privileges collective care and community love as its raw material to resist COVID-19. In that sense, the engagement and efforts employed by “social movements, activists, [and] self-organized collective organizations demonstrate that Black communities can make the difference between life and death in vulnerable territories.”<sup>63</sup> This Black politics comprises public protests, self-help initiatives in popular education projects, and strategic occupation of and participation in the city's political structures and parties. UNEafro and partnering Black organizations work to prepare Black youth to become critical political participants, crafting interdisciplinary and antihegemonic approaches to education as well as promoting pragmatic participation in electoral processes in order to gradually occupy and transform the Brazilian political system.

Hence, a diverse and vivid Black movement has been forged in a context not chosen but constrained by outside forces. Black young people have increasingly participated in the city's political scene, disturbing the social order, running for office, organizing public performances and protests, confronting the police, politicizing Black death, denouncing the state's genocidal agenda against Black populations and mass incarceration, etc. These individuals have deployed organized interventions through Black organizations, which have creatively mobilized individuals by reclaiming and crafting political identities and alliances within the political arena.

In their struggles to dismantle colonial structures, enslaved Africans and their descendants engaged in processes of self-liberation, pressing for the end of forced labor and exploitation through riots, mass flights from plantations, and other strategies that rendered that brutalizing system unviable economically. Similar patterns may be observed contemporarily, although strategies for Black

emancipation engendered by Black movements in contemporary Brazil continue to be rendered invisible.<sup>64</sup> Drawing attention to and supporting such Black collective efforts, particularly within the context of right-wing conservative governments that are invested in promoting multiple forms of Black genocide in Brazil, have acquired crucial relevance.

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