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3 Selections from "Upon the Body: Poems of/to a Black Social Epi, PT.II–LOVE//Resistance in the Time of COVID"

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3 Selections from "Upon the Body: Poems of/to a Black Social Epi, PT.II--LOVE//Resistance in the Time of COVID"

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Abstract

The 3 poems included here are from a collection written between January and August 2020. The full collection—27 poems total—examines intersections of structural racism, racialized police violence, and COVID-19, drawing from generations of creative resistance produced and embodied by Black artists, activists, and scholars like Nina Simone, Langston Hughes, Paul Laurence Dunbar, Audre Lorde, Ida B. Wells, James Baldwin, and W.E.B. DuBois. The collection as a whole is crafted as counternarrative to public health's ahistoric, apolitical, racist, and homophobic proclivities in times of crisis. The 3 poems here are from Part II, "LOVE//Resistance in the Time of COVID." These selections make connections between social justice, structural racism, economic inequality, and public health history, weaving public health themes together with Black music, poetry, literature, and history to (re)frame/analyze the dual pandemics confronting Black, Indigenous, and other people of color, and to nuance narratives of our presence/resistance. "MASKS//Exposed" and "IMAGINATION//Immunity" do so in relation to COVID-19, while "BLACK//Gold" (written/recorded as a hip-hop track) sits at the intersection of COVID-19 and racialized police violence.

"MASKS//Exposed" offers a critical analysis of the public health and political discourse during the early stages of COVID-19, drawing from public health literature, critical theory, and news media to interrogate dominant narratives of being "all in this together", social distance(ing), and COVID-19 being an "equal opportunity infection."

"IMAGINATION//Immunity" offers a personal reflection on how COVID-19 has shaped daily life for those with young children, anchored in a theme of imagination as escape/immunity, and taking my childhood nostalgia of Nas' (1996) "If I Ruled the Ruled (Imagine That)" as the narrative architecture/pulse.

"BLACK//Gold" offers a lyrical analysis of intersections between dual pandemics of COVID-19 and racialized police violence, integrating critical social commentary of each as rooted in broader forms/norms of structural racism, racial capitalism, and epistemic and symbolic violence. Written in the tradition of Black protest music, the lyrics evoke the words/writings of James Baldwin, Frantz Fanon, Assata Shakur, and Nina Simone—using vocal and piano samples from the latter's renditions of "Black is the Color of My True Love's Hair" and "Strange Fruit."

Keywords

poetry, racialized police violence, COVID-19, structural racism, counternarrative, resistance

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MASKS//Exposed

Can covering

coughs cover

the costs

of our American production?

Crises manufactured
in the mouths of demagogues,
idiosyncratic idiocies¹
adorned in red ties
defending insipid claims of intelligence,²
suppressing science,³ ignoring
centuries of proof embodied
in the bones and lungs of our lost:

America has never been asymptomatic.⁴

Testing for pathogens
finding ourselves
in the streaks of Western blots
unapologetically contaminated,⁵
wiping doorknobs
we wouldn't turn for a neighbor
who doesn't speak our language;⁶

searching for solvents to absolve
our apologies as the world becomes
a 5G autoclave covered in breaking
coverage of tolls counting
the uncovered
 the unhoused⁷
the unfree⁸
 the uninsured⁹

¹ See: [Burns, K \(2020\)](#)

² See: [Nakamura, D \(2020\)](#)

³ See: [Milman, O \(2020\)](#)

⁴ See: [Patterson & Runge \(2002\)](#)

⁵ See: [Edwards-Isaac, D \(2020\)](#)

⁶ See: [Kanno-Youngs et al \(2020\)](#)

⁷ See: [Kim, C \(2020\)](#)

⁸ See: [Marshall Project \(2020\)](#)

⁹ See: [Luhby, T \(2020\)](#)

the undocumented¹⁰

uncovering

the umbilical cord of infection.

How do you quarantine racism?

How do you "flatten the curve" of capitalism?¹¹

Patience?

Hope?

Hope is an accelerant
in an arson of indifference,
and we are not the resistance¹² –
we are the Remakers.¹³

We must burn their corneas,¹⁴
corner their consciousness
as wolves conditioned on the flesh of lies

tear

their tongues

for origami

appetizers on a glass tabletop of truth
organized to shatter,¹⁵ to cut, to dislodge
patience from the bends of our bones
and prayer from our cracking fingers
because god is a lobbyist.¹⁶

The fire is here and, no –
our ride is not arriving;
it has been consumed

¹⁰ See: [Gomez, A \(2020\)](#)

¹¹ See: [Wallace et al \(2020\)](#)

¹² See: [Alexander, M \(2018\)](#)

¹³ In reference to/in conversation with James Baldwin's analysis in his essay, "Notes for a Hypothetical Novel." In specific reference to the quote: "I don't believe any longer that we can afford to say that it is entirely out of our hand. We made the world we're living in and we have to make it over" (p.154); See: Baldwin, J (1992). *Nobody Knows My Name*. Vintage, Reissue Edition: New York.

¹⁴ In reference to the insidiousness of "colorblind" racism in the U.S.; see: [Johnson, T. \(2019\)](#) and Bonilla-Silva, E. [Racism Without Racists](#)

¹⁵ In general reference to women's and gender rights; here, "glass ceiling" and more recent organizing around 2017 Women's March

¹⁶ See: [Center for Responsive Politics](#)

by the flames of an arc
fashioned from our sweat,¹⁷
funded by the tithes and taxes
of a hopeful populace that depletes toilet paper
and leaves matches fully stocked;
washing virally exploited hands¹⁸
with antibacterial soap, massaging
monetized fear into palms dying
to be raised as fists – unpaid.¹⁹

Sick? Now leave.²⁰

A drunken reality exposed by social distance,²¹
rubbing sanitizer on distilled inequality –

let's put a mask on it
call it COVID
or call it "Chinese"
or call it whatever the fuck we want
as long as we don't dare dream
to call it enough.

At what point, exactly, does "it" become

what it is?

When an actual pandemic
poses no threat to dreams
of going viral;
when a president lays bare
our true pathology
in an ode to Ivan Drago –

because what's a death to a dollar

a “problem”²² to a patent
when there's a promise
of a check?

As my brothers build
and operate the warehouses
my father trucks the products
my mother stocks the shelves

¹⁷ See: [Collins, M \(2015\)](#)

¹⁸ See: [Charles, D \(2020\)](#)

¹⁹ See: [Kaiser Family Foundation \(2020\)](#)

²⁰ See: [APM Research Lab \(2020\)](#)

²¹ See: [Bonhomme, E \(2020\)](#)

²² See: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/23/us/politics/trump-coronavirus-restrictions.html>

my partner treats the sick
our loved ones' skins
scorch to dust in sterilized boxes...

should we wade
through the world we made

jealous
of those melting away
inside

or purchase stock
in natural gas?²³

I'll wait →

6'

← freedom

²³ Natural gas is a primary energy source for cremation

IMAGINATION//Immunity

Or, Qualitative Analysis of Toddler Perceptions of COVID19 Using Theory Grounded in Snacks

I've been lying on purple
lounging cushions in the sun
working on myself, rediscovering
my melanin on an 8th floor patio
with a "spidey" named "Bum Bum"

views of a "sleeping" volcano, caffeine

*black diamonds and pearls*²⁴
and my toddler setting the scene –

peak.
awakenings.
nostalgia.
obliviousness.

imagine that...

a world where
cement trucks pour
pancakes
sloths fly
and foxes play capoeira.

He asked me why
everything
is closed.

I lied like any parent
in pursuit
of the holy trinity:

assuage fear.
satisfy curiosity.
and return
to your quarantini – saúde!

I told him germs called corona,
the truest of fictions.

"Germs. Kawona.
Get big owies.
Go... go hospital."

²⁴ In reference to Nas' 1996 track featuring Lauryn Hill, "[If I Ruled the World \(Imagine That\)](#)"

He gets it. Washes his hands
...until they're squeaky clean!²⁵

It's funny how we tell adults
the same thing, that many of us believe it –
believe that our hands were clean
when things were "normal."

How long must we lather
before I can wipe
the tears from his eyes,
before we stop
scrubbing away
the word "united"?

"Toy shop kwosed. Donuts kwosed.
Get some... get some other snacks?"

I wonder if he knows

that his grandmother is risking
her life to stock toys
and pancake batter –
fueling sloth jet packs.
ensuring our survival.
walking

...right up to the sun.²⁶

²⁵ See: <https://www.fisher-price.com/en-us/product/laugh-learn-smart-stages-puppy-fdf21>

²⁶ In dual reference to essential workers having to face the corona virus—with corona being the outer layer of the sun—in order to make ends meet, and the hook of Nas' song supra note 24

BLACK//Gold

Or, A Social Epi's Lyrical Analysis of Dual Pandemics*

*[set to 90bpm; featuring samples from Nina Simone's "Black is the Color of My True Love's Hair" and "Strange Fruit"]

Kaep kneeled, got peeled, bodies broken on the field /
22 long retired but I see Emmett still /
1619, the pandemic is real /
social distance just reveals what racism conceals /

The same shit, that got us here dying from COVID /
is the same shit that got us here dying from chauvins /
Black bodies get shots, the economy opens /
White fear gets cheers, the equality's broken /

Tired of excuses of you tryna noose us /
steal the fruits of our labor, still tryna juice us /
nothing strange anymore, televise the abuses /
lies and maneuvers, desensitize lives for the viewers /

Can't, go for a jog, can't play in the park /
bunch of grown ass men still afraid of the dark /
took Aiyana while she dreamed, what's the state of the arc /
that we bend for McDade every day that we march /

...on the way to the march /
cameras rollin' in the movement, are you playing your part /
got a song for Assata, a mask from Fanon /
a lighter from Baldwin, it's time to set it off...

...Miss Simone with the backflips /
fact is, there's no gold without Blackness /
go west, manifest, kill the savage /
Brown, Indigenous, Yellow Peril in the tactics /

Gold rush put Kaep on the blacklist /
...light skin with a Black fist /
decolonize, raise Frantz from the ashes /
of Baldwins fire, brown skins blue maskssss /

6 feet is what the government ask is /
6 feet fit to cover George's casket /
y'all cry over tissue for your asses /
bitches couldn't walk 6 feet in Maud's maxes /

Toe tag, nothing trendy like a Black death /

[“...Black body swinging in the southern breeze...”²⁷]

hashtag, Breonna Taylor on a mattress /
math whiz, Black bodies turned to fractions /
3/5 times 2020, that's disastrous /

...So where my muthafuckin' matches /
'bout to put climate change into practice /
warm it up, bring the hammers and hatchets /
'til Black lives matter it's about to get ratchet /

...No earrings, no glasses /
all allies, no excuses, no passes /
N95s on the face of the masses /
pandemic panthers, come marvel at this Blackness...

...on the way to the march /
cameras rollin' in the movement, are you playing your part /
got a song for Assata, a mask from Fanon /
a lighter from Baldwin, it's time to set it off...

²⁷ Referring to line from “Strange Fruit,” written by Abel Meeropol, performed by Billie Holiday & Nina Simone, amongst others.