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Tracks on Repeat: An Autoethnographic Poessay

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Abstract

At the time of this writing, the world is in the throes of a global pandemic. COVID-19 has reached every corner of the world. The impact has been devastating across individual and collective contexts. This autoethnographic poessay is a creative exploration of a Black woman's experience(s) of living in and through COVID-19 and enduring racial oppression. It weaves between time, space and place recognizing the interconnectedness of the personal, professional, and social-cultural. This piece intentionally amplifies, and grapples with, emergent and conflicting tensions without seeking to resolve them.

Keywords: *Black aesthetics, Black clients, Black clinicians, Black expression(s), Black creative resistance, racial oppression, racialized violence, (re)imagining care*

Introduction

Racial and economic disparities, which existed before COVID-19, have swelled to a disturbing degree. Cities, states and countries across the world have mandated quarantine and shelter-in-place orders. Deaths are devastatingly numerous and fear is rampant. Several months into contending with this virus, it became evident that Black and Brown communities were disproportionately impacted. In many places, Black and Brown people comprise(d) the majority of severe illness, hospitalizations, deaths and complications connected to COVID-19. These disparities, while exacerbated, are not new.

Leaving home requires a hyper-awareness to safety protocols and thoughtful consideration to where and how one travels. There is increased concern for maintaining safety, especially for *vulnerable populations*. People fear for those they love who must venture out and even worry that harm might befall them at home. The detrimental impact of the assaults that this virus can wield on the body is unpredictable in who and how it targets. While the context (the COVID-19 pandemic) of heightened and even *hyper* concern is new, the feeling is familiar. In fact, the references at the start of this paragraph could just as easily be referring to police killings of Black people, environmental racism, ICE raids, racial profiling, the school to prison pipeline, and a litany of

other social-cultural terrors. This is the everyday terror that exists as a variable hum against the backdrop of Black everyday living. As a Black woman living in the United States, I am in all moments keenly aware of the precarity of my safety; that at any moment, for a myriad of reasons, my life could be (up)ended.

The Production of Black Agony

Black people have suffered racial trauma since the birth of the United States as we currently know it. Trauma situates itself in the body (van der Kolk, 2015) and passes through generations (DeGruy, 2017). These experiences live in the Black body. Racism has a detrimental impact on physical health (Trent et al., 2019) and mental wellbeing (Williams & William-Morris, 2000); racial oppression is so injurious that studies have noted when Black people are vicariously exposed to racialized violence, they may experience trauma symptoms (Downs, 2016). In *Afropessimism*, Wilderson (2020) asks:

Why is anti-Black violence not a form of racist hatred but the genome of Human renewal; a therapeutic balm that the Human race needs to know and heal itself? Why must the world reproduce this violence, this social death, so that social life can regenerate Humans and prevent them from suffering the catastrophe of psychic incoherence-absence? Why must the world find its nourishment in Black flesh? (p. 16)

These are indeed important and necessary questions with which to grapple. The scope of this piece does not allow for that exploration. Yet, implicit in Wilderson's (2020) questions is the assertion that anti-Blackness is core, not addendum, to Human being. It suggests that racialized violence against Black people exists on a cellular level. These questions challenge the default origin stories that are attributed to anti-Blackness. This is further underscored in Wilderson's declaration that "slavery is a relational dynamic [...] just as colonialism is a relational dynamic"; therefore, bigger and deeper than a particular time or set of individuals (p. 40).

Though Black people have endured racial oppression, historically and presently, we have also resisted, rebelled and persevered throughout. The arts have been an integral part of Black survival and thriving. Black people have long used creative processes for connection, healing and liberatory practice. Enslaved Black people(s) used music as a coded means to communicate (Berry, 2017) and as a container to hold and sustain cultural histories (Davis, 1998). Creative process, throughout history, has been a way for Black people to subvert oppressive systems. Arts-rooted activism has impacted social-cultural change and Black people have consistently recognized and reified that "creative action liberates us by reminding ourselves and other that we can come up with new ways to disrupt" (Chrislene DeJean, as quoted in Esema, 2014). The scope of this poessay does not allow for an outline of the voluminous ways in which Black people(s) have used creative action as a means to connect, heal and disrupt. Rather, it is a creative exploration that grapples with the tensions that Black bodies hold... pain and joy, past and present, trauma and healing, and... and... and...

Process

Autoethnography examines the self as a way to explore and understand broader relational and social-cultural dynamics (Jones et al., 2016; Leavy, 2009). This method aligns with this poessay, which is rooted in the belief that the personal is inherently connected to the cultural; similarly, autoethnography recognizes that personal experience is (in)formed and arises in relationship to one's social setting(s) (Ellis, 2007). Spieldenner (2014) critiqued autoethnography as a method that "can be problematic" due to its dependence on "personal perception and memory" (p. 14). For the purposes of this poessay, using the personal and perceptual is intentional. As a Black woman writing about my experience, I leaned into Audre Lorde's (2007) reflections in "Poetry is Not a Luxury." She underscored:

When we view living in the European mode only as a problem to be solved, we rely solely upon our ideas to make us free, for these were what the white fathers told us were precious. But as we come more into touch with our own ancient, non-European consciousness of living as a situation to be experienced and interacted with, we learn more and more to cherish our feelings, and to respect those hidden sources of our own power from where true knowledge and, therefore, lasting action comes. (p. 75)

Lorde (2007) further articulated poetry “as a revelatory distillation of experience” (p. 25). Poetry has been used herein as a way to illuminate emergent themes in my intersectional experience of being a Black woman and a drama therapist living in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as unrest and uprising in the US. This exploration amplifies the relational dynamics that exist at the intersection of the personal, professional, and social-cultural. To be clear, the reflections herein represent a moment in time, a snapshot of my experience(s) against the backdrop of the current moment. It is not an exhaustive exploration of my experience nor a reflection of *all* Black experiences. This work was born out of contending with the multi-layered contexts and complexities that the present holds. The present is at once holding the past, the now, and the potential(s) of the future... Specifically, as a Black woman I recognize my body is holding multiple affective and connective layers. Living through COVID-19/unrest/uprising, I/my body has at once registered grief and overwhelm while also feeling deeply and cellularly prepared to face chaos, upheaval and uncertainty...

Procedure

Two guiding questions informed the exploration herein: 1) What weighs on the Black drama therapist in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic and living within the context of enduring racial oppression? 2) What uplifts the Black drama therapist in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic and living within the context of enduring racial oppression? As I encountered and engaged with personal experiences, memories, news, and historical resonances that related to the questions, poetic reflection was used to respond. The poems titled “I’ve Been Here Before” and “The Mo(u)rning After” emerged in a different manner. “I’ve Been Here Before” was created as part of a creative writing meeting in response to Arundhati Roy’s (2020) essay “The Pandemic is a Portal.” The poem, “The Mo(u)rning After” was also written in a creative writing group in response to the social-cultural climate. Though these pieces did not follow the structure of poetic journaling, they have been included for their resonance to this exploration. Once each poem was written, I read and often re-read the pieces and then chose one reflection/memory/encounter to represent the threads embedded within each piece. This creative/reflexive/chemical process of moving memory/history into poetry and then distilling experience from the poetic emerged organically and is indicative of the interconnectedness of the personal and the poetic.

Structure

The poems and reflections are written in the theme of an album and the guiding questions represent the different sides of the album. A brief explanation precedes each track, though not all ideas and expressions are expanded upon in order to be legible by all. This was an intentional choice to allow the experiences and reflections to be shared as if I am speaking into a mirror (*one* that reflects me). I am aware that this means some will read these pieces and, perhaps, find a reflection of themselves. Others may read the pieces and feel resonances to their own experiences through their own projections. Still others may find these pieces to be illegible. As a Black woman, I spend much time translating my thoughts in a way that is legible to dominant expectations. The following album plays *as is* and unapologetically in the Black expressions. The definitions layered throughout were all pulled from *Merriam-Webster* (n.d.) and were intentionally chosen to fit each track.

Album: Black on Both Sides

Side A: What weighs on the Black drama therapist in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic and living within the context of enduring racial oppression?

[track: a path made by or as if by repeated footfalls]

I was sitting in a team meeting, some time ago, while a colleague expressed her frustration about a patient who, in her opinion, “should not have been admitted. He is here for two hots and cot.” She repeated that phrase, “two hots and a cot,” several times as she rolled her eyes at the audacity of this person seeking safety. My colleague, a white woman, was casually dismissing our patient, a Black man. Her words spoke to the elusive truth that what we call health care systems are often devoid of care. *Care* would recognize that not having basic needs met, including food and shelter, is distressing. Being food and housing insecure is distressing, which is a mental health concern. However, white supremacy culture and its parent (capitalism—which is inherently racialized) have socialized us to affix value and worth to *care*. This meeting is one of so many where I have heard colleagues dismiss the needs of Black people across intersection(s) of class, gender, ability, size, sexuality and {...}. The oppressive systems in those comments/sentiments/thoughts that seep into action/behaviors are the same ones that fuel the swelled disparities that COVID-19 has amplified. They are intertwined.

Track 1: A Wound That Never Heals

This is not an ouch that can be kissed away
 This is not a hurt that aches the same for each of us
 And this feeling, suffering, is not new to some
 This suffering is not all encompassing for all
 For some, pain and grief existed as daily companions before
 And now this COVID weight rests atop the mournful mound

This is not a boo-boo that will heal on its own
 This is not a wound that will heal with time
 No, recovery will require action
 A recovery will require care
 A tending to the open injuries
 A reckoning with the parts that ache
 From centuries of disregard
 And the parts that bleed
 From the persistent bludgeoning
 In the same unhealed wound

The soul of this country
 Has a wound that has never been cared for
 A rupture that has never closed
 A wound left untended
 Will rot
 And spread
 The flesh will fall apart

Things have indeed fallen apart
 The heart and very soul of this country
 Has rotted at its core
 Because of refusal to look
 At the deep tears
 To stare in the abyss
 Of a dark cavernous divide
 That holds the true origin story
 Of a country stolen

Built on the blood and backs
 Of Native Americans
 Of Black folx

 The real hoax
 Is the re-scripting
 Of a true life horror story
 The birth of this nation
 The condition of this world
 Anti-Black hatred
 The soup for non-Black souls
 Black social death
 Black death
 Black
 Black gets removed from the person
 And assumed as something for your consumption

 This is here and now
 And there and then
 And there and then
 Is here and now

 We are living history
 There is no mystery here
 But I ask you this question
 What makes you think I belong to you
 Why do you believe the world is yours
 Do you know who *you* is

 [track: the parallel rails of a railroad]

I recall being a new drama therapist running a group (as an outside facilitator) at a residential treatment facility that housed predominantly Black and Brown youth. One particular day two Black youth, one who had dark skin (J) and the other who had a lighter complexion (P), began to argue. A staff member stepped in to break up the fight. However, this staff member specifically targeted J, the darker complected youth, saying, "You're always causing problems. Why can't you just sit down and chill? You are always doing too much." His rebuke went on from there and had an underlying tone of disdain. While my co-facilitator and I were able to redirect the moment, the harm/violence had been done. I watched as J was publicly shamed and disproportionately targeted. This occurrence emerged as a consistent pattern during my time at this site. J's actions were consistently judged and responded to more harshly by many staff members. This is not, of course, an anomaly. It was, however, devastating to witness this beautiful Black child be so openly mistreated. Moments such as this are so common that they are normalized. This makes the sinkage into complicity so seamless and elusive that even those clinicians who, perhaps, consciously oppose such behavior are likely consistently complicit with it. As you take in that last sentence, I ask you to consider if you have witnessed (or participated in) similar moments. If discussion and understanding of anti-Blackness is not central to training, we can be sure that therapists will consciously and unconsciously be strong arms of it. If Black students do not have necessary support in training, we can be sure they will be asked to hold grief they should not have to carry alone. I also recognize that though the grief is heavy, it is important that I, as a Black woman, let it in. It is this grief that fuels my fire to consistently fight. And yet...

Track 2: Grief Crept In

You came close
 Snuggled next to me

Wrapped your arms around me
 Then climbed on top of me
 And released your full weight into me

I hate you
 And yet, I need you
 And yet, you feel so bad
 And yet, you feel so good
 And yet
 And
 Yet

[track: a way of life, conduct, or action]

My second internship experience, when I was in graduate school, was on a forensics unit. The unit was comprised of predominantly Black men. I recall an encounter where I was speaking with a Black patient as we were waiting to go to recreational (rec) time. As we were talking, a correctional officer (CO) came over and began to cuff his hands and feet. It was hard for me, in that moment, to sustain eye contact with my patient. As he was being so aggressively and dismissively handled, I could not bear to witness it... to witness *him*. I felt ashamed to be an extension of a system that refused to see him as human. This tension, being part of systems that are harmful to Black people, is constant. Carceral logics do not just exist in forensics units; they are embedded across all systems of *care* and steeped in anti-Blackness. Elemental change and a (re)imagining of *care* are required with/in mental health care, including the creative arts therapies, to uproot plantation and carceral logics from its/our core(s). We must understand that the storms are not just *outside* and ask ourselves if we recognize how/where the unrest exists *inside*.

Track 3: The Storm

It is reigning terror
 It is hard to see through
 The Snow White supremacy
 Let it pass, this hail of colonization

 The lightening breaks through
 The dark of her skin
 Revealing the self-hate she has taken in

 Here comes the son
 Stripped from his mother's arms
 On the plantation
 At the border

 The earth quakes
 The sky cries
 The wind rages
 For the kids who cry
 Afraid in cages

The Flip Side: What (up)lifts the Black drama therapist in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic and living within the context of enduring racial oppression?

[track: detectable evidence (such as the wake of a ship, a line of footprints, or a wheel rut) that something has passed]

During the COVID-19 pandemic, I have worked more, across every context, than ever before. While I have certainly felt drained and, at times, overwhelmed; I have also felt prepared to meet the chaos, unrest and uncertainty. I [we] have long understood the precarity of life, the fragility of a moment, and the fluidity of experience... it is historical and ancestral. I have been surprised (and also not) by how much loss,

grief, hope/lessness, dis/ruption, and {...} I have been able to *hold* while *carrying on*. And yet, this is something Black people have long known... have long done. A Black colleague of mine mentioned recently that they were not only surviving, but thriving, during this time because they know intimately how to live in and through turbulence. We, Black people, have been here before.

Track 1: I've Been Here Before

The mightiest opponent is the one you can't see
It sneaks up and attacks
You don't even know you've been caught
Until you are deep in its grips
Your chest burns with fire
Your throat swells with heat
You summon all your internal defenses to fight
Aware that something is trying to take you out

And then you remember
I know this fight
I [my ancestors] have fought similar battles
Victory courses through my veins
I may not make it but my fighting is not in vain

This is a dark night that will be long
I know there is no knight coming to save me
There will be loss
There will be mourning
And yet, this dawn will break
Morning will come

The powerful who have fallen
Will remain on their knees
Battered and bruised
But the mighty are those
Who have been dismissed and discarded
For years...centuries...counted as out
And yet, we remain

The mighty are the marginalized
And the mighty will stand
You see, I've been here before
In a fight against erasure
Viruses of many sorts have sought to end me
My body knows survival
It is coded in my DNA

The mighty are the marginalized
And the mighty will stand

[track: to leave tracks]

It's that the creative arts therapies struggle to hold its Black clinicians for me. Across the modalities there are wounds that have been unattended and consistently (re)opened. The creative arts therapies are not exempt from white supremacy, racial capitalism, heteropatriarchy and {...}... this must be named and faced directly for change to occur. I am concerned about the degree to which the foundation(s) of the creative arts therapies are inherently appropriative. For example, the foundational writings with/in the creative arts therapies are *predominantly* written by white men and white women, while white women are the *predominant* practitioners. This sets the conditions that *predominantly* white people who often work with predominantly

Black and Brown patients are selling/mandating/offering treatment to communities that have inherent cultural/ancestral knowing to the very arts-based practices upon which the field(s) stand. Yet, the acknowledgement and attribution of that knowledge is largely missing with/in the field.

It's the power and protection of my ancestors for me.... enduring legacy that refuses to be removed from the record no matter the tools of erasure they might face. I recall the first (and only) time I met Cliff Joseph, who is/was/is a leader in the field of art therapy, an incredible artist and activist with enduring work rooted in anti-racism and anti-imperialism. It was in 2019 when the Critical Pedagogies in the Arts Therapies (CPAT) Alliance awarded him with the inaugural Cliff Joseph Award for his profound breadth of work and service. The award ceremony was part of a larger conference event and those of us in attendance were gifted with the opportunity to hear his wisdom directly that day. His colleagues, mentees and past students spoke to the mighty impact that he had on their lives. I felt an indescribable energy in his presence. This moment amplified the importance and necessity of representation/reflection/cultural connection/history/lineage. Cliff Joseph's work, presence and perseverance paved the way for others. And, in coming to know his work and being in his presence, his light shined on my own path and travels with me. I am grateful for this moment; I am grateful for Cliff Joseph. I am thankful to my ancestors and their ever-presence.

Track 2: My Body is a Full House

My Black Bones are laced with history
 My ancestors' legacies
 Narratives told and untold
 Known and unknown
 Trial and tribulation
 Jubilation...
 Across the generations of this nation
 I hold a multitude...

 I hold my history
 I hold me
 I hold you

 My body is a full house
 My body is full
 My body is
 My body...

[track: a sequence of events: a train of ideas]

I remember the young Black man on the forensics unit, incarcerated for a minor crime, who barely came to my groups. On the last day of my internship, he looked me in my eyes and said, "I wish you all the best. I hope when you graduate you get a good paying job." He was still waiting to find out the fate of his future and yet he was invested in the success of mine. I remember the Black gender queer person who worried for their own bodily safety but persisted in their activism and protest even when they faced harsh criticism and pushback. I remember the Black man who knew he was facing life in prison who looked me in the eyes to assure me he would be okay and that our work together made a meaningful difference in his life. I didn't have the words then to let him know how our work together made a *deeply* meaningful difference in mine. I remember the Black man who tried to tell the psychiatrist about the abuse he suffered as a young boy. The psychiatrist cut him off to say, "Shh... no no... that is not what we are here to talk about. We are here to talk about your medicine." And then I watched as the staff wondered about this patient's "violent outbursts." I remember the Black woman with a traumatic brain injury who came to all of my groups and smiled the sweetest smile and would always say, "Hey, I'm here." I remember the trans Black

woman who came to every single group and supported every single group member. She reminded herself and all of us how the more we shine the more others will want to find a way to dim/inish us. I remember. Remember. Re/member.

Track 3: The Mo(u)rning After

History keeps on happening
 This repetition
 This disturbing loop
 This track on repeat
 If it's not a whip that beats
 It's a gun shot ring
 The bell of freedom has no sound
 'Cause the bell can't ring
 It's being drowned out

This track is tired
 The master copy
 Has replicated so many times
 That the original version
 Hides behind all its duplicates
 The duplicates are so close to the original
 That they might as well be the master

I escape to my sleep to taste freedom
 And even there
 Black life does not matter
 The track never stops
 It just plays on
 I am weighted
 But I won't be undone by this sad song
 For I know that the master('s) design was to erase us
 And yet we are still here
 And yet..

Conclusion

To be Black in the United States is to experience moments of racialized oppression on a daily and persistent basis. In 1961, when James Baldwin was asked about the experience of being Black in America by a radio host, he replied:

To be a Negro in this country and to be relatively conscious is to be in a state of rage almost, almost all of the time—and in one's work. And part of the rage is this: It isn't only what is happening to you. But it's what's happening all around you and all of the time in the face of the most extraordinary and criminal indifference, indifference of most white people in this country, and their ignorance. (Baldwin et al., 1961)

The moments I have recalled in this poessay (both spoken and those that live in the undercurrents of poetic distillation) have happened *to me* and *around me*. The moments call up rage and pain; the poetry is a space (and practice) of holding and healing...salve to my wounds.

In this poessay, I am unapologetically taking up space in my Blackness and re/claiming my time (past and present). I am intentionally naming pains wounds and re/harnessing my own stories. Each of these recalled moments exist as part of a colonial legacy; within this context, these manifestations seek to cause irreparable harm and dis/member me. This poessay is an act of re/membering myself against the backdrop of hostile environments and histories. This poessay intentionally does not seek to resolve, explain or defend the tensions explored herein. Rather, I have brought my body (at a moment in time) to the page because my body is inextricably connected to my

body of work. And, in so doing, I am following the wisdom of Toni Morrison and writing Black in; I am writing what I have wanted and needed to read in my journey as a therapist. I write this for me and for those who may see themselves reflected...

About the Author

Britton Williams is a Black woman. Drama Therapist. A myriad of hyphens and ands. She is a teacher and student. A thinker and dreamer. She is urgently concerned with the possibilities that live with/in radical (re)imagining and the inextricable connectedness of healing and liberation. And...

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