Through the COVID-19 looking glass: Resisting always already known injustice and shaping a ‘new normal’

No matter how many different opening sentences I typed and deleted, as we approach the end of 2020, a year that many have described as a science fiction dystopic nightmare come true, there seems only one apt way to open this editorial:

*madeleine’s log*

Year: 2020  
Location: Western Europe  
Season: Autumn 2020  
Pandemic status: resurgent; steep increase in infections  
Government response: lockdown 2.0

I expect future historians will struggle to find many articles, blogs or essays written during 2020 that do not situate the author or the writing in relation to the varying periods of lockdown triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic in one way or another.

COVID-19 – also commonly referred to as coronavirus, #DaRona, #MissRona – has been the ‘main show’ in town in all corners of the planet, insofar as very few individuals, no matter where they live, have escaped its impact on their lives – felt concretely – during the course of the year. As I write this editorial, in many countries there is yet no mid-show interval, let alone a final act of the pandemic, in sight. The other major occurrence of 2020, which also reverberated on all inhabited continents, was the groundswell of Black Lives Matter (BLM¹) protests and demonstrations against police brutality directed at Black people and against anti-Black racism more generally, sparked by the murder of George Floyd in the United States in May 2020. Much has been written about the obvious links between the effects of the pandemic and the issues raised by BLM protesters.² To some people, lockdowns and the unfolding employment and economic crises resulting from the lockdowns created ‘the perfect storm’ for such high numbers of Black and White people to take to the streets for BLM protests in the United States³ and to be replicated in so many parts of the world.⁴

I want to focus here on how the pandemic is shining a bright light on always already known and understood past and contemporary forms of gendered racialised injustice in
Europe and beyond and to highlight an example of how Black/African women have responded to/resisted such injustice.

The COVID-19 looking glass

Initial reporting in mainstream media all over the world would have us believe that ‘no-one really saw it coming’, and close to 9 months after the World Health Organization declared the 2019 novel coronavirus a global pandemic, there is still a sense that no-one could have predicted what we have all been witnessing. What we are witnessing and experiencing has been consistently described as unprecedented – as if the world has travelled into or is viewing itself through a COVID-19 looking glass in which – similar to Alice’s looking glass – everything is upside down and inside out. That is not quite accurate, however. Some scientists and the science journalists who followed their work did in fact ‘see it coming’, decades ago. Scientists sounded many an alarm, and science journalists wrote articles and books that went into considerable detail about what would happen in the event of just the kind of global viral pandemic that COVID-19 has turned out to be (see, for example, Marantz Henig, 1994). Predictably, such efforts – including the ones that became best sellers – did not garner enough attention and were not taken seriously enough to warrant the kinds of policy responses that could have better prepared us for what we are living through now. In an article published in the National Geographic a week or two after most countries had entered into the first lockdowns, Marantz Henig noted that at the time she was writing about potential global epidemics (late 1980s, early 1990s), the consensus among field virologists was that it would take ‘the death of one white person’ (emphasis added) to make Western countries sit up and pay attention.

And there we have it in six short words – six short words that frame the COVID-19 looking glass as one that amplifies all that we always already knew about how power works to create, uphold and tighten structural inequalities in this world. The COVID-19 looking glass does not show us a world turned upside down because of the effects of a global pandemic; it shows us more starkly than ever how unequal our world is, has always been.

The enabling and sustaining conditions for all that we have witnessed all year in all regions were always already in place and fully operational long before COVID-19 became part of our daily realities. Or, as Ruha Benjamin put it in an ‘initial set of provocations’ she shared in early Spring 2020, ‘the virus is not simply a biological entity, but a biopolitical reality which travels along well-worn patterns of inequity’.

‘We try these things . . .’

As the spread of the virus accelerated across Western Europe and numbers of deaths increased exponentially during March and early April, medical and scientific experts dominated television and online news and current affairs programmes. During a discussion on a French channel about the use of existing BCG vaccinations to protect people from COVID-19, one of the speakers – the head of intensive care at a Paris hospital – stated,
If I can be provocative, shouldn’t we be doing this study in Africa, where there are no masks, no treatments, no resuscitation? In fact, a bit like how it is done for some studies on AIDS, or among prostitutes, we try things because we know that they are highly exposed and that they do not protect themselves!

There was swift condemnation of these remarks across online social media platforms, which were reported by online media in various countries in Africa (including Ghana, Morocco and Kenya) as well as by the BBC in the United Kingdom and news outlets in France. The French TV channel removed the footage containing the doctor’s remarks, and the doctor issued an apology via social media, explaining that he had ‘clumsily’ been trying to signal that African countries should not be left out of trials that were to be launched in countries in Europe and in Australia.

To many, however, the remarks were neither shocking nor surprising. The sentiments expressed with such nonchalance by the doctor are nothing new; just the COVID-19-iteration of the ‘we do what we like’ attitude former coloniser European countries have always already had towards countries in Africa and towards the bodies of African people. In the doctor’s words were echoes of the ‘well-worn patterns’ – retraced anew in response to a global pandemic – of exploitation, violence and complete disregard for African lives that characterised European colonisation of the African continent. The well-worn pattern here is one in which African bodies – specifically African women’s bodies – are identified by European men as legitimate objects for experimentation.

We know this pattern well.

We can trace it back to the testing of anti-AIDS drugs on sex workers in African countries in the early 2000s. Further back to African women’s bodies and genitalia being put on display in European countries in the late 1800s and cut from their bodies after their death for the purposes of ‘research’ (as discussed below). Further back still to the rape and forced breeding of African women captured during the transatlantic slave trade (Micheletti et al., 2020).

But even a well-worn pattern can be undone: slowly stitch by stitch or with a sudden yank that tears it asunder. African women – on the continent and in the diaspora – have long shown that there are many, many ways to challenge and resist power.

Drawing on North American Indigenous conceptualisations and praxis of ‘coming-into-being’, Gail Lewis has posited that ‘presencing’ contests and ‘has the potential to detoxify the effects of colonial discourse (historical and contemporary) in which Indigenous [and also Black/African] peoples are rendered invisible and/or insensible’ (Lewis, 2017: 4). Lewis suggests a couple of requirements that must be met in order for Black/African women to be fully present. One of these is ‘development of our courage to acknowledge the harm done her, historically and in the here and now, by utilising the resources we have in the archive in the interests of practising presencing’ (Lewis, 2017: 8).

The online responses pointing to, and locating the French doctor’s words within well-worn patterns of objectification, exploitation and abuse of African/African women’s bodies felt like a slow unpicking of the pattern. It took a powerful form of presencing of African womanhood to show how a well-worn pattern can be torn apart.
As the lockdowns forced so many to remain in their own countries and in their homes, hundreds of events moved online, including the 2020 Ake Arts and Book Festival, which took place on 23–25 October 2020. South African poet, author, actress and producer Lebogang Mashile’s play ‘Venus Vs Modernity’ reached a global audience on the second day of the 3-day festival, some 5 months after the doctor’s off-the-cuff remarks.

Venus Vs Modernity tells the story of Saartjie Baartman, an enslaved South African woman – nicknamed ‘Hottentot Venus’ – who was included in freakshows and displayed in human zoos in England and in France between 1810 and 1815. After her death at the age of 26 in 1815, Baartman’s body was dissected and displayed in jars at the Musée de L’homme in Paris for some 150 years. Her remains were not returned to South Africa and buried in her ancestral home until 2002, after an intervention by President Nelson Mandela.

It was serendipitous – or perhaps not – that the French doctor’s comments about dispensable African women’s bodies could be so powerfully pushed back by the kind of presencing of the same bodies that Mashile’s play offers. In Lewis’ terms, the play both contests and detoxifies the harmful effects of historical and contemporary colonial discourse as it explores themes of history, colonialism, sex work, romance, fame, religion and body image through spoken word and music. The play offered some welcome reprieve as a key moment of African women resisting the always already known power structures that view and would treat their bodies as dispensable objects and which we also see so clearly through the COVID-19 looking glass.

**Tools for shaping a #NewNormal**

In an essay published at the beginning of April, Arundhati Roy suggests that the COVID-19 pandemic ‘is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next’. Humans, she says, can choose to travel through the portal ‘dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us’, or we can leave all of that behind to emerge on the other side of the portal ‘ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it’.

Right now, perhaps more than ever, the work done by feminists – wherever they may be located in the world – represents a lifeline, a critical tool for those who – catalysed by the injustices brought into sharp relief by the effects of the pandemic – want to both imagine and fight for another world and work to shape a ‘new normal’.

We have always needed deeply feminist work in all of its forms – academic, activist, creative – that is emancipatory, political and rooted in the differentiated realities of people of all genders and none. This need persists, and fulfilling it is critical as the mammoth task of building a ‘new normal’ of justice and freedom gets underway. To quote poet Vanessa Kisuule (2017),

we are indispensable

walking pillars of defiance . . .
Notes

1. #BlackLivesMatter was co-founded in 2013 by community organisers Patrice Cullors, Alicia Garza and Opal Tometi in response to the acquittal of George Zimmerman, a White man who shot and killed Trayvon Martin, an unarmed African American teenager in Florida, USA. The Black Lives Matter Global Network Foundation, Inc. currently has chapters in the United States, the United Kingdom and Canada ‘whose mission is to eradicate white supremacy and build local power to intervene in violence inflicted on Black communities by the state and vigilantes’. This is distinct from Movement for Black Lives, which was established in 2014 as an umbrella network for Black groups and organisations in the United States to strategize.

2. See, for example, Diallo, R. (March 2020) ‘The coronavirus reveals another virus: White privilege’; Benjamin, R. (April 2020) ‘Black skin, white masks: Racism, vulnerability and refuting Black pathology’.

3. Andrew Cuomo, Governor of New York, was reported as saying, ‘There are forces coming together here, let’s be honest. It’s not a coincidence that this [BLM protests] is in the middle of the COVID crisis, the poor paid the highest price for this COVID situation’. Opal Tometi, one of the co-founders of #BlackLivesMatter, also shared her opinion in a New York Times interview that ‘. . . there is something about the economic conditions in addition to the lethal force [used by the police against Black people] that makes this moment feel different, where people are making different kinds of demands’.

4. See here for images of 2020 Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests in different parts of the world.

5. Through the Looking Glass is the sequel to Lewis Carroll’s mid-19th children’s fantasy novel Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland.

6. Such as The Coming Plague: Newly Emerging Diseases in a World Out of Balance by Laurie Garrett (1994).

7. Nadje Al Ali’s article on ‘COVID-19 and Feminism in the Global South’ addresses the pre-existing gendered injustices that the pandemic has exacerbated, especially for women located in the Global South, including the increased burden of care work borne by women, alarmingly high rates of violence against women and girls trapped at home with perpetrators during lockdowns, and the added vulnerability of LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and others) people, disabled people, domestic workers, internally displaced people and refugees. See Al Ali (2020).

8. Data from the World Health Organization’s COVID-19 Situation Dashboard at the time showed that Africa was the least affected continent.

9. See ‘HIV/AIDS’, Reproductive Health Matters 13/25:187–193; in 2004, the Government of Cameroon suspended clinical trials of an anti-AIDS drug being tested on sex workers by a US pharmaceutical company due to ‘dysfunctions that have been noted by the audit mission’.

10. According to new research findings published in August 2020 in the American Journal of Human Genetics, comparisons of genetic ancestry ‘revealed a bias towards African female contributions to gene pools across all of the Americas’, despite the fact that African men made up more than 60% of enslaved individuals. One key explanation is the fact that enslaved African women were frequently raped by their White owners and forced to bear children.

11. Lewis (2017).

Acknowledgements

The author expresses thanks to Ann Phoenix, Dubravka Zarkov and the ‘Systahs of the Story Circle’ for valuable feedback and comments.
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