

ARTICLE 9

COVID-19 WHILE BLACK

The Real Pandemic

Donna M. Davis
University of Missouri–Kansas City

Danielle M. Davis
Fordham University

It's all a blur.... The endless days and weeks and months of COVID.... We were in New York City visiting our kids when the news hit—even had tickets to two Broadway shows. In my ignorance and disbelief, I somehow thought we'd still be able to see them—just one more day and we'd be in our seats! But then it all shut down. We wandered around Times Square—a ghost town—and not even the imposter Elmo's and Batman's were around. Surreal...

Since then, of course, we have endured a nightmare of death and misery. We have watched our families suffer and our communities obliterated by unemployment, homelessness, and poverty. The underbelly of our nation has been laid bare, revealing what we've always known: That some lives in this country really don't matter, that those with privilege and access always have the best chance at survival, and that at the end of the day, some folks just don't care about anyone but themselves—a far cry of our nation's motto of *E. Pluribus Unum*, or “out of many, one.” I know this motto is supposed to suggest that we are collection of states, united, and that we

are a collection of peoples, also united. However, what COVID uncovered was that this motto, for too many people, actually means: Out of many, *only one* counts—me.

I'm tired...

It seems that in my almost 60 years on this planet, not enough about my reality as a Black woman has changed. Oh, do not get me wrong—I know that my great-grandmother would be so incredibly proud of me and the fact that I have an actual job at a university, teaching people. She, with only her high school diploma—that she earned at the age of 49—and a nurse's aide certificate, was one of the wisest people I ever knew. Born in 1896, she was among the youngest of her seventeen brothers and sisters, and only escaped a life of abject poverty and sharecropping because her mother promised her next child—my great-grandmother—to a sister who couldn't have children. This sister lived in the city, which meant my great-grandmother, while still very poor, was able to eat regularly and had a roof over her head. She worked mostly in other people's homes, caring for their children, and cleaning their messes. The full-time work at fourteen meant putting her formal education on hold, but she never lost sight of her determination to get her high school diploma. Besides being brilliant, she was also a gifted comedienne, loved the Los Angeles Dodgers, and made the best peach cobbler on Earth.

I think about her often. In fact, when I was in my dissertation defense over 20 years ago now, I remember writing on the corner of my notebook: *Mama Griffin loves you*. So, it didn't really matter what those five faculty members had to say about my work. I had backup in that room. This is the kind of armor that so many of us have to put on just to get through day, let alone stand up in front of a dissertation examination committee. We need to feel that we come from people who believe in us and love us—because our country and world surely do not.

Whew, I'm tired...

I think what has been most horrible about this past year is the realization that my own children know this sad reality too—that they are Black women, and that the world is hostile to and for them. And that, just like their Mama Griffin, they will have to endure the slights and offenses and outright abuses that come with being Black in the United States. Here we are, some 100 years after she was a teenager, still trying to prove that our lives matter.

My youngest daughter is 20 years old and a dancer—studying at Fordham University in the Alvin Ailey BFA Program. It has been a tremendous experience for her—getting to see dancers who look like her and believe there may be a place for her to grow in the field. She's also majoring in Creative Writing, and in one of her English classes, she was asked to write about her

greatest “wish” for herself. After months of quarantine and taking classes over ZOOM, and watching the social injustice of summer 2020, she wrote:

The Wish was forged many sunsets ago under the gold and ivory of Africa. None of us are quite sure how It started. Perhaps It was nothing more than a flutter of the heart, mistaken for imagination. Perhaps It was a dream, burning alongside the crust of the Atlantic on the rims of crucified lips. Or Perhaps It did not truly emerge until that first ship arrived in the New World: stolen lands tilled with many dark, stolen hands.

I do not claim to know any more than those who came before me. I only know that I exist by the grace of the Wish and the Wish alone. It lives in the lining of my stomach. Waiting with every swallowed sentence to escape from the flesh shadow.

The Wish is immortal. It is as much a part of my body as my teeth, my hair, my mid-night skin. That is what worries me the most.

The Wish has many faces. I have known them all. It is the raw throat of the protestor, crying, exhausted, for the same intangible freedom as their ancestors. It is the terrified gasp of a mother at the sight of her youngest son, splayed godlessly across the headlines, full of fanged metal bullets. It is the creeping horror of a fifth-grade girl, the darkest in her class, when she realizes that she will spend the rest of her days fearing the eternal sting of the whip, dreaming of a world that she will never get to live in, but she is told she must pray for, nonetheless.

One day, they will stop killing us. One day, they will stop jailing us. One day, we will all live together in perfect harmony.

One day, they will not judge me by the color of my skin but the content of my soul.

One day, one day, one day...yes, the Wish makes its children many seductive promises. But do not misunderstand. It promises without mercy.

The Wish is a terrible beauty four centuries in the making.

I know that somewhere in the faded branches of my family tree an enslaved woman shrieked and suffered for the faint hope that one day I would survive her. I know that she would not have fought without the Wish, without the promise of some brighter, holier future. I know that her children would enter a world designed to crush them bone by bone and that they would resist the blows; I know that my history is littered with gritted jaws and armored skin and that I am expected to fall in line.

I knew it in my first ballet class at seven years old. The way my natural hair fought against the required bun. The way my curves grew in without regard for the classical form. The weight of an entire race resting upon the raising of my arms, the extension of my legs.

I knew it overnight at a friend's house, sneaking the silk bonnet over my head after everyone else had gone to sleep.

I knew it sitting in front of the television watching the names scroll endlessly past.

Trayvon Martin. George Floyd. Breonna Taylor.

I knew it as I protested their deaths. That I would forever be protesting their deaths.

And I closed my eyes and submitted again to the Wish. The Wish that would wash their blood away. The Wish that would unite the world. The Wish to end all wishes.

Change takes time.

Time is up, brothers and sisters.

The world keeps us wishing only to maintain our fetters and design our graves.

So, I wish, with all the blackness in my being, that one day I may finally stop wishing...that the arms of the world might cradle me as it never cradled my ancestors, that my bones might settle on the grass of the continent from which I was ripped—and send my soul sweetly to sleep.

Okay, Danielle is tired, y'all.... But, she shouldn't have to be so exhausted. She shouldn't have to feel the weight of 400 years of oppression and racism and violence while she tries to get through the day, get her homework done, and take dance class. There's only so much Black Girl Magic one can muster.

And speaking of Black Girl Magic, the hashtag that took off a few years ago to uplift Black Girls and showcase their magnificence, there is a caveat that comes with the feel-good-ness of it: One must indeed be magical to pull-off an easy existence—to succeed at all—in a world that wishes we would disappear—poof! Gone. The magic is that we are *still here*—only the promise of equity was an illusion. So, we applaud these successes because they are to be celebrated. We know what it takes to move through life in this skin and come out in any way unscathed. We will celebrate and uplift and make space for this discourse. It is important and necessary. And our girls need us to do it. But there is an undeniable pain associated with the phrase, as Linda Chavers (2016) notes:

The “strong, black woman” archetype, which also includes the mourning black woman who suffers in silence, is the idea that we can survive it all, that we can withstand it. That we are, in fact, superhuman. Black girl magic sounds to me like just another way of saying the same thing, and it is smothering and stunting. It is, above all, constricting rather than freeing. (1)

So, while the global health pandemic that is COVID-19 continued to rage on throughout the summer and into the fall, and we hoped and prayed that relief would come in the form of new leadership, we applauded Stacey Abrams for her incredible work putting the state of Georgia into a competitive race. Folks remarked that once again, Black women, and in particular this Black woman, would save America. And, there is some truth to this thinking. Black women are a solid voting bloc. We are absolutely unmoved by challenges at the poll. Difficulty in voting practice only strengthens our resolve: “Oh, you want me to wait in line for ten hours? That’s alright. I got my chair and my water bottle. I’m fine.” And for thousands of Georgians—many of them Black—that’s just what they did. When you think about it, it really does seem superhuman. But in a year that was so filled with misery, standing in a ridiculously long line to vote seemed par for the course.

What was also more of the same was the realization that, like almost all things that human beings experience, COVID-19 has been worse for Black people. We have contracted it at higher rates, do worse when we are hospitalized, and die at a more alarming pace (Stanton 2020). The healthcare system is unfriendly to us. Many of us are, understandably, hesitant to take the vaccine that will save us. History tells us that we need to be cautious about what some folks tell us “is for our own good.” So, even though the science is clear, and the vaccines are effective and safe, too many of us have lost faith in the system. That lack of faith kills us.

Schools that serve primarily Black children have had less access to the technology needed for online learning. Some went hungry at the start of the crisis because school was where they got fed. Dorn et. al. (2021) state:

The COVID-19 pandemic has wreaked havoc on families, leaving many children in precarious situations. Feeding America notes that one in four children is at risk of hunger during the pandemic. The number of children who are housing-insecure has risen as families struggle to pay rent. Parental supervision and support may be more difficult in families in which both parents need to work outside the home... (1)

It just seemed like it was one thing after another: COVID hit, George Floyd was murdered, social protests happened, but nobody who could actually *do something about it* cared. Instead, we watched the former president mock mask-wearing and encourage white supremacists—literally fanning the flames of both crises in tweet after tweet. It really was so exhausting just tuning into the news. It was bad enough to know that we were taking our lives into our hands by going outside, but the dual pandemic—the real pandemic—of racism and all that it means for Black life became even more pronounced and deadly. During the aftermath of the murder of George Floyd, the American Psychological Association (Mills 2020) put it this way:

We are living in a racism pandemic, which is taking a heavy psychological toll on our African American citizens. The health consequences are dire. Racism is associated with a host of psychological consequences, including depression, anxiety, and other serious, sometimes debilitating conditions, including post-traumatic stress disorder and substance use disorders. Moreover, the stress caused by racism can contribute to the development of cardiovascular and other physical diseases. (1)

So yes, we are quite literally sick and tired. We are terrified. We are angry. But we are *not* hopeless...

Hopelessness is just not something we do. This does not mean we can't have feelings of defeat from time to time or that we shouldn't reach out for help from support networks when we need it. This is essential—we need to practice self-care and remove the expectation that Black women should remain invincible amidst the most horrific forms of racial violence. No. That's not the point of Black Girl Magic, or any other uplifting messages we send and receive from one another. It has to be okay to say, "You know what, enough! I'm not strong today, but I'll be strong tomorrow." It has to be okay to acknowledge the mental weariness that comes from the daily fight for a safe existence. It has to be okay to grieve for those we have lost in the struggle, knowing that our future can indeed be better because we come from people who have always overcome.

Some relief finally arrived with a new administration—one that includes a Black woman. Yes, when Vice President-Elect Kamala Harris walked out to Mary J. Blige's "Work That" (2007) at the socially distanced victory rally, we knew exactly who she meant to hear that song:

*Just because the length of your hair ain't long
And they often criticize you for your skin tone
Wanna hold your head high
Cause you're a pretty woman
Get your runway stride home
And keep going Girl live ya life* (1).

And with the swearing in of the new administration, we heard the hopeful words of the youngest poet laureate to grace the inauguration stage. Leaving aside the barricades and armed soldiers that surrounded the United States Capitol for the ceremony because only days earlier, thousands of insurrectionists tried to overturn the election, killing a police officer in the process—the sight of Amanda Gorman, in her sunshine yellow suit, delivering words of wisdom far beyond her years, was precisely what this Black mom needed. She did not ignore our country's flaws or pretend that her presence meant we had moved beyond issues of race and racism (Jones

2021). Instead, she spoke to the good that is inherent in the promise that is America, even while we may struggle to realize it:

*Our people diverse and beautiful will emerge battered and beautiful.
When day comes, we step out of the shade aflame and unafraid.
A new dawn looms as we free it,
For there is always light, if only we are brave enough to see it,
If only we are brave enough to be it. (1)*

We're going to be okay.

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