

Tending To The Socially Dead

Analyzing Black Antagonisms

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Preface: Marked and Mourning

Written by Semiyah

I am mourning the deaths of those whose names I know, whose names I once heard, and whose names have not yet been made public or reported about. It is not necessary to know every detail or circumstance surrounding their demise since to be black is to always lie in wait for it to claim you. It comes for black folk horrifically on schedule, yet simultaneously predictable since the reality of being adorned with dark skin means an intimate dance with death. The hashtags, the autopsies, and the archive are unable to tend to all the bodies that still have no resting place, that remain as reminders of what is imminent, that repeat a relational dynamic between slave and master that I know we wish there was a resolution for. How can I mourn deaths with no names, no relative connection, yet the bullet, the whip, or the rope feels like it left scars on my skin?

I am somehow able to remain outraged at black death, suffering, and pain despite its consistent persistence. I am able to conjure up rage so seamlessly it is becoming second nature like breathing. It's as if my default state fluctuates between a strangled cry and a tightly clenched fist. The taut grasp aches for armament filled with ammunition to defend this perceived weapon that I walk around in every day. I am a mass of black terror that has done nothing (yet) to be truly worthy of the fear my skin, my being evokes. I, like my ancestors, am exhaustingly resilient in my refusal to go away, to become unseen. How is it that I am a thing to be feared when the gun is not in my hand, but pointed at me?

I am assigned to the hold of the ship, to social death, to the grave. The appointment for my corporeal departure was made before coming out of my mother's womb as her fate is destined to be the same. I inherit her non-status, as she inherited her mother's, as my grandmother inherited her mother's. How are socially dead people still breathing in a world insistent on suffocating them? How is it that with all the black blood that has been shed our surplus suffering is never sufficient? It's almost as if black pain is a necessity for humanity to remember who they never want to be.

African Abjection

Written by CharlieBanga

Before stepping outside the comforts of my home—the place where I feel safest, it's common routine for me to prepare myself for a potential altercation that may or may not occur. Fretful but undeterred, I leave my residence everyday fully aware that I might be murdered, imprisoned, or thrown into a high-stakes situation where I'll have to kill a cop in self defense—all because of my blackness and the unwarranted fear it invokes.

This comes to me as no surprise, since in the collective unconscious, our racial schema is repulsive, the genetic makeup of our melanin grotesque, our familial features foul and frightening. Indeed, this is the cold hard truth of our grim reality. The largest organ of the human anatomy is our natural born skin, and yet, global civil society views my darkness as deviant—a peculiar pigmentation not at all precious, but rather a malevolent inherent threat. My epidermis being viewed as the embodiment of criminality essentially means that I am appointed to the lifelong task of protecting myself and others who resemble me, mainly from predatory policemen and

unfortunately, those who've already assigned us the permanent role of culprit due to their anxiety around Africans—who they see as abject.

Be that as it may, I am committed to the abolition of all agents of anti-blackness, that is to say, all governmental authorities and federal agencies that are invested in the preservation and proliferation of black subjectivity, often hidden under the guise of western hegemony and white supremacy—with the American empire being at the forefront of that capitalist, imperialist, neocolonial concept. In a world where authoritarian regimes continue to reinvent new ways to prolong the endless duration of black degradation and dispossession, I am dedicated to becoming a permanent inconvenience to not only the state, but all who aid, assist, and advocate for the destabilization and destruction of black countries and communities. At this juncture, where many remain easily persuaded by political performances, enamored by an endless encore of elections, and seduced by state sanctioned spectacles that seek to serenade us into submission and subservience—this is where I stand. Perhaps I'm speaking too passionately and boldly about this whole ordeal but it is what it is. There's no amount of prayer, atonement, redemption, or repentance that will make me forgive what was done to my ancestors many moons ago, and what is still being done to my people, domestically and internationally now.

Introduction

We first want to preface this by saying we are not scholars, academics, or college graduates. On the contrary, we are grassroots activists, organizers, and cultural workers on the ground that have been inspired by black studies, the black radical tradition, and many black intellectuals, authors, and thinkers. We write for those that seek accessible resources to help educate themselves and others in their respective communities. We believe that valuable knowledge should be shared amongst the black marginalized, poor, and working class people (the black lumpen proletariat). This is not only for the university, hidden behind PDF paywalls or stuck in the echo chambers of academia. This essay attempts to put words to a suffering that defies the language we have been given as no vocabulary could fully encompass what we have had to endure. We acknowledge the paradigmatic position we've been placed in and outline how social death has prevailed beyond the plantation. This critical observation of our current political landscape was written from a black anarchist perspective and an Afropessimist lens of interpretation since we are students of those particular traditions and frameworks.

The style of approach in which we wrote this piece may be a bit unconventional in regard to its formatting and structure. Nonetheless, it's heavily laced with poetics, insurrectionary proclivities, drenched in anarchic undertones with hints of black nihilism and we're rather unflinching about our disdain for liberal reformist ideas and the state. The reader may get the impression that the speakers are talking only to black folks and not whites or other minorities; you'd be correct about that—this is strictly for the niggas and it's intentionally written that way. But of course, if the topics pique your interest, feel free to indulge in the text as you may find it insightful. Furthermore, this article doesn't necessarily touch on every minute detail, but overall we think it's worth the read as it provides an interesting but brief introduction into a much needed conversation. We encourage deeper discourse around the topics discussed in this article since black existence is layered and complex. This is how we honor the lives of those who came before and nourish the rebels, writers, and theorists who will come after us. Lastly, we'd like to express

our deepest gratitude for Dr. Selamawit D. Terrefe. Although we've never had the pleasure of meeting in person, we've learned a lot from watching and listening to you virtually. Your words, work, and wisdom continue to inspire us and we still have so much to learn. Your revolutionary rigor, resolve, and resilience was unrivaled as you were a force while amongst the living and you remain one even now as an ancestor. Rest in power.

A Reckoning with Violent Resistance

Violence is something that we all have experienced; whether that means being a victim, perpetrator, or a witness to it being inflicted upon others. By that understanding, we can say that violence is an inevitable occurrence, a behavioral phenomenon that shows up in various forms of social harm. That is to say, violence can be verbal, structural, physical, sexual, psychological, and emotional, just to name a few. Moreover, violence is often used as an implement of power for tipping the scale in one's favor or changing a particular relational dynamic. It's also important to remember that those who normally get to dictate and define what violence is, are not the ones at the bottom of the racial sociopolitical hierarchy. The role of deciding what constitutes as violence is usually reserved for those who have the authority and monopoly on it—like the ruling class elites. Namely, those bureaucratic bullies and bitch-ass billionaires that are in domineering positions of control. Nonetheless, the moral aspects of violence (the good and bad or right and wrong actions, regarding violence) often fluctuate and is dependent not only on one's objective and subjective realities, but on the context, intent, and outcomes related to its use.

In a virtual conversation called an “Ontology of Betrayal”, three black scholars and theorists by the names of Frank B. Wilderson III, Selamawit D. Terrefe, and Joy James discuss a wide range of topics including the black freedom struggle, the psychic investment in betrayal, revolutionary politics, and anti-black violence etc. During the dialogue, there's a thought-provoking segment where Joy James and Selamawit Terrefe reckon with the notion of political violence, when faced with the evils of state intervention. Joy illustrates that love (“agapé”) as a form of political will is intrinsically tied to our commitment to each other and to resistance. James is not opposed to black resistance/self-defense, but expresses that this shared kinship is linked to our “emotional landscape” and rooted in the communal care we are committed to providing one another. This suggests that this sentimental connection Joy details can bring about a compulsion for justification of violence. In other words, if love and political will are linked, then justification for violence as a means of resistance seems necessary.

Selamawit challenges Joy's argument by suggesting that perhaps this continual desire for justification might in fact be the “psychic investment in betrayal”. Terrefe is speaking to the possibility that needing a reason to validate the use of violence as self-defense, as a catalyst for inflicting violence upon our oppressors, may become an unconscious deterrent that has the ability to stagnate, sabotage, or steer one away from the road of black rebellion. This begs the question: are we more concerned with being justified or being free? She extends this point stating: “I don't want to have to discuss love, or affect, or emotion, or care, in order to justify why we need to end the current order. And I think I share that with many Afropessimists. This is a violent world order; it's parasitic on blackness, we have a body count that's piling up—it's parasitic on other people by extension. I don't want to have to say that I love my people or I love anybody else in

order to wage war against the current order. I don't want to have to say there's a justification for anything."

This bold statement by the brilliant, but now transitioned Selamawit Terrefe requires deeper introspection. One that examines the ways in which we cling to our so called moral obligations and ethical responsibilities when faced with the question of revolutionary violence. That is not to say that as black radicals we wouldn't be conscientious, just, and principled, (we should), but when engaging in political violence, one mustn't be absorbed in moral grandeurs to the point that it hinders our material motives and efforts. Indeed, it is critical to analyze why political will, love, and struggle bring about a desire for justification for insurrectionary actions. What should our resistance be rooted in? Is it possible that love and violence need to co-exist if liberation and lives are on the line? Perhaps it is time to consider what other driving forces must be in our hearts while guns and molotov cocktails are in our hands.

Some will be bold enough to admit that writing letters of demands, signing petitions, and calling our local representatives has materialized absolutely nothing. Many have also recognized that participating in demos, marches, or protests without de-arresting and self defense being a part of the political program, has done nothing but promote and popularize these ineffective, nonviolent, pacifistic movements. However, internally they may struggle with an inherent desire to vindicate the violent forms of resistance they may engage in or that is essential. Resistance rooted in love, that requires violence as a means, is forcing two seemingly polar opposites to somehow co-exist, hence the need for justification. But what if a love that does not shy away from anger, revels in revenge, or marvels at madness, completely annihilates this desire?

In a world parasitic on blackness, black folks must marry love and rage because our love's impetus (anger, retaliation, etc.) further compels us to combat this negrophobogenic war on our flesh. If love requires one to be inactive, civil, or docile, that type of love is utterly useless in the face of bullets, batons, and bombs. Indeed, genuine revolutionary love must become comfortable with militancy in the passenger seat if it seeks to upend the violence that constructs our day to day.

We cannot delude ourselves into believing that resentment was not a necessary ingredient in the Nat Turner Rebellion or in the Haitian Revolution. It would be asinine to assume that fury and frustration were not key components in the Ferguson Uprising or the Baltimore riots. Niggas have always had an intimate, non-consensual relationship with violence because of the anti-blackness embedded in the fabric of our society. Therefore, black people needn't justify any use of violence as a means to free themselves from the consistent brutality waged against them. After all, if we, the dark, are structurally doomed due to the vitriolic visceral reaction of our black vessels, what good is justification for the already dying? Why justify anything when we are seen as nothing?

With knowledge of this truth, are we ready to become collaborators with chaos and let our love rendezvous with wrath, whether black liberation is a pending possibility or not? If the motivation behind love demands only passivity and acquiescence to representation and respectability politics, then you can bet your life that our oppressors will maintain their dominance over the global black population. Justification is only necessary for those whose love prefers to cuddle with comfortability rather than let resistance be rooted in a righteous rage.

A Meditation on The State and Social Death

In a book entitled “Anarchism and the Black Revolution” former Black Panther and revolutionary elder Lorenzo Kom’boa Ervin describes the state broadly as “a hierarchical institution by which a privileged elite strives to dominate the vast majority of people. The state’s mechanisms include a group of institutions containing legislative assemblies, the civil service bureaucracy, the military and police forces, the judiciary and prisons and the sub-central state apparatus. The government is the administrative vehicle that runs the state.” To elaborate on Lorenzo’s great, but concise definition, the state legitimizes itself not only by ensuring that everyone is beneath it, but also ensuring that some groups are above—remaining dominant, while others are below—remaining marginalized. This is mostly because hierarchy is the main ingredient to statism (which is just another form of domination.) In other words, it’s the common denominator, the key component, and recurring theme. Those that are at the bottom are left with a choice to either reject assimilation to the centralized state or embrace creating a new world where no one is in subjugation to anybody else.

This line of demarcation between ‘the have’ and ‘have nots’ has convinced some of those below that they can be the exception to the power that comes with being a part of the above—they are sadly mistaken. The state is designed to perpetrate harm, its systems designed to crush rebellion, and its power created to rule and ‘maintain law and order’. To be in power over another, to have state power even if your origins was once to have been below, you will not be an exception to how this entity functions. You will inevitably due its bidding if in a position of control because a thing created to kill can’t be restored or transformed to save those that yearn to live freely. If we are to be in complete opposition to the state, we must resist it at all the levels that Ervin details. The above and below must both cease to exist; this separation of the ‘haves’ and ‘have nots’ must be severed by any means necessary.

Historically, whenever we’ve decided to unshackle and defend ourselves from our ever present enemy (the state), we somehow are still demonized, brutalized, and painted as the aggressors. Despite the fact that our violent acts against them were the direct result and response to an ongoing violence that they’ve been inflicting upon us globally for centuries. In the throes of the civil rights era, it didn’t even matter if the approach to black liberation was peaceable or if the strategy to socialism was nonviolent. Freedom fighters who were devoted and imperative to these endeavors, like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., were still berated, surveilled, and assassinated. One does not even have to be engaging in an act of resistance or violence to meet an untimely demise.

In 1984, Eleanor Bumpers, a 67-year-old disabled grandmother was murdered by the NYPD in the midst of a mental health crisis during a city-ordered eviction. In ‘98, Tyisha Miller was only a teenager when her youthful years would be permanently upended by over a dozen gunshots being unleashed by the Riverside PD. In 2024, Sonya Massey called 911 for help due to fear of a potential prowler lurking around the vicinity, then a cowardly deputy of the Sangamon Sheriff’s Office killed her the moment blackness became yet another thing to be dealt with. This crass contempt for black people’s complexion serves as a reminder for what was done, is being done, and in some ways can predict what will inevitably occur. Certainly, black people never being able to rid themselves from the snugly fit cuffs of social death is the reason why they are repeatedly designated to the role of the slave.

The subjugation and alienation of other human beings is integral to how many states and societies have built and defined themselves throughout history. Slavery, in a broader context, has been around for thousands of years going back as far as the Neolithic period; it's existed across many cultures and even manages to manifest itself in a modality of ways within our current society. Nonetheless, one can't help but think about why it was (and still is) so unique for the negro. In Orlando Patterson's "Slavery and Social Death", he poses the question why is the institution of slavery referred to as "peculiar" when it was clearly the norm? This question leads to an even more uncomfortable query: how did something seemingly "peculiar" become a permanent factor for those marked as black? Well, the truth of the matter is that every other racial group that experienced slavery was at some point able to transcend their slave status, whereas black folks still wear the laminated label of lesser beings.

The state, especially in the contemporary age, is the orchestrator of this experience, the maestro of this anti-black misery, the primary proprietor seeking subservience from the "slave", which is the underlying term that is discreetly interchangeable with blackness. The power the state possesses is being utilized to further certify black folk's isolation from the social contract and human category, therefore barring them from all essentials and liberties that would permit a true integration into society. Social death, as it pertains to the life of the slave, the black, is the obliteration of past, personal purpose, and all kindred connections. It is to be disconnected from anything that would give credence to their sentience as a member of the human race.

It's evident that although the literal chains have been removed, another kind has taken its place. Black folks currently living in the afterlife of slavery are facing structural scarcity, economic disparity, gender discrimination, inequality in the work place, injustices within social settings, being pushed out of the places they call home due to gentrification and redlining, and streaming through the prison pipeline due to mass incarceration. Slavery set the stage not for a mere moment, but for a lifetime of restrictions that built a breeding ground for future generations.

We became internal enemies of the state the moment we were kidnapped and commodified by enslavers. Thus, controlling the "threat", that is those in black bodies, has resulted in a refusal for reparations, a permanent place within the margins, a financial life filled with strife, no care or consideration to better black neighborhoods and livelihoods. Truthfully, this is an experience that has debilitated black folks in ways they will never be able to fully recuperate from. There is no alleviation, recourse, or reform this entity could render for the revitalization of a people that have been accosted by anti-black power structures at every turn.

The state's objective is simple and clear: keep black people across the globe at the bottom; we will no longer call them slaves, but we will continue to treat them as such. If one chooses self-determination over subjugation, the state will exhaust every avenue to ensure suppression of autonomous Africans. Constructing decentralized revolutionary movements that could lead to our emancipation will come at a cost, but the death toll tells us that black bodies are going to pay the price regardless. If we are only imagining a new world that is egalitarian, accessible, sustainable, non-patriarchal, and absent of anti-blackness and social hierarchies without actually attempting to carve out that world now, we will continue to live in the shadow of the current reality. The state is not to be utilized as a tool or vehicle for black salvation. It is to be smashed, abolished, rendered obsolete, and swept into the dustbin of history. Ultimately, there is no room for accommodation or cooperation with an oppressive power structure that is designed to destroy

things that are a “threat”. There is no reforming or reasoning with an entity that is addicted to black affliction. If our oppressor hungers for silence, we will serve a dish of blatant disruption. If our recurring killer is aiming a firearm, we must meet that bullet with one of our own.

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