Black Like Me, Like We

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My name is Destiny Mae; I am 21 years old and a fourth-year student studying Sociology and Critical Studies in Equity and Solidarity at the University of Toronto. I have been writing poetry linking my passion and ancestral affliction to my art form to social issues since I was 12 years old. As a teenager, I began to work within my community to engage in collectivity advocacy and education. I continue to commit myself and engage in this work. Black Like Me, Black Like We, reflects my cynicism towards the present, the past, and how Blackness is conceptualized and actualized in today's white supremacist and neoliberal world. By addressing the past and present overlap, I mark the fallacies, negligence, and harm of the current world perpetuated onto Black folks. I firmly believe that critical awareness and analysis of the past and its marked present is how we as the collective can heal and deconstruct harm. Thus, I am hopeful that through critical writing, and action we – the Black community and not - can engage in ethical self-reflection. Ethical self-reflection can then lead to liberatory practices and thinking. I hope and intend for my writing to contribute to liberation.

do you know
i live knowing about death as black as me
knowing that
one day i will be nothing but a video on your
timeline
nothing but a hashtag
the life i lived
will be encapsulated
by a selection of photos
of a smile glistening with death
as Black as me
a topic of discussion,
an event
point of reference
for those that posted the Black draining from my
body
circulated, studied, and analyzed my lynching
i will be sought as a martyr
remembered by those that haul my name
on their backs down the streets that my blood-
stained Black
do you know about the streets?
the solemn streets breathing the air
into lungs that screech
at white life
or do you know only
about the streets that paved over the scars

the lashings left on our backs
do you know
i live with a death as Black as me
a life that was never my own
a life that branded my neck with rope burns
life so Black
i know nothing but to mourn
because
i am as Black as death can be
i will be
as Black as death can be.

Artist Statement

I have dedicated nearly a decade of this life to my art, linking it to 'activism.' It was an unconscious decision, informed by my ancestral roots as a Black person (Collins, 1999; Lorde 2020). I find it difficult to call my work 'activism' (Collins, 1999; Lorde, 2020). As I am unable to separate poetry from my survival, so why would I label Black life as 'activism' (Johal, 2005; Kelle, 2003:x; Lorde, 2020) I have been writing, performing, educating, and workshopping my (s)kinfolk and others on the complexity of Blackness (King, 2019:19; Macharia, 2016:187). I consider myself to contribute and reiterate Black radical and anti-colonial scholars seeking to distort the colonial narrative through the practice of traditional epistemologies (Collins, 1999; Johnson, 2014; King, 2019).

Through this knowledge and praxis, I have known and have come to analyze Blackness as detached from us (Giroux, 2007; King, 2019). Meaning, that we are socialized to believe that to be and live Black is to be an antithesis to the definition of human in a settler-colonial world (Fanon, 1965; Giroux, 2007; King, 2019; Macharia, 2016). As defined by settler colonialism and white supremacy, Blackness and the body is disposable, fungible, subhuman, branded with death (Brand, 2017; King 2019; McKittrick, 2006). Though, for those that lead Black lives, we understand that our Blackness is the opposite: indispensable and worthy of life (Brand, 2017; Collin, 1999; King, 2019). The conflicting definitions lead to an internalization that is damaging to the Black soul and body; this was and continues to be (re)designed and regulated by white supremacy and neoliberalism (Brand, 2017; Giroux, 2007; Johal, 2005).

What does *this* mean for those that occupy Black life? It means what I have written above: we know a life that we mourn before we get to live. It is a life that has already been rendered lifeless, beginning with intergenerational grief (Johnson, 2014:164; McKittrick, 2006). Black death takes on many unavoidable forms. It is a perennial fear of mortality, a constant reminder that death can visit us for merely existing. Black death is knowing that your life is only valuable and worthy when you are lifeless (King, 2019; Richardson, 2020). It is an experience that is not felt by those that live white life. White life is to live without perennial fear, to live freely rather than only to survive. When (white) individuals can benefit from this world's definition of white (life, good, worthy) and black (death, inadequate, unworthy), they can perform and align themselves to the standards of whiteness (Fanon, 1965; Giroux 2007). Thus, isolating themselves from Blackness. More often than not, we as Black folk are awarded glimpses into white life that are quickly dissolved by reminders of our truth (Fanon, 1965; Johal, 2005: 275). For the reasons above, this is why I have written this piece.

This piece comes from a certain amount of pain, collective grief I have carried throughout my entire Black life (Johnson, 2014). Pain and suffering that is not unique but has been brought forward over the last decade and significantly during this pandemic (Richardson, 2020). I wrote this intending to name a reality inherent to Blackness, a feeling that is unnameable and spoken of only in private (Johnson, Richardson, 2020). This was a piece that was necessary for not just my (s)kinfolk, but for those that are born with white life. I am writing towards a time where Black death can become Black life. I am writing as a reflection of myself, a description of the collective 'me.' I am writing towards liberation (Brand, 2017).

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