Theories and Methodologies

Which Pandemic?

TSITSI JAJI

It has been a season of writer's block, a time of stunned silence in which the most basic gifts of language seem stopped up. We stay indoors, under orders to lock down, or shelter in place—language that conjures up the anxieties of a prison in protest, an active shooter, a tornado sending us into windowless rooms. New vocabulary brings new quandaries. What is the difference between an epidemic and a pandemic? When is a disease endemic? Are such questions merely academic? Mired in difficult diction, we expert readers find words no longer anchor us. The false etymology of a garden full of questions becomes, for the lucky among us, as unfamiliar as the campuses we shun. Our mouths are muffled; when masks slip down we are face to face with what is still up for bitter debate. Before, we might have spoken of masquerade, secret societies dancing in raffia, beads, ancestral power or bacchanal's sweet carnival, *Mas* in the time of renewal; or even a Venice before grief, before captivity, before the exhausted breath of a nurse, whispering last rites.[1] We cannot breathe. The tautology of our doubled grief snatches the breath that lifts language into lyric. Rainer Maria Rilke once called music the breathing of statues, but how shall we sing when all around us death rattles?

Street poem, chant, cry: I can't breathe. A man gasps for air in the perennial ritual of that other, longer, most appalling plague. George. Therapeutic gatherings perform speech, genuflection, a new solidarity for as long as the posture holds. I can't breathe. A man lies prone in a land of lakes, pools of blood, the fresh memory of another, shot dead. Philando. A man lies prone on ground that masquerades as fruitful, the Big Apple, not big enough to desist from stopping, frisking, manhandling, slaughtering. Eric. A woman lies prone, or perhaps face up, or in that unspeakable collapse devoid of choreography, her body turned to lace and a door, now a lattice. Breonna. A woman says her name. Another, and another, we say their names,

TSITSI JAJI is associate professor of English and African and African American studies at Duke University. She is the author of *Africa in Stereo: Modernism, Music, and Pan-African Solidarity* (Oxford UP, 2014) and the poetry collections *Mother Tongues* (Northwestern UP, 2020), *Beating the Graves* (U of Nebraska P, 2017), and *Carnaval* (Hudson Valley Writers Center, 2014).

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the gift of their mothers desecrated by this long pandemic, racism. No vaccine on the horizon. People begin to tell the truth. The American Psychological Association ("We Are Living"), the *British Medical Journal* (Godlee), a handful of universities, more than a few white people, more than a few tired, well-rehearsed Black people. We assume the position.

We assume that eventually we will find something to say. We assume that we will know how to take a position. We assume that we are not essential. Some of us stay home. We are used to security. Some of us, precarious, have no such choice. Some of us pop in from time to time, to fetch a book, rifle through a drawer, collect the mail. The mail is slow, if it comes at all. A bad omen. We are late too. We disappoint editors, who turn out to be friends, tutors, agents of grace. We beg committees to accept a recommendation and discover we are not the only ones. We draft, and draft, and draft poems that do not come right. Sometimes we send the white space, a few words, the only ones whose short, flat syllables this suspended craft will yield. We open our e-mail, and wonder about comrades whose poems come daily. The Academy of American Poets decides that for a time the Poem-a-Day will wear the mask, laugh, look mean and terrible, bare teeth and say it: *Black Lives Matter* (Academy).

The lives that have mattered are the ones that teach us this time is both the exception and the rule. The lives that matter make statistics both essential and banal. The lives that matter are Black, Indigenous, people of color, rechristened for a year of unattended funerals. The lives that matter come from the shittiest places—Africa, Haiti, El Salvador; we catch the drift.[2] The lives that matter stayed put, or crossed a body of ocean, only to drown, en route, disembarked, or landlocked at home. The lives that might matter, if language is to return, are those with practice at the genres of our time. It is too soon for elegies. No one can come for eulogies. Obituaries fill the pages, screens, airwaves, but something rings false—how can we mourn those we never knew? We need help, if we are to pour this double portion of grief into something worth the sound it screams into silence. We need to know if something other than a scream would be better. If we are prone will we live or are we dead?

There are people who know how to breathe the grief of Ghana's Ewe dirges into English verse—Kofi Anyidoho summons the voice of his mother, Abla Adidi Anyidoho, to sing with him. There are people whose sorrow songs have passed from field to concert hall, something we call spiritual. There are people who keen for generations, music holding indecipherable syllables in place, until strangers brought together find an old saying ripe for each other's improbable presence. An elderly man, his face etched by sun, war, and worry, spells out this truth: we grieve in our mother tongue (Toepke and Serrano 51:01–25). I remember his words, because I needed to borrow them once, to bless the memory of a twelve-year-old boy, Tamir Rice, laid low too soon. "You never forget the language you cry in" (Jaji, "To Bless"). There are people in Southern Africa, in my own family, who learned to bury their children, raise their grandchildren, head a household of siblings instead of entering grade seven. Too young to be so close to death. I think of how the toll of this novel coronavirus is anything but new for Black people ill-served by medicine in America, and the ominous variance in Africa's numbers, how it strains. In this season, I have found myself turning back to those who know all too well how to grieve, those who have lived through other seasons of grief and have mastered languages of lament. But as Imani Perry put it, "Racism is terrible. Blackness is not." The poetry of Blackness beckons.

And yet, I find I am slowed these days. I cannot write on time, in verse as in prose. I read and reread, and still I am not sure how to make sense of things, so I look for the nearest reading group—my students. Teaching, *Alhamdullilah*, is that one part of our work that carries on, when all else falters. I am teaching a course regularly offered, African Diaspora Literature. The time is right to give my syllabus a new name: Black Lives Matter.[3] How else to respond to this time but with a reading list almost exclusively drawn from works by and for Black women from around the globe? We parse lines in praise of an Ethiopian nun, Walatta

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Petros, and I savor their wonder at a seventeenth-century African biographer writing in Ge'ez. Say his name, Galawdewos. Another week, we read M. NourbeSe Philip's book of impossible mourning. Later I pause at its threshold, the epigraph. *Though they go mad they shall be sane, / Though they sink through the sea they shall rise again*. Philip, of Tobago, decolonizes the soft tongue of Dylan Thomas, of Wales, into this no-man's speech, "And death shall have no dominion." There is nothing gentle about Philip's book, *Zong!* My students and I do not muster the madness to linger over the gray shades of her poem "Ẹbọra," those underwater spirits (175–82). We take the poet at her word: "There is no telling this story," and so we refuse a claim to transparency (196). What sense can be made of Black lives—one hundred and then some—drowned for an insurance payment? Say her name, M. NourbeSe Philip. And say the names she writes into the bottoms of her pages: "Masuz, Zuwena, Ogunsheye, Ziyad, Obwambi, Keturah . . . (3). We read Patricia Jabbeh Wesley. *When the Wanderers Come Home*—a daughter, too long in the diaspora, arrives in Liberia to bury her father. But her elegy turns into this mail order:

> as if I were
>
> some storehouse of dead people . . .
>
> In Monrovia, only corpses, the same manner
> in which I left decades ago, walking through
> //
> dead bodies of my people during the war.
> Someone, please send me some black clothes.
> ("Send Me" 13)

Elsewhere she tells us it was not just distance that delayed her journey home:

> Now there was chemotherapy
> at my door, and death news arrived on my phone
> in a store parking lot, me, imprisoned,
> not only in a car, but so far from that first
> //
> *Po-po-wlee* call, the coming of the *Nehwordeh,*
> our townswomen, the daughters of the clan. . . .
> ("2014" 113)

Wesley grieves the solitude of all immigrants, remote in grief. And then, this curse: she will not mourn alone after all. Within a few months, the world is transfixed by "a new Monster, Ebola, like war, like cancer, they call it Ebola, a plague, the untouchables / are the dying, but doctors and nurses die first . . ." ("2014" 113). I read the lines over again, out loud: "the untouchables / are the dying, but doctors and nurses die first." Patricia found the words that fail me, and wrote them before I knew to need it, my Liberian sister's anacrusis.

What I need is to launch into another project, writing and curating poems for a set of classical vocal songs that my new friend Shawn Okpebholo has agreed to compose, our invitation to dwell in a new online archive, *Freedom on the Move*. My old friend Martha Guth sees this collection of runaway slave advertisements, brilliantly curated as the record of self-liberating people, and thinks, these runagates deserve a hearing. She dreams of Black brilliance singing the memory of their brazen courage in a concert hall, and she invites us to find the poetry and the music, the American lyric in these scanned documents. We are making work for songSlam, a winter festival to come.[4] I have been commissioned, as the churched in my family would say, and yet I am daunted; it's been months since our first phone call. I cannot bring myself there. I cannot pore over these records. And so, again, I ask my students' help, but I know they need company: this is group work. I send them in fours to this archive, but I want them to hear the voices of enslaved people. Literally. I assign too much, asking them to listen to testimonies recorded by primitive machines in crude interviews—the Works Progress Administration's collection *Born into Slavery*. One quartet composes a set of poems shuttling between the two archives. My students instruct my reading and correct my spelling. It matters to them to include the names of each of the enslaved "womxn" mentioned—Say her name. They approach "slave narratives through the lens of ongoing struggles—power, capitalism, the commodification of Black bodies, and sexism—which intersect with one another and manifest themselves in new and different ways in the present. . . . We

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cannot hope to understand or improve the present without first understanding the past" (Fraser et al., "*Freedom*"). I love them for their earnestness. Their poem "Womxn in the Outer Space" italicizes lines culled from *Freedom on the Move* to show how "enslaved womxn were described by their enslavers, who were men and womxn," while the lines from *Born in Slavery* appear in roman script, quoting survivors describing in their own words "how enslaved womxn were exploited and abused, including forced marriage and family separation . . ." (Fraser et al., "*Freedom*"). Editing with an instructor's privilege I single out lines that move me, but without the full cento, their force is blunted:

. . .
As Hannah has two daughters and a mother, [Hannah, runaway ad posted 10/25/1823]

it is probable she is harbored

Big enough to wash children

A small black boy, about nine years old [Frank, runaway ad posted 1/9/1853]

Big enough to draw water

The negro girl Eugenia and her mulatto child, aged two years [Eugenia, runaway ad posted 1/26/1847]

I remember that I started crying

. . .
If any Person will inform her Master where she is so that he may have her again, [Tamor, runaway ad posted 6/12/1782]

The world is getting wicked'er and wicked'er

they shall be well rewarded

He will endeavour by every means in his power [Stepney, runaway ad posted 2/23/1796]

he come out with his gun and shot at mother

to make his escape either by land or water

she run down the ravine and gits away with me
(Fraser et al., "Womxn")

My students and I wrestle with our nauseated feelings in the autumn as infection rates accelerate. We read the work of the historian Tera Hunter, who brought her research to the public sphere in a *New York Times* editorial a few months earlier, when the "frequent scenes of wailing mothers and babies being torn apart by government officers at the Mexican border" were dominating news cycles. She reminds us that this particular form of immorality was a well-worn tradition: "for long stretches of American history, it was commonplace for children to be snatched from their families." The regular dissolution of slave families was as devastating as it was paradigmatic, and slaves "who had lost loved ones were punished if they dared to cry, complain or fight back." Such cruelties lived on, through apprenticeship laws that allowed former slave owners to take custody of Black children (and exploit their labor) for years on end. And from 1879 onward, Native Americans were forced into boarding schools that had the explicit goal of cultural annihilation. As Richard Pratt, founder of the Carlisle Indian Industrial School, held, these schools aimed to "'[k]ill the Indian in him, and save the man.' . . . The children's names were changed, their language, religions and other cultural traditions suppressed" (46). Native American children remain overrepresented in the American foster system. And, as with African Americans and Latinx populations, they are overrepresented in the rates of death and hospitalization caused by COVID-19.

And yet, there is something called Black Joy. I remember Hunter's op-ed not only because it is searing and beautiful but also because I read it in a season of my own private miracles. A couple of weeks after her piece came out, I learned that my poetry manuscript, *Mother Tongues*, had won an award from the Cave Canem Foundation. It was dedicated to my son, born a few days later.

Tender was our fortress.
Once, we were one solid bloc
of granite, bold as marble.
Now we swivel and
Float on air, like dancers watching wonder
marble into the you in me, the me in you,

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this living monument, this only child.
("Dedication")

Now I shudder more viscerally at the thought of what it means to mother a Black son in America, one whom history has "despised, and forsaken . . . [a] man of pains, and acquainted with disease . . . one from whom men hide their face" (*Tanakh*, Isaiah 53.3). Raised in the privileges of a campus childhood, my boy will likely be insulated from the terrors that faced Tamir, Trayvon, Michael, Eric, Philando, George. . . . But "treasuring up all these things in [my] heart and meditating on them" strikes me dumb ("Luke 2"). Their names catch in my throat. I am losing language, struggling for script, rent from Relation, feeling old as if there is nothing new under the sun. But poetry, translating what remains of a mother tongue, archives a new awareness that becoming-mother is becoming-Black. I thank the ancestors for my students, who teach me how to read and write better. The fall term has ended, and I will miss seeing them each week, on *Zoom*. I will miss Cornelia Fraser, Thalia Halloran, Taylor Huie, Geovanni Janer, these poets in spite of themselves, and I will miss their peers.

I miss real office hours, sitting in my slightly musty office with the irksome water stain and waiting for Dorothy Adu-Amankwah to knock on the door and talk to me about her thesis. She has graduated now, with honors, but I will always remember reading poetry together in the spring pandemic of 2020. The particulars of this moment may be without precedent, but the global HIV/AIDS epidemic foreshadowed our age of social distance. The South African poet Rustum Kozain's poem "Crossing from Solitude" explores how the communicability of HIV/AIDS disrupts intimacy. Kozain's lovers linger in ekphrasis:

We talk shit,
laugh, or worry, declare,
confess, tell stories. Then

we'll mob each other
like the crazed lovers we are
uncontained
and certain as our bodies. . . .
(71)

For Adu-Amankwah,

> the haphazard structure of this stanza [and its diction evoke] a loss of control between the lovers. Kozain uses the verb "mob" as an alternative to "embrace" eliciting a violence unaccustomed to love. "Crazed" modifies the uncontrolled lovers. The enjambment of "uncontained" in the third line in this stanza further highlights the chaos of this stanza. In his word choice "certain" Kozain qualifies and justifies the intensity of the lovers' actions. The lovers are driven by the need for intimacy, a desire to "cross that silent, undeclared, / still solitude." The speaker declares physical intimacy the epitome of crossing the solitude; the speaker and lover's bodies "seek their single truths." The imagery of sex in the fourth stanza, an entanglement of limbs, further illustrates the significance of this physical unity
>
> caring not for anything
> but my leg in its space between
> your legs; your hand on me
> as if it's my hand on me
>
> or your hand on yourself
>
> Kozain's imagery [shows] the notion of sex to be no boundaries between oneself and another human being. . . . Yet what happens when this form of communication is no longer possible?

As Kozain continues, the "real world" intrudes. Later the lover will

leave for a rally.
June, 16. A new fight
as our country falls again,
still, to plague and old men

muddled and muzzled by an old
God who clearly couldn't care
he gave us cocks and cunts,
aresholes, the language of the fuck,

The body's craze for assonance. . . .
(71–72)

As Adu-Amankwah notes, this shift to percussive diction—the hard sounds of "c" in "clearly couldn't care," "cocks and cunts"—punctures the soft sounds

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of the preceding stanzas with a note of anger, matching the evocation of the Soweto Uprising, on 16 June 1976, when students took to the streets protesting the apartheid state's imposition of Afrikaans, a foreign and oppressive language for most Black students, as the official language of instruction. When police gunfire stopped, nearly two hundred people, mostly children, lay dead in the streets. Kozain's pairing of apartheid's ghosts with the specter of HIV/AIDS underscores how long South Africans have lived with the threat of death. . . . Ultimately, Kozain's poem promises new intimacies as they mouth their stories. The lovers must discover how to enter into each other's inmost sanctum once more:

> A bath that cools
> for no one, an odd blue sky,
> the sun that falls now
> towards evening, towards winter
>
> as our confessions deepen,
>
> declarations that circle and skirt
> the unsaid of how else
> the human might cross from solitude. (72)

"Kozain's answer" to the restrictions of safe sex, Adu-Amankwah writes, "isn't prayer but something similar: confession. Confessions require vulnerability, to allow one's fears and secrets to be exposed to the eyes and ears of another" (38–39). To draw near, even in times where danger closes in on our most closely held. Adu-Amankwah's introduction speaks plainly of the disorientations I, too, was feeling:

> I never imagined that I [would] be writing a thesis about narratives of illness in the midst of a pandemic. Last September, when I started researching for this thesis, the word "coronavirus" wasn't at the forefront of language among physicians. Now, "coronavirus" is in the everyday language of people all over the world. [The COVID-19 pandemic is] exacerbating inequalities in our current society. The livelihood of contract-workers, hourly-paid workers are at stake; individuals who don't have health insurance fear the possibility of healthcare costs. Asian-Americans are being beaten, verbally abused and racially stigmatized because the coronavirus originated from China. (1)

Together we noticed how, without having explicitly decided to, we found ourselves reading differently. Adu-Amankwah concludes her thesis by speaking to the primary motivation driving her work:

> In the medical world and in society at large, there is a general perception that black people can endure more pain than other races, physically and emotionally. Thus, black individuals are less likely to receive the accurate amount of pain medication or be diagnosed with mental illness such as depression. This is a historical trend that still remains. There isn't sufficient attention paid to the pain of black patients and black people as a whole. If medicine doesn't want to remain implicated in this injustice, medicine must start paying attention. (58)

Parsing poems, Adu-Amankwah shows, is one way to do this. As a future physician, she found reading literature to be essential training for attending "to speakers who have been silenced by their body's suffering and society's complacencies." She imagined a medical school curriculum where reading could foster "empathetic care of all patients" (59). I want to live in a world where poetry has that kind of power.

When we study together, it already does.

Notes

1. Carnival in the Caribbean diaspora is celebrated with *Mas*, the street festivals that *masquerade* cannot fully name.

2. In January 2018, President Donald Trump infamously referred to these nations as "shithole" countries in a meeting with United States senators, as was widely reported in media sources, including the *Washington Post* (Dawsey).

3. A description of the class by my student Caroline Petrow-Cohen was featured on Duke University's English Department website in December 2020.

4. For more on the songSlam Festival, see the website for *Sparks and Wiry Cries* (www.sparksandwirycries.org/).

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