

WOMEN AND MIGRATION(S) II



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Cover image: FIRELEI BÁEZ for Marie-Louise Coidavid, exiled, keeper of order, Anacaona, 2018. Oil on canvas. Installation view: 10th Berlin Biennale, Akademie der Künste (Hanseatenweg), Berlin, 9 June 9-September 2018. Photo: Timo Ohler. Cover design by Anna Gatti

27. The Empathy Exodus

Esther A. Armah

The ad would read...

Black woman

Desperately seeking Empathy

Long term Commitment? Obviously not

Would settle for one night

Stand?

No...

supine yes...

Not the missionary position

I need to be on top

Of everything,

every issue,

every trauma

every item on my to do list

every protest

every awakening that has shit to do with me

I am a stranger to my reflection. I see only a growing to do list where there used to be braids, and dissatisfaction for however many things I still haven't ticked off that list.

The phone goes, the WhatsApp pings, email notifications appear, a DM from Instagram, a Tweet I am tagged in... a friend, a colleague, a co-worker, a boss, another colleague. All newly awakened to the globalized horrors of injustice, they seek my counsel, my book lists, my listening ears, my black woman body to pour their revelations and raging. They assume my body has space for their Johnny-come-lately

revolutionary moment that may or may not last beyond the protest they are attending for the first time.

Multiple calls and texts with my global sisterhood spanning cities and continents reveals an exhaustion, an emotional labor that spanned borders, crossed oceans and inhabited our bodies, minds and hearts.

It is the night after the night after multiple days of protests where eight minutes forty-six seconds has become a global clock to tell the time of state violence against black people's bodies. The protests started in the US, now they are growing and globalizing. My city of birth—London—comes alive to the emotional sounds of *Star Wars* Black British actor John Boyega. Vulnerability staggers through the bullhorn he holds, he is sharing what it is to be Black and Man and Being on the streets of London, dealing with and being confronted by the Metropolitan Police, London's police force. Britain's tidy racism raises a pinky finger, sipping tea and staring aghast at America and what it considers 'their' race problem. On these streets, with these protests, allow John to reintroduce y'all selves—to the mother of racism, perpetrated and perpetuated twisted around batons and Britishness. In BedStuy Brooklyn, my home of eight years, the streets come alive to a soundtrack of protest featuring multiracial crowds who illuminate newscasts, dominate headlines and occupy Breaking News stories. In Ghana's capital Accra—my current home and city—our president does a tribute to George Floyd, newly re-connected to an African-American constituency, in the wake of 2019, the Year of Return that saw 15,000 African Americans return to Ghana, honoring 400 years since the first enslaved Africans left this corner of the Continent, and would land in Virginia.

How are you? Asked nobody ever of this Black woman, of too many Black women during many, many months of 2020. Or maybe they did, but they didn't mean me. Or more accurately, I don't mean they didn't say the words. I mean they didn't ask the question with the intent of listening to an actual response.

Sistren, your understanding, your comfort, your heart, your ears, your voice, your body, your breath, your everything trained on bodies and beings outside of you. Your you-ness was expected to be devoted to the service of others; be it discoveries of 2020 systemic racism by white friends, colleagues and randoms in 140 characters, be it manifest foolishness from the pens and minds of Black men navigating

unimaginable traumas, be it families for whom your one-person reality was their everything.

I invite global Black women to pause, to gather, to create a pipeline for migrating emotionalities.

We must momentarily wage an empathy exodus. Consider this a global intervention. Exhale. Breathe, you are choking on your own exhaustion, but continuing to listen as you choke. Our emotions must move to the rhythm of unknown, unheard, unrecognized soundtracks—our bodies calling they need us—slow down quickened hearts beating in protest at names turned hashtags we no longer remember but are expected to memorialize. Here in Ghana, women who carried trade on their heads to feed families now carry the weight of a community on their backs. Across the water in America, Black women wade, neck-deep, empathy bled out, but always being asked to give more, listen longer, be available. This is not reciprocal carriage, it is Black woman armies of emotionalities in service. Always in service.

So, I invite you to join *The Empathy Exodus*; to dance, wail, to rock threads that have been hidden in Zoom closets, to accessorize with your interiority, to marginalize the mayhem and mainstream your you-ness. *The Empathy Exodus* is a path that we'll make, then walk. It is a beat only we can hear and disappear into. It is the pursuit of peace that rewards rather than reminds us of a need we are yet to fulfil for someone other than us. *The Empathy Exodus* is an electric slide, the shaku shaku, the wind your wais', the oh hell no, the let's get it on. It is a pit, it is a pass.

It is where we partner to dismantle the emotional patriarchy—that system that caters to, privileges and prioritizes the feelings of white men, of all men—no matter the cost or consequence to women and Black and brown people. Make like Black Jonah, two by two, an empathy exodus—movement of jah sistren.

In the empathy exodus the mirror of emotional justice meets us. Brown eyes meet brown eyes. Just for a second, you are seen.

Who is that?

This global intervention, an act of revolution to honor unrecognized racialized emotional labor, and to kick everyone's ass who keeps demanding you add more to your To Do List even though it is noose, chain and shackles.

I write this sitting in Accra, Ghana's capital. My back is to Accra's inky night and the jasmine picked from the garden mixes with the burning scented candle.

The aim is peace. Or rather escape from a present that has me blinking, seeing a nine-year-old black girl in the back of a cop car in the States, handcuffed, pepper sprayed and yelled at by a police officer, who literally said to a nine-year-old child, "You're acting like a child!" Eight cops. Eight. E.I.G.H.T... and forty-six seconds later, they pepper sprayed her childishness.

Here in Accra, the sixteen regions report thirteen-year-olds returning to school pregnant, heavy doses of shame wafting through classrooms, airborne by teachers disgusted by their condition, but silent about the violence that has enabled their condition.

I want to break free, sings a sister, in Queen's Freddie Mercury voice. *I'd like to teach the world to sing/in perfect empathy*, sings another... A Coke won't fix this mess.

The soundtrack of this global intervention is Afro-beat. The mission of this intervention—if any Black woman chooses to accept it—is an empathy exodus as a particular part of our healing, fashioned just for us.

Some of you stare horrified at such an intervention. Seriously. Healing—yours and mine? Ours? Right now? Unimaginable. There's a pandemic, police brutality, protests and white women's newly awakened racial angst to get through. We residents in shithole nations slide deeper into cushions with bare feet crossed, glancing up at ceiling fans whirring and cooling COVID-free air, with an African night sky alive with inky black sounds of noisy lullabies, only to be awakened with a call to action centering others' transformation, but not our wellbeing.

We are in cycles of crises; of loss and converging pandemics.

From the closed borders of this nation I call home, wading through waters choked with putrid racism and newly found conscience, we make our way, moving quickly in the quicksand of stay-home politics and eternal Zoom-meetings.

I daydream as I muse about this ark. "What can I do that would be appreciated?" A white woman had asked me during a Q&A of my keynote on Emotional Justice, whiteness and racial justice. I was momentarily silenced by the question. We all were. Wait, so your action—if you actually take any—is predicated on knowing two

things—there will be a reaction, and that reaction must be appreciation. This, I silently say to myself, is what happens when we think competing ideology or progressive politics alone is our path to peace, healing and eternal wokeness. I want to challenge her. I cannot stomach the racialized emotional labor that will ensue, and how that will drain the little that is left from a wrung-out spirit. I say nothing. I fume in that global language that is ‘black women, white women, race and harm’. I do the emotional labor gymnastics to maintain an even keel and complete the Q&A portion of my keynote.

I return to the present. I long ago rejected being the milk-filled emotional titty of a world sucking from me and then sanctioning any expressed pain. This ark, of sorts. An emotional labor one. I don’t want to build it. That would require the kind of emotional labor familiar to Black women in the three cities in the three nations I call home. This is an ark for migrating emotionalities, for an empathy exodus, for the kind of flight that only requires your sanity and your safety. This ark cannot be made of wood—that surface wounds—and I, we, need the kind of vessel that allows us to sink without feeling drowned or drenched. Floating. That is my particular request. To move through space with all the benefit of male privilege and none of the toxicity, the part that chokes my humanity and renders me less human and less whole.

Why an empathy exodus? A rhetorical question for Black women. But I will try and answer it here.

A history that has wrapped itself around bodies, bootys and beauty requiring incessant emotional labor to stave off systemic insistence that nothing about me, my chocolateness, is precious, powerful—only pitifully unwanted, while simultaneously appropriated. These are old stories, that doesn’t mean they don’t sting with the freshness of 500-year-long history and traumas. Here in Accra, I reckon with and navigate a terrain of expectation that to cater to the feelings of others is not merely service, but the height of pleasure. Dare I suggest it is not, then my very woman-ness is not simply questioned, it is shunned, it is clearly unraveled—I must be unraveling.

For too many of my white sisters, I have no words. Throughout 2020, you have required and requested far too much emotional labor of me, of us. And when I say required and requested I mean expected and demanded—over your racial injustice awakening that overlooks

my racial justice insomnia. I need Emotional Ambien and respite from relentless required affirmation that the woke-ocracy is transformative. For you, maybe. For me, it is traumatizing.

Keynotes a go go, doing racial justice labor that somehow feels like strengthening inequity as a white woman discovers her racial justice wings, climbs on some Black woman's back and shouts, "look I'm flying", as your back bends and twists to the rhythm of her newly discovered justice jangle. Loss was the soundtrack of 2020. It was high-hat, negro spiritual, drum n bass, boo hoo blues and gospel. The Sounds of Blackness breaking and being remade from being broken and being reimagined. Exhaustion is a lyric, a concerto, a spoken word, a word, a mantra. I wonder if I can find ancient African languages to say this word.

This intervention starts as a global Black woman check-in. To check in, you must check out. This empathy exodus requires you travel to your reflection and pause, absent action, motion or goals. For so many of us, we can stare down white supremacy undaunted, spring into action. But stare at our own reflection, our own body, vulnerability, exhaustion and find us, our power, pleasure and our us-ness in the reflection that stares back. Eesh....

We have to warm up to an intervention—one that moves at the pace of Black women's emotional labor in service to our own souls. That is an unfamiliar journey, landscape and territory—so we move slow, it may seem pained, awkward, disjointed. Okay. That's okay, an empathy exodus is unfamiliar and feels unkind—but migrating emotionalities allow for fresh possibility.

Do not make your emotionality a villain—the empathy exodus is the intervention to make room for replenishment—the kind we must give ourselves.

No spa day for Black women's interiority—but that's why the ark is the perfect vessel to hold our exodus. Crisis feels like a yoga position—it is not so much a stretch, but resting stress positions, and so rearranging emotional limbs to move to the beat of self-care is an unfamiliar rhythm.

An empathy exodus, then, is the global intervention to address the crisis of Black women's emotionality and interiority from a year that bled, burnt, broke, built, burdened, bolstered, rewound. A cycle. A

cipher. A sister. A sistren. The empathy exodus is our reset button to make some space from no space to replenish.

This, then, is my intervention for global Black women sick of service, colleagues, friends, kids, family, partners, Zoom, protests, masks, loneliness, loss, soothing, comforting.

Final ad...

Need a moment that time-travels through notions and nations.

Step into the Ark,

The Empathy Exodus

it sways to an affirming rhythm

no shade, no judgment

returns you, returns us

to our us-ness,

rupture & return

Replenished?

Maybe. Maybe not.

Just reminded

Replenishment is a superpower

I cannot continue. I cannot not continue. I'm going to need that ark again and again.

So, this ark? It has a name. Emotional Justice. Inside of it? The visionary framework for racial healing that centers the wellbeing of global Black women and girls. It is in service to the empathy return of a more healed Black woman. Our emotional language has always been ancient.

So, consider this an African intervention, from this west coast corner. We are continent, nation, tribe, we are village, elder and young 'un. We name empathy, we name exodus because there is no future that is a wellness for us without an empathy exodus from spaces, places and people that treat you like emotional currency—your worth appreciates and depreciates according to the weight, depth and breadth of service for their soon-come-never-gets-here justice model. Our models are Egyptian mummies, tombs wrapped in batahari cotton, shades of indigo, storytelling in its stitches.

The ark might get built one day. But not today.

I will get to the empathy exodus. It is somewhere on my To Do list. Right after my next Zoom, answering questions for the next eight minutes forty-six seconds. I can breathe. I just can't feel. So, let's do this another time, 'kay?