

# 2020: AN ARIA FOR STAYING THE COURSE

THE TENTH MAGAZINE



Essay by MARCUS ANTHONY BROCK

Portrait by ERIK CARTER

“Pajaro” shirt painted by DEVIN OSORIO

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This Christmastime, I am nostalgic. In my writing, and in my heart, I have returned back to nostalgia, but not in the familiar way. Nostalgia literally means a return to pain or a return to home. Yet pain is formative, pain is useful, pain is home, and I’m trying to find my way back. Taking it all together, the highs and lows of 2020 have taught me one valuable lesson: we must stay the course—even when life has not given us much reason to. Faith and hope are revolutionary aspirations.

They are the railings holding us up as we steer the course. Ending one year and going into the next is a heavy reminder of things gained, but it is also a hyper-visible reminder of the many things lost.

This year is an anthem—no, an aria—on our humanity.

And the thing about our holidays, whether it’s Hanukkah, Christmas, Festivus, Kwanzaa or for the non-observant, everything comes

crashing back: loss, trauma, happiness and mistakes. Once Mariah Carey’s annual jingle begins to blare so does the year in review for ourselves. There are years that I have been broke, and years where my needs were well-met. There are years I have overflowed with immense joy. There are years that have felt snaked and stolen. And there are years that have felt blessed and beholden. This year, I am simply smiling while listening to the breath in my body — and holding.

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I must have been approaching 10 years old when, just days before Christmas, my mother’s partner stole her money. I sat playing on the floor when she tearily said, “There will be no Christmas this year.” We both cried in our rooms, simultaneously. I vaguely remember us both crying together. An apartment filled with grief and lacking smiles would populate that Christmas morning.

So many memories are vague from my childhood, but this one is not; it is omnipresent. I cried myself to sleep those nights leading up to the holiday, but on Christmas morning I awoke to some of the presents on the list I had left for Santa. I don’t know what my mother did to make sure Christmas had found us, or whether she begged, borrowed or stole, because Sharon Jones & the Dap Kings said it best, “There ain’t no chimneys in the projects.”

This year, Christmas did not come for many. The financial, physical and spiritual losses have accumulated during the coronavirus pandemic and the scars are heavy. No present under the tree, and no stimulus check, will salve those wounds, so we must look elsewhere for the endurance to weather a lacking holiday.

There was a year when I was down on my luck, feeling as though God had shown me a love unrequited. I had agreed to attend a friend's Christmas party, but had no money and would not have any coming in for at least two more weeks. My Mississippi ancestry knows better than to show up empty-handed to an affair — no matter whether it's flowers from one's garden or the main dish in hand, you still convey your gratitude by bringing something to a house party. Unbeknown to me, however, a friend's mother had sent me a package, which arrived just before the party. I opened my door to discover a box filled to the brim with homemade baked goods and Christmas treats. It also had a bottle of dark rum that was perfect for my yuletide greeting. And just like that, the shame of showing up to my friend's party without a gift quickly dissipated. And that shame ran deep.

I hated attending the market when I was a kid. There were times when my mother had money to spare, and there were times when we were broke. And in those times of depression, when money was funny and change was strange, public assistance put the training wheels back on our family. But kids don't understand that, so asking me to run an errand to the grocery store meant I had to carry the multi-colored book of food stamps down Artesia Boulevard to Lucky's, which was humiliating for a young me. Today, those poverty-protesting crayon-colored books have been replaced with debit cards, but there is still so much shame that comes with poverty, and I had been programmed to think I was lesser-than back then. Looking around my school, I didn't understand why *those kids* had the things *we did not*. How was I to hold gratitude as a child for the food that would keep me healthy and alive? I

couldn't. I did later, but then I did not, so I would hurl the bags over my shoulder and drag my nourishment all the way home.

It is time I return home.

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*Got my house  
it still keep the cold out*

*Got my chair  
when my body can't hold out*

*Got my hands  
doing good like they 'sposed to*

*Showing my heart  
to the folks that I'm close to*

*Got my eyes  
though they don't see as far now,*

*They see more  
'bout how things really are now.*

-Celie, "I'm Here,"  
The Color Purple Musical

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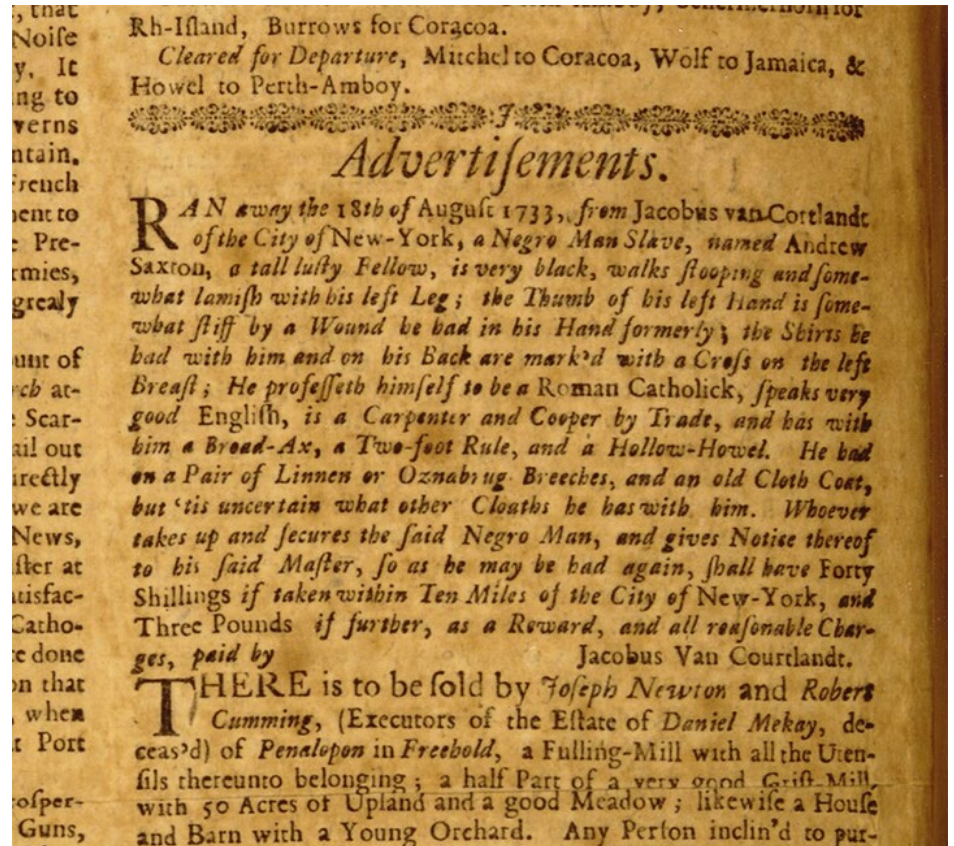
So here I am, back at home. The public murder of our kin has forced me to take refuge back home, back with my ancestors, and pour a few libations. I am emotional and infuriated that Darnella Frazier, at only 17 years old, was the one who captured the video of George Floyd gasping for breath. She witnessed his lungs as they shriveled and became arid. There were others present, but she held the camera. A fleeting memory for some, but

an inscribed one for her. You see, it wasn't just George Floyd; it was the culmination of it all — Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, the pandemic, isolation, violence, God, the quarantined quarters with the ones we loved, the quarantined quarters with the ones we despised, and the countless instances of anti-black vitriol that have plagued our screens since the moving image was invented—Spring 2020 pushed it all to a fever pitch. And yet, the document of the thing—the atrocity—has become ubiquitous. The crime against humanity, unfortunately, has to be given wings, and that is a tall order to replicate for each generation.

During the first week after George Floyd's assassination, I wept every day, sometimes twice a day, and all day on Sunday. My kin-friend Cristian reached out for us to hold space with each other in the aftermath, but I could not bear to see him right away. When we did meet, we talked as day turned into night, grief-stricken, but also sharing laughter in my home and on our walk to a nearby park. At the age of 50, James Baldwin told Maya Angelou, "I've been writing between assassinations," as he recounted the lost lives of Medgar Evers, Malcolm X and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. And here we are, still writing, making, living and breathing between assassinations, just as our ancestors did. As Black people, it is easy to forget the emotional labor we endure to succeed in an American cultural framework that was intended for our forced labor and entertainment—and yet we stay the course. Margaret Garner stayed the course. Andrew Saxton stayed the course. When we think of New York, we see skyscrapers, Ellis Island, Macy's, the Astor-Rockefeller-Rothschilds, but do we think of those enslaved bodies, slain Native Americans and inden-

tured Irish servants who turned this place from New Amsterdam into New York? What about that Queens was named after Queen Catherine? Or that the Bronx was named after Jonas Bronck and the Dutch who bought the land of New Amsterdam—for a song—nevermind its inhabitants. Resiliency is rooted within the oppressed, but like Fannie Lou Hamer, I am sick and tired of being sick and tired. The trauma penetrates our DNA, literally. The enslaved African-Americans had bones that showed the osteoarthritis of a senior in the bodies of a 20-year-old. I am sick and tired of being sick and tired. Museums hold bone artifacts of the enslaved, the oppressed Jewish descendants, queers and Romani people who were forced to labor during the Holocaust. Where did all this trauma go? Nowhere. It is still there, regardless of our acknowledgment, but we have found a way to use it.

Before I sat down to journey back home, I watched the remarkable Viola Davis in August Wilson's *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*. The capture of endurance is what took me over. Gertrude Pridgett, who became Ma Rainey, was well-aware of her exploitation by white music executives, her rising success, singing the blues and the sorrow songs, and her bisexuality were all in her arsenal. When she demanded her Coca-Cola, or that her nephew was paid his rightfully earned \$25, she did it for the culture. That's the blueprint. The executives only capitulated to her needs when they realized she had not signed the contract to license her voice. And this is why Chance the Rapper can pull up with dreadheads in the lobby if one more label tries to stop him. He ain't studying them. She was the blueprint. Chadwick Boseman's portrayal of Levee didn't capitulate, nor did Boseman himself. I think he was



New York Gazette, September 17th, 1733

the coup de grâce, not for himself, but for me, for us, in what has been a volatile year. He was the blueprint. Glynn Turman said Boseman's eyes sparkled on set alongside his then fiancée, now widow, Taylor Simone Ledward. On-screen, I saw the sparkle too. And though his body had become frail, he left the magnitude of his soul, and the same gravitas of *Black Panther* in film history for us. He overtook Wilson's words when he questioned God. Indeed, his endurance to play that role while his body was failing him was a gift. That is the reason we pay homage to our elders and our ancestors. We rise on trains and buses for our elders, not because they are too old to stand, but because they have earned the right to sit. There is, and always will be, a body count for liberation. The body count has come in the form of illness, suicide, war, and now a global pandemic and racial wars.

You see, the real project of hatred, racism, sexism, misogyny, transphobia, xenophobia and genderphobia is denouncing someone's origin, their truth, their culture, their majesty so much until they too believe the lies they have been told — in effect rendering them incapable of aspirations of freedom. You cannot see it, you cannot touch it, you cannot hold it; you can only drink it, smoke it, eat it, buy it, fry it and dye it. Therefore, it does not exist. So, we need art. We need utopia. We need to dream. We need hope because without it, could any of us go on? Or in the words of W.E.B. Du Bois, would any of us have the “dogged-strength alone from being torn asunder”? So this Christmastime, you must understand, I'm not looking for any traditional gifts. I just needed to go home.