

Sophia V. Nelson: Today is Monday June 15th, 2020. My name is Sophia Nelson, I am in Atlanta, Georgia. I am on this recording with Geronimo Collins. Geronimo Collins is participating in this oral history interview, coming from Prince George's County, Maryland. So, Geronimo lets jump right into the interview. How do you define self-care?

Geronimo Collins: I define self-care as a self-prescribed method of coping and healing. And something that is extremely necessary in living in a society in which healthy, non-toxic methods of coping and healing aren't really embraced or supported. So, thus amplifying the need for people to have their own methods of self-care in order to...to stay even-keeled and keep a sense of sanity. While living in a society in which you know only the superficial truly matters.

SN: Can you go into a little more detail about living in a society where self-care isn't amplified as much. As you said, the superficial is what matters. Can you describe what that society looks like to you?

GC: So, what I mean by being in a society where its superficial...superficial things matter most. I say that because high output and productivity is valued over relaxation and time away. People who are social and extroverted are thought of to be more useful...and just better people compared to say introverts and what not...and I think even people who are extroverted need time to unplug and be allowed that time to do so. Just like, in order to recharge and make sure they themselves are not overcompensating for something that is going on within, inside of them...that is potentially troubling or something like that.

And, I think even with the high productivity and the most ambitious and successful. Among the successful being defined as those who are successful as entrepreneurs and business and celebrity and wealth and even good looks. They are valued more so than those who may not have any of those things. And while I'm not saying that you shouldn't have any of those things. Or nothing about those things shouldn't be admired...I think that there is a place and...I think there is a place for it. And I think that people should be allowed to define their level of comfort. Define what makes them feel good. Define what success is for them. And not feel forced to participate in a heterogenous way. And the same way as everyone because otherwise you find people who end up going into these bouts of depression. Or just feeling inadequate because they are attempting to do something that is inherently not them. There is only a certain point a person can develop a skill. Some people are not supposed to be doing certain things. Or aren't supposed to shine in the same way as other people. Or what society may deem as what is successful. And those who are best and brightest and most talented.

SN: It would be helpful if you can describe the opposite of how we've been functioning as a society. As you've described, superficial being most important. What is the opposite of that?

GC: The opposite would be not feeling as if you have to work a hundred hours a week for ten years, and twenty years in order to deserve a vacation. To not be made to feel as if something is wrong with you because you be in the house, you don't want to be outside socializing. And not necessarily because you hate people but because you do better to yourself. And you are able to be your best and do your best ...whatever it is you are interested in....by taking time for yourself and not necessarily being in a social setting all the time and stuff like that.

I think also, making it ...letting it be known that...I'm trying to figure out if I could provide an opposite of the financial component? Just the productivity part. As long as all your bills are paid, you are able to pay all your bills and you are able to feed yourself, and take care of yourself,

and you feel good just knowing that you are contributing to your life and your family's life in a meaningful way, I think that should be enough. If that is enough for someone. I don't think that...I think those people are just as valuable as those who want more for themselves financially...or more for themselves in a material way. For me that's the way in which I can describe the opposite of society.

Even thinking about the way in which people create. And the way in which people produce. And the way in which people are deemed talented within the workplace. You know there are people who are skilled tradesmen and labor people who oftentimes are overlooked. And for the most part, even in this time that we are in, may even be feeling the worst of everything. Because you can't work from home if you are a plumber. Or if you are a skilled craftsman of sorts. You can't work from home if nobody can afford to call you. If there is nothing needed to be sold.

And they found that work and it is what makes them happy. You will find some very intelligent people. It doesn't mean that they...if they don't have a degree perhaps. Not to say that people that have degrees....they are just as intelligent and are able to contribute to conversations about you know just human life and existence. In a way that I think that people that spend time in post-secondary classrooms do as well.

9:09 - 9:25 Describe what normal life looked like prior to COVID-19 lockdown. What was normal life for you before COVID-19 lockdown?

9:26 - My response to what normal life looked like for me prior to the pandemic and the shelter in place orders and things like that. I laugh because everyone knows me as someone who is always out and about in different social environments you know. I call myself an ambivert because I am good at keeping to myself and also being amongst people and socializing. But, having returned to the D.C. area almost a year ago, from New Orleans, I have been in the house. I have been a homebody. This is the first time in my life that I have voluntarily been a homebody.

And so when all this shutdown talk started happening, it wasn't a major departure from the norm for me. I had been in the house already. I will say though that I have begun traveling more over the past two or three years. And that, put a stop to that. I haven't been able to take a quick trip up to New York. I have been wanting to go back to Philly because I haven't been there in quite some time. And even just to get on a plane without feeling like, okay if I get on a plane there is a mandatory 14-day quarantine wherever I go. Which, who has time for that? So, I'll say on a localized standpoint, I haven't really felt it because I've been in the house since I came back from New Orleans this time last year. But, on a more so...well, in regards to travel...interstate or even international travel that has definitely affected my ability to do that.

SN: it sounds as if travel is very important for you

GC: Yes.

SN: Have you been doing anything as an alternative to get that fix?

GC: There is nothing I can do to satiate that hunger for travel that I have unless I'm actually traveling. You know, I can think about where I'd like to go and what I'd like to do. Even contemplate ways to get around mandatory 14-day quarantines. Which I don't think is the case now with a lot of states having reopened. Even internationally there are places that have

reopened to tourists. But, ultimately I have to travel...that's the only time I can not feel like I'm missing out on something. That's my only FOMO. Not being able to travel. *laughs*

SN: There are many reports that COVID-19 is affecting the African-American community at a higher rate. Do you have any concerns about this?

GC: So, for the whole community....my concern about that remains the same as my overall concern about our general health and that not enough of us are healthy. Not enough of us have access to the services and resources and knowledge so that we can be healthy. And culturally, because of the way many of us...especially if you have a years-long....generations-long lineage in the United States as a Black person, you know soul food is a big part of our cultural expression and gatherings. And although, I've learned in recent years that the soul food...what we consider soul food today is not what soul food was even in the midst of our enslavement...our ancestors' enslavement. It was actually fresher and even healthier and more flavorful. It wasn't just salt, sugar, and fat. *laughs*

Because of what we see as soul food today, it's killing us. It definitely isn't something we should eat as many people do. And then, of course, we know all the things about food deserts and you know you look in neighborhoods where I grew up...I grew up in Oxon Hill, Marylandwhich is not the worst place in the world but it is not the best place either. So, if I go just over the bridge into old town Alexandria, I will find a plethora of healthy takeout options and a larger variety of ethnic foods and things like that. On this side of the bridge in Oxon Hill, you got a lot of what I say "fried, died, and laid to the side." A lot of Chinese carry-outs. There are a couple of Latin restaurants. Salvadorean. As well as they have got Peruvian chicken spots around....even though, I won't name any names...but some of those places use a little too much salt in their food.

But, for someone like me who leads a pretty healthy lifestyle, eats a pretty healthy diet...unless I get up and go across the bridge to Old Town Alexandria all the time or go into the city of D.C., I'm in the house cooking all the time. Because there are just not enough options outside of the house that fit the way that I eat. And I think about that and how...while yes, I have the knowledge and I'm willing to go to take the extra mile, literally, to get the types of foods that fit my diet, so that I can feel good as I'm eating and after I'm eating. But, I also know that's not the case for a lot of the people who live around me. A Lot of the people in my family, a lot of my friends. And so, as far as any reports about Black people experiencing COVID-19 infections at a greater rate than other racial groups, you know, I'm not surprised to hear that. Because many of us were unhealthy before.

And then there's people of course who are seeing that "oh they are just making us the face of COVID deaths" and things like that. I mean, that could be true too. That doesn't negate the fact that we aren't healthy. You know what I mean...generally speaking, we are not healthy. If you live in America period, you are probably...you're probably not that healthy. And if you migrate here from another country, there is a good chance you will put on 20 pounds pretty quickly. Especially if you are coming from a place where obesity is not a thing.

I say this because I have friends and roommates from other countries where obesity was not a common thing. And then they come here and say, "yeah I gained like 20 pounds in 6-months" or something....you know...but going back to the whole thing about Black people and COVID-19, I don't feel any differently than I did prior to COVID-19. I always thought...I always recognized just how unhealthy we are collectively. And that is something that we are going to have to reckon

with internally as a group. As well as while we're advocating for better ...better policy and legislation and business development...that will make it so that ...and health care, that will make it so that we can lead healthier lives. ...

Tape 2

SN: How have the murders of African Americans at the hands of police and the subsequent protests, riots, looting...unrest across the world...how has that impacted you?

GC: Well, I've got to say that I am one of the people out here that is kind of desensitized. I say that because the last time I felt something after ...because I watch all the videos because I'm crazy. *laughs* And my empathy meter...it could use some work, I can admit to that. I would say the last time I actually felt something from one of these videos where a Black person was harmed or killed...a Black person that wasn't in the wrong enough to warrant being killed by a police officer. The last one I watched was Philando Castille, prior to this one. That was the last one I watched and that was the last time I felt something.

I watched Ahmaud Arbery. I didn't watch....is there a video for Breonna Taylor? If there is, I didn't watch that one. And I watched George Floyd. I watched him with Derek Chauvin on his neck and everything. And, I don't know...I didn't get the same emotional response as I got when I watched that video of Philando Castille and his girlfriend and his daughter. I didn't get that...I didn't get the same emotional response which was one of fear and sadness, at that time. But this one it was like - okay, I see it. Let me process it. So I am definitely one of those people who have become desensitized at watching one of these types of videos. As far as....aside from that though. The response both nationally and globally....well let me speak on the national. The national response is to be expected and while I am someone who wishes we were a little more proactive and had kept the same energy going for many, many years...without having to wait for something this troubling and traumatic to happen. I'm not mad that it's happening and I think that it will...regardless of the trial of Derek Chauvin and the other officers....well I know one of them has already been....oh no, they've been charged, they haven't been convicted but - regardless of how that trial goes....or the trial of any other of these people who have killed Black people.

I know that from people who are on the ground, who have been on the ground, and have talked to these people at these protests...there is organizing happening. I think that it will...should people keep their eyes focused on the longterm as well as the immediate, I think it will bring about some real legislative change. I don't know about the implicit bias that people possess....I don't know if that is going to change, I don't have that much faith in humanity *laughs* but, legislatively I think things will change for the better. But, you have to keep...you have to stay on it, you can't just fall back once you get the wind. You got to stay on it because falling back is how you give the opposition the opportunity to catch up. You can win a battle but you haven't won a war. Winning a battle doesn't mean you've won the war. You've got to beat people back so far that when you do put your guns down, even for a moment....they don't have enough time to catch up and get the upper hand. And I don't know and perhaps it's a spiritual thing beyond my realm of understanding. Maybe one day in my spiritual practice I will come to understand why Black people, in particular, have continued to experience what we experience over centuries across the world. But, I don't understand why it continues to happen. And I think also because we are not inherently violent. I think that's why we fall back because we need to recharge and things like that.

As far as the global response it kind of makes me think about the Black mixtape and how a lot of people outside the U.S. especially in Europe. Had no idea at the time about the Civil Rights movement and shortly after that...the Black power movement. The rise of the Black liberation army and the Black Panther Party. A lot of people in Europe had no idea that Black people were being mistreated the way we were at this time, leading up to the Black Power movement. I think because of that, and whether or not these people have their own implicit bias. Whether its an anti-American, anti-Black American, anti-Black, period bias...I think a lot of people that are out protesting across the world with regards - in support and solidarity for the movement for Black Lives, I think they are protesting ultimately like, "you can't treat human beings this way....you know you just can not." And, it's true. You can't treat human beings this way. Everybody has a right to life, everybody has a right to live how they deem fit. As long as they are not hurting another person. And I think that these will continue. Its also getting people to see whats going on in their own countries. You know you look at the U.K. You look at certain European countries. Look at different countries in Africa. And people are just like, "yo!" Especially if white people still have their thumb on the Black population, that hinders them from progressing in a meaningful way. And so, this is what I think...and this is my observation and thoughts and feelings about what the protests in response to the killing of George Floyd and protests in solidarity for the movement of Black Lives across the world. Those are my thoughts and feelings about that.

8:25 - 8:36 How have you...well are you?...how are you lending yourself to the movement if indeed you are?

8:37 - So, how I'm lending myself to the movement. I am not a protest type. I am not going to be screaming in the face of police. I'm not going to be out there with a bull horn. I'm not an organizer in that way. That's not how I choose and that's not where I'm best suited. I am best suited as someone who can work behind the scenes. I am best suited as someone who can communicate from the inside. So, I am wanting to move in that direction.

I'm making a career change and going into IT. And as we all know within tech, there is a diversity issue. And I think my presence in that sector will not only add to the diversity numbers but also me being someone who has the soft skills of being able to talk with people who are from all different backgrounds and also the varied experiences I've had in life. Or in different cities, states, or countries is something else that I would be able to bring that could very well place me in a position to authentically and genuinely add to the diversity of the tech sector.

I think, especially with the way things are going in the world, where tech is about to run everything. I think its important to make sure they are people in place who are going to be decision-makers who and who will influence the decisions on these new technologies that will come out. And making sure they are technologies that benefit everybody who engages with them. And not just some people or one race, people who are wealthy, or people who have easy access to things already. So that is how I see myself lending myself to the movement. And being the most beneficial to it.

Cut 11:27 - 12:07

12:08 - is your definition of self-care something you have to implement during this time?

12:14 - 16:45 absolutely. And I think having this downtime, quote-unquote has allowed me to pay more attention to it. And add more habits into my life that will give me a great self-care

method. Or give me greater methods of self-care. I have had work out routines on and off throughout my life. So, I started working out again. I even plan to register for a self-defense course. I've been of course because I haven't really been going anywhere, I've been cooking more. I've increased my intake of fruits. Vegetables I've always got enough of but fruits...because I'm not a big fan of sweets...even though the sweetness of fruits is better for you than say some desserts or candy. I've increased my intake of fruits. As well as I am going to be cleansing soon, doing a juice cleanse...multi-juice cleanse.

But, also just making sure I keep in contact with people that I care about, people that I consider friends and family. But, also reaching out because I know that my level of need emotionally isn't as great as some peoples, so I have a little more to give. So, for me being able to provide is important for me. That makes me feel good when I can provide. When I can't provide I feel bad. And not because I think I'm supposed to provide. But, intrinsically I am a provider. So, as long as I'm able to provide I am good and that is something that I realized even before the pandemic. And in this downtime having the ability to fine-tune these self-care methods. Because there are even days when I haven't done anything. I just set and watched on stuff on tv. But, the stuff that I watch on tv which is typically all on the internet - Netflix, Amazon Prime, YouTube - it's not really anything mindless. I don't watch much stuff that is mindless. Yes, it's very very little that I watch that is escapism in that aspect. Most of what I watch is documentaries, some interviews, and conversations about certain topics that I'm interested in. Things like that. Educational videos. But, very little that I watch is escapism. So, I'll just spend all day doing that. I won't pick up a book, I'm just doing that. And I think that's cool just to give myself an opportunity to do that. Because I do not have to always be on. Because as someone who...my zodiac sign is Virgo. We have to be sturdy, we have to be calculated and methodical. And we always have to be on and doing something. So, really find the balance in that.

So, where I haven't had some of the mental, and emotional, and financial challenges that a lot of people have experienced since this pandemic hared. That doesn't take away from the fact that I still need my methods of self-care period. And so that another way for me to be prepared in the event that anything can change. I am grateful that so far everything has been good and I would like it to remain good for me. For some time but in the event that something changes I want to make sure that it doesn't hit me like a ton of bricks and takes me out. Figuratively speaking. So, it's absolutely necessary for me to have methods of self-care.

17:18 - what I believe is my second to last question, you know that message that "we are all in this together." The "we" is comprised of many of "us" individuals. So, take a moment to describe who you are. Give me an oral bio of who Geronimo Collins is in today's time, and before, and just overall.

17:19 - alright so...the tell me about yourself question is always *laughs* the most difficult question in any moment. Whether I'm at a job interview, whether or not I'm having a casual conversation with someone, regardless. But, I'm going to do my best to answer it.

So, who is Geronimo? I am...I'll just go down the list...I am a 37 years old native of... was born in Washington, DC. Grew up in Prince George's County, Maryland. I've lived a few places up and down the east coast. I am an urban culture and lifestyle enthusiast. Reformed blogger turned full-time conversationalist. I love talking with people to learn about them. I have always taken more often than not in my recent years as an adult - I've taken a very objective view on things. I'm free thinking. I'm not one to go with the crowd. And that's pretty a unique stance to take for someone who is not only black but also someone who identifies as transgender. And I

think it's necessary to do that because you have to understand that even in going with the crowd, there might be something underlying that's more detrimental in what's being presented. Whether it's in media, whether it's a way of thought, whether it is just an action. So, before I jump on board because I want to make sure that I don't fall victim to something that can come back to negatively affect me later. And so, I can I'm a very objective person. And what else can I say about myself? That's pretty much it. I'm a podcaster and sometimes I write. I'm not a big fan of writing but you know I can do it. The podcast is called All the Fly Kids. I have another podcast called Centerpieces. Which is an every now and then conversation about Black artists' influence on culture. Yeah - that's me.

SN: Is there anything I haven't asked you that you want to make sure is documented?

GC: Nah, I think these were some good questions. Good questions that required some in-depth and allowed for some in-depth responses. So, I want to thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak. And getting me to talk about what I've been thinking for quite some time and haven't really had the space to talk about.

SN: You're welcome, I'm glad we could collaborate.

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