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Black death
and mourning in the time of COVID-19

Black bodies have been the sight of devastation for centuries. We who inhabit and love these bodies live in a state of perpetual mourning. We mourn the disproportionate dying in our families, communities and in the black diaspora. We are yet to come to terms with the dyings that accompanied the AIDS pandemic. Tuberculosis breeds in the conditions within which most of us live. We die from hours spent in the belly of the earth where we dig for minerals to feed the unquenchable thirst of capital. Malaria targets our neighbours with deathly accuracy. Ebola was contained to West Africa. It is a rapacious black disease. It kills us. In the black diaspora, African Americans are walking targets for American police who kill and imprison them at rates that have created a prison industrial complex.

The dying began centuries ago when human cargo fuelled empire building through the slave trade. Ships traversed the wide expanses of the world's oceans bearing black bodies to harvest cotton, chop sugar cane, bear tree trunks, pave roads in chain gang formation, and fetch and carry at private homesteads. Millions died in the dungeons before the ships arrived to measure and prod, exchange cash and trinkets, and stock bodies in the hold of plagued ships. Those who died and were killed on board were thrown into the ocean (Hartman, 2008). Once on the plantation, those who spoke back were hanged and strung on branches like strange fruit. We have come to know this as lynching.

And so we are agreed; we die at disproportionate rates both historically, in the present and into the future. Black people know death intimately. We have become habituated to dying. The black condition is to sit with dying. We live in a perpetual wake (Sharpe, 2016). But before we really take stock and measure the extent of our loss, the next wave of dying crashes upon us without so much as a warning. And so, when the murmurs coming out of China spoke of a virus, we sighed knowingly. But China is far away. When Europeans began to die, some of us marvelled at this equal opportunity virus that infected princes and prime ministers and did not fix its target on black bodies. Others even suggested that with all our other vulnerabilities, we had become immune to this latest contagion. Our bodies had finally built up resistance after centuries of black plagues and diseases.

We watched a distant disease quickly become a local reality. We have joined the world in locking down borders, gates and doors. Our long and elaborate African handshakes have abruptly ended. First a middle-class disease, the virus was carried by those with funds to travel by air and ship. They spread it on among themselves as they travelled. But because we clean and service their lives, we awake to the news that the first person in Khayelitsha, the sprawling working class and informal settlement of Cape Town, has now been infected.

Before the virus became a black condition, fears of contagion had become racialised and classed. In the northern suburbs of Johannesburg, black domestic workers and gardeners – people whose job is to clean – were being trained to wash their hands in large-scale tutorials by old white women. Before we got the virus, we were cast as already contagious. But now we have formally joined the global community as an infected people.

As the virus silently yet swiftly spreads among us, we have to ask what it means to be always infected even before we are infected? What does another wave of dying mean for us? What does containing a virus entail for an imprisoned community like that of Khayelitsha where a shack fire imperils the entire community? How will we bury our dead when we cannot take their bodies home to the village? What does it mean to have a funeral when we cannot travel and congregate in our numbers around the dead? Will this iteration of dying continue the tradition of black death as excess bodies that do not matter? How will this epoch of dying further complicate our mourning when even the mourners die? How will we mourn our dead?

This season of dying reminds us of Haiti, the celebrated first black republic constituted of formerly enslaved people who overthrew their colonial oppressors. Now we think of Haiti less with chests swelling with pride and possibility but as the place of apocalyptic earthquakes and shrivelling freedom dreams. Two hundred and thirty thousand dead bodies. One seismic quake that rocked the black world on a January afternoon of 2010. Their dead are ours too. We are still gathering the bodies of our dead from the reeds in the aftermath of the Mozambique cyclone Idai. We locate them from the smell of their decomposing flesh. As drought spreads like a dark stain in the horizon, what death and forms of dying await us? How many more Live Aid concerts and images of emaciated and starving Africans? Will the world fatigue of the spectacle of flies buzzing around our decomposing faces? Climate change batters us with a punitive ferocity reserved for those whose humanity is always in question. How do we mourn when others forget? If grief and mourning require witnessing, time, seclusion, rites and weeping, when will we mourn when we die without pause? What does it mean not to attend the funeral of a loved one because we cannot travel under lockdown? Do we keen on the other end of the phone? Do we dial into the funeral?

And so we count the dead with bated breath. Daily, we call home hoping the viral spread will miraculously pass by. How will we mourn when we cannot say goodbye? How much more dying can our collective psyches take before we succumb to the sweet temptation of forgetting and madness? Will our nightmares allow forgetting? Will we ever pause to take stock of black death and its sedimented traumas? How do we brace ourselves for the deadly tsunami about to overtake us in this iteration of dying?